



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

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### **Without a National Dress but a Climate of their Own: The Invention of the ‘Temperate’ English Climate, Character 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 appears to be unique insofar as no other European nation lays claim to a climate coincident with its territorial boundaries. This is in striking contrast with the (possibly again unique) lack of national dress. Beginning with the first (mid sixteenth century) visual portraits of an Englishman as virtually naked and the attacks on the attendant tendency to imitate other cultures (metonymically signalled by the wearing of foreign fashions), I will show how the myth of an (idealised) national climate emerged with the centripetal drive of more and less radical protestants to a bounded national language and identity. In contrast to representations such as Shakespeare’s one reference to the national climate as ‘foggy, raw and dull’ (*Henry V*, 3.6), the climate is represented as like the language, ‘temperate’, an Aristotelean mean between the extremes of (northern, specifically German) cold and (southern, specifically French) heat. This myth of a temperate national climate was then taken up in post-Restoration England by a clutch of writers, opposed to the commonwealth, who associated it not only with the ‘nature’ of the English but also with their ‘constitution’. This word is used of the human body, but carries obvious political resonances at the moment of the formation of the (unwritten), again unique, ‘constitution’ of the modern English system of governance claimed by Lord Chesterfield in 1750 to be ‘the only monarchy in the world that can properly be said to have a constitution’. This was represented by these writers as, like the climate and language, an Aristotelean mean between extremes. The myth of a national climate thus feeds into and bolsters with the force of a natural condition the construction of ‘the English’ after the crises of the civil war and the ‘revolution’ of 1688-89 as a specific, exceptional, and organically constituted body, to be imitated rather than imitating, and equipped by nature, as Aristotle’s Athenians were, to rule over neighbours as well as peoples ‘naturally’ destined by their climate to be ruled.