



‘Strange Habits’

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

International Conference / 3-5 December 2020 / Clermont-Ferrand, Moulins

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Apes, Gulls and Fashion Victims: Dress and Undress in the London Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker

Thomas Dekker is memorably defined as a *peintre de la vie londonienne* by Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies in her definitive *thèse d’Etat* (1958). Her choice of the term *peintre* (painter) is significant: Dekker is like a roving photo-journalist, recording London itself, the City, as a living organism, with its constant hubbub, its swarming populace, its crowded streets and alleys, its sounds, its smells, and its bizarre characters. Dekker’s verbal photographs are so visual—he was a dramatist and a character-writer, after all—that the reader of his prose works is invited to *see* the scenes he depicts, not just to *imagine* them. In another magisterial thesis, Eliane Cuvelier writes of a contemporary of Dekker’s, another writer, Thomas Lodge, as a *témoin de son temps*, a witness of his time. Dekker is not just a witness, he is a painter, a recorder, of his London in all its ebullience. *Chez Dekker, ça grouille.*

Dekker’s best-known play, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, depicts humble but proud and earnest artisans at work in their shop, making shoes—an article of clothing. Whether or not Dekker himself was descended from Flemish cloth merchants and tailors who immigrated from the Low Countries, first into East Anglia in the fifteenth century, his writings, both dramatic and non-dramatic, display some familiarity with the milieu of textiles, cloth-and leather-working, and fashion. Dekker was also a satirist, inviting laughter at the fashion excesses of young would-be gentlemen and ladies-about-town, often newly arrived from the country and hoping to cut a fashionable figure in the big city. In this he, like his contemporary Ben Jonson, anticipated the social comedy of the Restoration, with its fops, dandies and ‘country wives’.

This presentation will focus on some of Dekker’s prose works, in particular *The Gull’s Hornbook* (1609) and *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* (1606). In these pamphlets, he depicts and satirizes the excesses in dress and behaviour of the gulls and gallants who people early Jacobean London.