



‘Strange Habits’

Clothes, Climes, and the Environment in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries

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Subverting the Strange Habit of Saint George in Shakespeare

If only metaphorically, Shakespeare’s use of the habit of Saint George, the patron soldier saint of England, was a way in which emblems were used to highlight the condition of the soldier in early modern England: the habit as leitmotif in the History Plays reveals socio-economic instability and exposes a transition from feudal combat to early modern soldiers being bought and sold, or even plying their own trade, in mass warfare. The red cross of Saint George on a white background had essentially been adopted for the uniform of English soldiers to rally troops and glorify the king. When, for instance, the character of Henry V commands “Cry ‘God for Harry! England and Saint George!’” (*Henry V* 3.1.34) at Harfleur, T.W. Craik notes how he is invoking, “God for Harry’s cause! Saint George for England’s victory!”⁶. Within this framework, the public spectacle constructed through speech and costume ostensibly stresses both a supporting “England”, a persona created thanks to the services of the easily recognisable costumed soldier, and the individuality of the monarch. The king is emphasised in both cases since God and the military are to support his private and public bodies (“Harry”, “England”) whereas his army is considered as an anonymous mass. The costume thus primarily symbolised a patriotic and military figure “suited to reception by kings” and Saint George pageants welcomed Edward VI upon his coronation or Edward IV, after his defeat of Henry VI in 1461, the former’s victory seemingly echoing the saint’s triumph⁷. At court, the habit of Saint George was a symbol through which power was manifested through a seemingly spiritual patronage of kingly cause. In Shakespeare, however, the use of Saint George’s habit also remained open to more subversive interpretive possibilities and thus shaped different social identities for both the soldier and the sovereign.

⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Henry V*. Ed. T.W. Craik, The Arden Shakespeare. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 204.

⁷ Lamb, Mary Ellen. *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, p. 69.