Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture

Through examining some of the everyday items that helped establish a person’s masculinity or femininity, this book offers a new analysis of gender identity in early modern English literature and culture. Individual chapters focus on items such as codpieces, handkerchiefs, beards, and hair. Fisher argues that these seemingly peripheral parts were in fact constitutive, and consequently that early modern gender was materialized through a relatively wide range of parts or features, and that it was also often conceptualized as being malleable. The book deliberately brings together sexual characteristics (beard growth and hair length) and gendered accessories (codpieces and handkerchiefs) in order to explore the limitations of using the modern conceptual distinction between sex and gender to understand early modern ideas about masculinity and femininity. *Materializing Gender* engages with a range of historical materials including drama, poetry, portraiture, medical texts, and polemical tracts, and a range of theoretical issues.

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Since the 1970s there has been a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political, and cultural history. While the earliest New Historist work was criticized for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytical work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and of the concept of identity itself, on theatre as a political and economic phenomenon and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theatre which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

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Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture

Will Fisher

Lehman College, CUNY
For Valerie, Phyllis, and Peter
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