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Review of Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*.

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Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 368 pp. (+ i-xiii). ISBN 0521781027.

Reviewed by Jane Hedley, Bryn Mawr College

Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory is a fascinating study that advantageously blends the scholarly interests of its fashioners, who are among the most influential literary scholars of their generation. Their scholarly partnership has impressively extended the reach of each one's already wide-ranging scholarship, and their scholarly apparatus, by citing an enormous number of other scholars with whose work they have been in dialogue over a ten-year period, affirms that literary scholarship is socially produced to a greater extent than most of its practitioners know how to acknowledge. Their study "participates in a renewed attention to material culture" (xi) that has produced a number of important books over the past fifteen years, including Patricia Fumerton's *Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (1991), Lisa Jardine's *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (1996), and Arjun Appadurai's edited collection of essays on *The Social Life of Things* (1986).

The Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (General Editor Stephen Orgel), under whose auspices this book is published, is a series whose stated purpose is to strengthen both the theoretical and the historical purchase of the New Historicists' move away from formalism. The New Historicists of the 1970s sought to re-position literature as "an aspect of social, economic, political and cultural history" (iii); scholars who have continued to do this work in the 1980s and 90s have not only been more theoretically self-conscious than the first generation of New Historicists, but also more radically and provocatively anti-"literary." This book's most important theoretical excursus anticipates the charge that in working to "restore the significance of things to the making of culture" its authors have succumbed to the materialism of their own cultural moment. Critics who charge this and scholars who worry about being accused of it often do so in the name of Karl Marx; but Jones and Stallybrass point out that "Marx's critique of capitalism is not a critique of 'materialism'": in Marxian terms it's not things that are "fetishized" under capitalism, but commodities (8). Indeed, they go on to point out, the word and concept of the fetish are themselves the coinage of international capitalism. Drawing on a series of articles by William Pietz, they trace both the word and the concept of the fetish to the beginning of the seventeenth century, a historical moment in which the European subject as we know him was beginning to emerge along the African Gold Coast: "a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects. . . who . . . fixated instead upon the transcendental values that transformed gold into slaves, slaves into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco, tobacco into sugar, sugar into gold, and all into an unaccountable profit" (11).

Jones and Stallybrass seem determined to make us better acquainted with clothes as commodities than we might wish to become, especially if we have clung to the conviction that for Renaissance texts the context that matters is itself textual, to be found in the history of words and ideas and generic conventions rather than yellow starch or the second-hand clothing trade. Their first chapter, punningly entitled "The currency of clothing," has two epigraphs: a statistical overview of the expansion of the clothing trades in England between 1530 and 1609, and an excerpt from an anti-feminist tract that itemizes the sums a spendthrift matron has borrowed to purchase

clothes. Of the eleven paragraphs that comprise the first full section of the chapter itself, six consist largely or entirely of information concerning the monetary value of articles of dress. This chapter's discussion of the livery system--the payment of servants and other dependents in food, lodging, and especially clothing--leads up to a wonderfully suggestive reading of two lines from *Paradise Lost* about the clothing of our first parents in the Garden of Eden, but the path to that reading lies through a dense thicket of pounds, shillings and pence: how much Queen Elizabeth paid her ladies in waiting, how many fox and lamb skins were used to "fur" the gown and jerkin of a court jester whose name is mentioned in *Love's Labor's Lost*, how much a Berkshire farmer, a clergyman, the queen's astronomer, and assorted members of the English aristocracy paid their servants in livery and wages. Both here and in their chapter on yellow starch, as well as a later chapter that suggests we begin to think of the theater in England as "a new and spectacular development of the clothing trade" (176), the copious itemization of commodities and their histories of ownership seems rhetorically deliberate, yet oddly at cross-purposes with the authors' intention to help us re-imagine clothes as rich repositories of "history, memory and desire" (11). I found myself wanting, especially in the two earlier chapters, to hear more about the social lives and less about the financial vicissitudes of all these starched ruffs and carnation silk stockings.

Jones and Stallybrass characterize our own cultural moment as one in which "a person is [understood to be] prior to his or her wardrobe" (276), but argue that in the Renaissance people experienced themselves as having been fashioned *by* their clothing in a very deep way. Their "habits" of dress inscribed on their bodies a system of relationships and obligations that made them who they were in the most basic, literal sense. "Clothes permeate the wearer, fashioning him or her within"--not only was this truer for Shakespeare's and Spenser's and Donne's contemporaries than it is for us, it was a truth they were better positioned to know and acknowledge, since it is "an insight more familiar to pre- or proto-capitalist societies than to fully capitalist ones" (3). The value of clothes--and they were much more valuable then than now, relative to other living expenses and forms of income--"pointed in antithetical directions" (11). Early seventeenth-century men and women were beginning to experience "fashion" in the modern sense of rapidly, arbitrarily, changing styles of dress; but this experience was uncanny and disturbing, since the notion of "fashion-as-change was in tension with the concept of fashion as 'deep' making or as enduring cultural pattern" (5). One of the ways in which that contradiction played itself out, Jones and Stallybrass suggest, was in moralists' and satirists' anxiety about the importation of foreign fashions and fabrics, which seemed to portend a "radical undoing of Englishness" (55).

The three chapters of the book's central section focus on the "women's work" of spinning, weaving and embroidery. In the context of the actual production of cloth and clothing these tasks did tend to fall to lower-class women, but they also became symbolically encoded as "evidence of chaste industriousness" for women of the middling and upper classes (89). The spinning and weaving activities of Arachne, the Three Fates, and Homer's Penelope are shown to have been re-read by writers and painters of the European Renaissance in symbolic terms that connect the loom and the distaff with ultimate creative processes while devaluing the actual manual labor that subtends the manufacture of cloth. The third of these chapters depicts aristocratic women using needlework to reach out to "the larger world of culture, commodities and politics" from within the domestic realm of "anonymous private handiwork" (170). The argument of this

chapter puts me in mind of *The Currency of Eros* (1990), Jones's earlier study of Renaissance women's love poetry: here, as there, the argument insists on women's resourcefulness, their ability to turn a "disciplinary apparatus" (*Renaissance Clothing*, 148) that seemed bent on effacing their lives and labors into an opportunity for self-expression and self-display. The traditional preoccupations and disciplinary apparatus of Comparative Literature are more apparent in these three chapters than in the rest of the book, while at the same time the authors' attention to social anxieties and to the ways in which material practices are ideologically inflected produces readings that are actively political and thoroughly grounded in the economic and social circumstances of women's lives.

The third section of the book, subtitled "Staging clothes," includes a chapter on theatrical cross-dressing that adds a new dimension to a topic already compellingly treated by Phyllis Rackin, Stephen Orgel, Lisa Jardine and Marjorie Garber. Whereas those other scholars' work has to do primarily with characters who cross-dress, especially the resourceful heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, Jones and Stallybrass are more interested in scenes of undressing in which a female character who is being played by a boy actor calls attention to the body beneath "her" clothes. "Un-pin me here," says Desdemona, referring not to her hair, as a subsequent theatrical tradition would have it, but to her clothing (213 and n. 37, p. 319). "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast," says Shakespeare's Cleopatra, whereas in Plutarch she puts an asp to her *arm* (212). "We need," suggest Jones and Stallybrass, "to conceptualize the erotics of Renaissance drama in totally unfamiliar ways if we are to make sense of these queer stagings of the boy actor," which ask us to see the woman's body that isn't there (213). Such moments, according to Jones and Stallybrass, stage the production of gender in terms of the logic of the fetish, suggesting "that gender itself is a fetish, the production of an identity through the fixation upon specific [body] parts" such as the penis or the breast (217). "The imagined truth of gender which a post-Renaissance culture would later construct" is thus anticipated, yet undermined, on the Elizabethan stage. (Jones and Stallybrass re-visit Freud's theory of the fetish in order to place it historically, in collusion with "the disavowal of gender as fetish.") In a related analysis of the circulation and deployment of theatrical costumes, they remind us that parts or fragments of clothing are themselves very often erotically charged in these plays; they are also often tokens of remembrance that keep the dead among the living. Clothes "that have conversed with other bodies . . . stage the otherness that materializes the impossibility of self-possession" (206).

Does Jones and Stallybrass's study persuasively demonstrate that Renaissance actors and audiences had a different sense of who they were and what it means to be a person than we do? To me their book suggests the opposite--that the texts they have "inhabited" so brilliantly here, from paintings and tapestries to the account books of theatrical companies to the texts of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, have yielded insights and convictions that arise from their own post-Freudian, post-Marxist, post-feminist cultural moment. By a happy coincidence, during the week in which I was reading their book I rented the movie "Trading Places," in which the heir apparent to a Philadelphia brokerage firm is tricked by his senior partners into trading lives with a homeless street beggar. One of the two old men who arrange for the two younger men to trade places believes that rich white men and poor black men are different genetically, at and from birth; his brother believes that environment is all, and wagers that if the homeless man is endowed with the position and trappings of a financial boy genius, he will become one. They arrange to have the "real" boy genius (played by Dan Ackroyd) lose everything--his home, his butler, his fiancée,

and at last the very clothes on his back, and endow the homeless beggar (played by Eddie Murphy) with the home, the butler, the job, and above all the clothes. What he quickly figures out is that conning the folks who trade in hog futures is both more lucrative and easier to get away with than the scams he's been running on the street, where he got picked up by the police for impersonating a Viet Nam vet with no legs. But as he climbs into the limousine that will transport him to his first big day at the office he does have a moment of self-doubt, which the superbly impassive butler assuages by telling him, "Just be yourself, sir. No one can take that away from you." Ironically, this bromide is just what he needs to hear, at the moment when its truth is least available for him to experience. "Trading Places" is a parable for our own late capitalist cultural moment, but what is its moral or message: that the "self" is inalienable, or that we are "creatures of fashion" in the most radical sense? I am not persuaded by Jones and Stallybrass that the latter possibility is any less available for us to be anxious about than it was for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, or that they were less invested than we are in the notion that a person's selfhood is ontologically prior to his or her wardrobe. This book may, however, be our own cultural moment's richest re-staging of these mutually antagonistic, mutually implicated alternatives.