



‘Strange Habits’

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

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“Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark”: Meteorological Climate, Political Atmosphere, and Clothing in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

This paper addresses a neglected area of research in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and aims at providing fresh insights into this play text which promotes a cold atmosphere and a dark climate. Even though scholars have produced varied and insightful analyses of the play, they have largely overlooked the role of clothing. Yet the twin notions of atmosphere and habitat both permeate the tragedy, and Shakespeare gives us a number of important clues on the way Elsinore’s inhabitants are dressed.

Through an analysis of the different meanings (i.e. literal and figurative) of the word “atmosphere”, this paper will explore the relationship between climate, mental and political environment, and clothing in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Francisco sets the tone early on in the text: “’Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart” (*Hamlet*, 1.1.6-7), connecting Denmark’s prevailing weather with his own emotions. Moreover, a closer look at specific scenes from the play (for example, act 1, scene 2 or act 1, scenes 4 and 5) reveals that clothes not only reflect Elsinore’s meteorological conditions but also offer new perspectives on the characters’ feelings.

Therefore, after focusing on the atmosphere’s impact on the way the characters are dressed, this paper will show how, in *Hamlet*, clothes sometimes serve to disclose the characters’ feelings, and sometimes conceal or even disguise them. Finally, I will see how Shakespeare’s dramatization of Denmark’s atmosphere, combined with his ambivalent use of clothing, helps to position Hamlet’s self in relation to those surrounding him. The Prince’s self-fashioning proves crucial, indeed, to the development of the tragedy as a whole and to the characters’ deadly fates.