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*The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England: Textual
Constructions of a National Identity* (review)

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Hentschell, Roze, *The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England: Textual Constructions of a National Identity*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008; hardback, pp. viii, 209; 3 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £55.00; ISBN 9780754663010.

Employing a detailed analysis of very disparate texts, Roze Hentschell argues that cloth was fundamental to the construction of English national identity in the early modern period. By cloth she means broadcloth, 'a dense, tightly woven woollen, which was manufactured into large pieces, approximately 28 to 30 yards long and weighing up to 90 pounds' (p. 3). Raw wool had been England's staple export throughout the middle ages. In the mid-sixteenth century, a shift to cloth production ushered in an economic boom that was checked by conflict between Spain and the Low Countries, England's main market. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a misguided attempt by James I to increase value by prohibiting the export of unfinished cloth caused a depression.

Hentschell focuses on the period between 1575 and 1615 – the crisis and the slump. The book is divided into three sections of two chapters each. The first section, 'Resistance in the Flock: Labour Rebellion in Pastoral Literature and Prose Romance' provides an original reading of works usually treated from a very different perspective. In the first chapter, the rebellion of the rustics in Sidney's *Arcadia* is seen as an aristocratic response to anti-enclosure pamphlets denouncing landowners who replaced peasants with sheep. Next, the popular prose romance, *Jack of Newbury*, an idealized account of the career of a successful clothworker, is revealed as an extension of the political activism of its author, the silkweaver Thomas Deloney.

In the second section, 'The Circulation of Subjectivity in the Cloth Trade', the focus shifts to international trade and its role in constituting national identity. The first part examines how promoters of American exploration and settlement, such as Hakluyt and Raleigh, fancifully presented it as a massive trade opportunity which would compensate for the Spanish disruption to England's traditional export markets. Minor details, such as the natives' interest in converting to woollen clothing or their capacity to purchase it, were glossed over.

The central role of clothing in defining ethnic identity comes most strongly to the fore in the next chapter which confronts the treasonous nature of imported cloth. Ben Jonson was one of many writers who ridiculed their countrymen's infatuation with foreign fashions. Mere imitation would not

in itself have been such a problem were it not for the added difficulty that these foreign garments were made of imported materials, expensive silks and velvets whose purchase indebted the nation and damaged domestic industry. Amid the satires and sermons denouncing foreign clothing and associating it with vice, idleness and sexually transmitted diseases, the most amusing is surely Robert Greene's *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier: or A quaint dispute between Velvet breeches and Clothbreeches* which ends with the expulsion of Velvet Breeches from the land. The cover, depicting an elegant courtier and a simple worker, effectively alludes to the class dimension of this conflict.

The final section, 'Staging the Cloth Crisis', examines the cloth industry in city comedy and civic pageantry. Hentschell demonstrates that the profession of the crook and the nature of the swindle in Thomas Middleton's *Michaelmas Term* reflected a widely held mistrust of drapers, their methods and the quality of the goods they sold. Hentschell concludes with Anthony Munday's pageants of 1614 and 1615 for the Drapers' Company celebrating the lord mayoral inauguration of two of their members. These clearly political events served both to criticize royal policies that had ruined the industry, and to exhort the merchants themselves to seek remedies by appealing to memories of former glory.

The common thread through all the texts is the antiquity of the English wool industry, and it is this emphasis on a venerable tradition, a golden age of prosperity and domestic virtue, which most clearly ties cloth to national identity. The centrality of cloth to the English economy is indisputable, but how far a concern for the economic health of the nation and a polemical engagement in contemporary socio-economic debates can be equated with such a nebulous concept as national identity is more debatable.

This is an intelligent and interesting book. The writing is engaging, there is an excellent bibliography, particularly valuable for its obscure primary sources, an adequate index and few proof-reading errors. The extensive use of discursive footnotes amounts to a parallel text but it is mercifully placed at the bottom of the page. The introduction provides an excessively detailed account of what is to come instead of giving a general context and the book suffers aesthetically from the lack of a conclusion. It ends abruptly with a scant paragraph of recapitulation where a few pages would have sufficed to draw together the various threads and complete the knot.

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