



Renaissance Materialities: Introduction

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Recent work in Renaissance studies has focused on the formation of what we have come to call the “early modern” subject. Scholars have aimed to discover exactly where in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature the modern conception of the free-standing, rights-bearing individual had its earliest origin (usually somewhere in the plays of Shakespeare). As part of a move to question what Margreta de Grazia has called this pressure for the Renaissance to be “modern before its time,” we may more helpfully look not to the early modern subject, but to those Renaissance material objects which still retain the traces of their specific historical situation. If we ask what such objects and the material practices associated with them might look like if we didn’t insist that they mark early modernity, but remain embedded in a particular moment in time, we might be in a better position to understand how historically deracinated our sense of the “early modern” subject has become.

The essays collected here look again at the objects manipulated by Renaissance people, which they made and which therefore not only made up their physical environment but which constrained and contextualized their own sense of bodily existence. Miniature manuscript books by a woman, new-fangled glass mirrors, imported silk, printed sheets pasted on particular walls—such objects locate themselves in specifying histories and allow us to see the subjects they encompassed in far greater historical particularity. By looking at Renaissance manuscript production, for example, we may be better able to understand not only the period’s profound continuity with the medieval past, but also the very specific fault lines of discontinuity which punctuate the tradition of handwritten bookmaking across periods. Or again, if we look at the newly invented crystal mirror and its uses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we may more accurately locate the fissure where something authentically different has entered the picture—and,

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simultaneously, still see how the new-fangled object at first serves to reanimate a medieval metaphor built upon an older technology. A focus on objects as objects is able to resist the ease with which the study of subjectivity has been able to transcend historical context. Rather than looking to the narrative details of broadsheet ballads for a textual representation of the experience of underclass subjects, we can, for example, begin where Patricia Fumerton does, with the physical walls upon which the cheap paper sheets were displayed, in the alehouse. In this context their status as aesthetic artifacts, decorative wallpaper for the poor and itinerant, becomes an aid to understanding how the placeless population of London felt about the idea of home.

The collection opens with two essays which test one of the most widely shared assumptions about the period of the Renaissance: that, in Elizabeth Eisenstein's influential formulation, the printing press was "an agent of change." By resituating printed books in relationship to other notable objects, precious manuscript volumes and cheap trinkets, James Kearney and Susan Frye recalibrate the rate of change brought about by the technology of moveable type. In "The Book and the Fetish: The Materiality of Prospero's Text," James Kearney addresses the strange status of Prospero's books which never explicitly appear on the stage as physical props. Attentive to the status of objects at a time when they were at the leading edge of their commodification in global commerce, Kearney revises the prehistory of the fetish to reveal the impact Reformation assumptions had on Europeans' attitudes toward pagan religious practices. Opposed to the fetishlike trinkets and fripperies so paradoxically important to the European (but aptly named) *Trinculo*—Prospero's books are thought by Caliban to contain the European colonizing power which has enslaved him: insofar as they do represent a fetishized literacy itself, he is right. Reifying unlettered Ariel's and Caliban's actual physical labor, Prospero's books, according to Kearney, reveal the "magic" of New World productivity to be based on slavery.

Ester Inglis's miniature presentation manuscripts, given as prestigious gifts to royal and noble patrons, seem to be far removed from Prospero's unmaterializing (but, we assume, printed) volumes. Produced by a specifically female agency exercised through gift exchange, and not created by a machine for any general market, her bejeweled volumes reanimate the kind of patronage Christine de Pizan had sought two centuries earlier. However, insofar as Inglis often copied out printed books, mimicking the fashions of moveable typefaces, her handwritten work specifically contests the masculinist hegemony of public print. Including elaborate pictures of

herself at work with her pen along with emblematic exhortations to her own female authorship, Inglis creates herself as a female author in much the same way Christine did before her.

Very different from Inglis's precious volumes, the physical nature of the ballads printed on cheap paper broadsheets do as much to reveal the lived experience of London's homeless itinerants as Inglis's miniature volumes do her life on the margins of court society. Patricia Fumerton looks closely at the graphic layout of the ballad pages, their segmented, bipartite visual structure with clearly visible compartmentalization, columns of black-face type outlined by heavily ornamented borders. She also looks to the site where such wares were often displayed as wallpaper, pasted up in alehouses as well as on other public walls. The highly ornamented, compartmentalized formats, she argues, offered visual pleasures to the barely literate. She also sees reenacted in their designs the displaced and segmented life of the vagrant laborers, who both sold and bought the ballads for a penny and who moved from tavern to alehouse, with no one place to call home. The elaborately fashioned woodcuts migrated from broadsheet to broadsheet, often bearing quite negligible connections to the songs they illustrated; the images themselves are vagrant. At once aesthetic artifact and an occasion for homosocial camaraderie, the broad sheet ballad decorating alehouse walls not only ornaments a place for the placeless but also helps to provide a cultural site from which to critique the constraints of a woman-dominated domesticity.

If there is any object which ought to speak most directly to questions of modern subjectivity, it is the mirror. In "The Technology of Reflection: Renaissance Mirrors of Steel and Glass," Rayna Kalas finds that even with the invention of an entirely new technology for making the crystal, quicksilver-backed mirror, a far lighter instrument which provided clearer and less distorted reflections than ever before, the idea of the mirror continued to work according to the medieval understanding of a *speculum*, that is, a mirror which reflects not an individual self looking into it, but God's divine plan. The new technology of the crystal mirror, however, did allow poets such as George Gascoigne to rearticulate the medieval metaphor of the *speculum* to serve his satirical purposes in *The Steele Glass*. Contrasting the "glass" made of steel with the crystal mirror, Gascoigne celebrates the true image provided by his poem, which is beheld in the steel glass that requires effort to polish its reflective surface, rather than in the crystal glass, which shows things much better than they are, beguiling the viewer with the brightness of its silver, foil-backed image. Such a steel mirror is made in

England; as Kalas points out, crystal glass mirrors were not made in England until 1624. They were therefore imported luxuries, hailing from an “incontinent” Venice and therefore suspect because of their foreign origin.

Equally suspect because of their foreign origin, imported luxury cloths—such as silk, satin, and velvet—become the means by which, Roze Hentschell shows, the English articulated a sense of national identity over and against European continental types. A variety of writers, invoking the famous emblem of the Englishman who goes naked rather than wear anything he hasn't selected himself, inveighed against the wearing of foreign clothing. Dramatists, preachers, satirists, and poets were intent on warning English consumers away from luxury cloths imported from Italy at first, and then later from France and Spain. As Hentschell shows, the condemnation of such frippery fashion for destroying a sense of true Englishness is aimed, fundamentally, at protecting the native English wool trade. So central was this trade to the nation's well-being that anything which threatened its health was tantamount to the bubonic plague or treason. While some few thinkers were able to perceive that the trade in imported cloth was, in fact, an enabling condition for the export of English wool and of real benefit to an emerging mercantile economy, the vast majority of writers saw such stuffs as a threat to traditional values associated with aristocratic hospitality based on land tenure in the countryside. Both the wool grown there, as well as the imported silk, satin, and velvet, were commodities; a discourse of national identity is marshalled to shore up the central industry of England. What may at first seem to be an argument for cultural identification or even religious salvation ends as an argument for the fundamental economic self-interest of the nascent nation.

In Peter Stallybrass's “The Mystery of Walking,” the article of clothing that takes center stage is the “boot,” but he is more concerned with the physical constraints posed by the relationship between objects of clothing and the physical object to which they apply, the body. Understanding that the fundamental concern shared between King Lear and Oedipus is the nature of the aging human body, that is, the answer to the Sphinx's riddle, Stallybrass points out that Lear ends up doing the opposite of what he had supposed. Instead of, unburdened, crawling toward death supported by his daughter's kind nursery, he ends by walking back on stage carrying Cordelia's dead—and burdensome—body. Stallybrass would find the answer to Lear's meaning in confronting the material conditions which precede any meaning. Lear's tragedy is that, unlike Oedipus, he may not be led by his living daughters but must walk alone bearing his dead one.

Nothing could be more startlingly different from an interior, psychologizing focus than this emphasis on the bare-forked, physical nature of the human body—which is taught in around a year to learn to walk upright. While this object has not changed much since the Renaissance and thus we cannot use it to specify historical difference, we can see how the physical emphasis on the object allows us a different perspective on the problem of being human. To look at the human being first as a physical object, as Stallybrass does, is in no way to disparage the knowledge (of the Oedipus complex, for instance) which we have gained from our committed researches into subjectivity. It is a way, however, shared with the other essays in this volume, to open up new possibilities for understanding the Renaissance in all of its material specificity.