



‘Strange Habits’

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

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Without a National Costume but with a Climate of their Own: the Invention of the English Climate and ‘Constitution’

The focus of this paper is the origin and ideological implications of the enduring, if scientifically indefensible idea of a specifically ‘English climate’, which is in contrast to the absence of a national costume. Beginning with the first (mid sixteenth century) visual portraits of an Englishman as virtually naked (without a costume/culture of his own) and attacks on the tendency of the English elite to imitate other cultures (metonymically signalled by the wearing of foreign fashions), I will show how the myth of an (idealised) national climate emerges with the centripetal drive of post reformation ideology to establish a separate, bounded and autonomous national culture and identity. In contrast to representations of it as ‘foggy, raw and dull’ (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 3.6), the national climate is represented as ‘temperate’, an Aristotelean mean between the extremes of (northern, specifically German) cold and (southern, specifically French) heat. This myth is then appropriated to authorise as natural to the ‘constitution’ of the English, the different forms of government over which the civil war was fought. Asserted to support the parliamentary cause by lawyer and MP Nathaniel Bacon in 1651 it is then appropriated by royalist writers from post Restoration England, who harness it first to the form of monarchical government restored in 1660, then, after the revolution of 1688-89, to the monarchical form as modified by the establishment of the modern political ‘constitution’. The myth of an ideal, temperate national climate thus feeds into and bolsters with the irrefutable force of a natural condition the construction of ‘the English’ as a body of constitutionally temperate subjects governed by a political ‘constitution’ that suits their temper in accordance with Jean Bodin’s foundational principle of government. No longer imitating others they are rather to be viewed as a model for imitation, equipped by nature, like Aristotle’s Hellenic race, to exercise political power over their neighbours and over peoples ‘naturally destined’ by their climate to be ruled.