

Subject and object in Renaissance culture

Edited by

Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Sallibrass



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Introduction

*Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan,
and Peter Stallybrass*

There are no subjects in seventeenth-century *vanitas* still-lives. Only objects. Or more accurately, their subjects are objects: books, pens, hats, purses, coins, jewelry, pipes, bottles. The great novelty of these early still-lives is that objects have evicted the subject.¹ Only a memory of one remains – the *memento mori* or skull, now an object among objects. And with the subject goes its world. The window space that receded behind the Renaissance subject gives way to the wall or virtual wall that drops behind the object. With such a foreshortening of space comes the standing still of time. While the subject of a painted narrative or history moves through time, objects of a still-life exist in inert stasis. Spatially and temporally secluded, *vanitas* objects appear to have a (still) life of their own. There is no need for a musician to play, a reader to read, a smoker to smoke: flute, book, pipe exist without makers, owners, buyers, users.

Yet the purpose of *vanitas* paintings is to urge the dispensability not of subjects but of objects – the vanity of all the things of this world. By their title (*vanitas vanitatum*, Eccles. 1.2) and by the symbolic encoding of the things represented (signs of transience and mortality), they exhort subjects to renounce objects. But can such a sequestering hold? We have reproduced N. L. Peschier's unusual *vanitas* painting (opposite) precisely because the subject finds its way back into the picture, at the top of the pile of objects, in the upper right-hand corner, head tilted like the skull beneath it. Even in more typical versions, the omnipresent skull itself serves as a reminder of the common materiality of subject and objects.

The viewer too testifies to their attachment. While the skull repels sight, the other objects attract it with their opulent splendor. While bringing to mind the passing of things, the paintings also give those things the permanence of art. In effect, they perform the opposite of what they profess, richly and fully embodying things rather than emptying them out.² While their *vanitas* moral would make the objects null and void, the lustre of paint enhances their irresistibility. In addition,

reproduction increases their store, so that there are more purses, jewels, books than ever before. Among their number, the *vanitas* paintings themselves must be counted, for they become what they renounce: objects to augment the subject's prestige and wealth, additional earthly things to be coveted, purchased – often at great price – and displayed as ornament. (In later *vanitas* still-lives, paintings themselves appear among the depicted vanities.)³

Renaissance studies have slighted the objects that are the subject of these paintings.⁴ It is as if we had listened to their renunciatory moral without seeing their sumptuous allure. For in the main we have proceeded as if it were both possible and desirable for subjects to cut themselves off from objects. The essays collected here aim to address this bias with a basic question: in the period that has from its inception been identified with the emergence of the subject, *where is the object?* This is not to say that the sovereignty of the subject has gone unquestioned in Renaissance studies, especially in recent decades. Indeed the various tautological self-reflexives once thought so characteristic of the Renaissance have lost their transparency as the subject has been seen increasingly to be constructed from the outside.⁵ Yet even in recent critiques of Renaissance autonomy, the focus has remained the same: the subject at center and the object beyond the pale. What happens, we wish to ask, once the object is brought into view? What new configurations will emerge when subject and object are kept in relation?

At the outset of this inquiry, it may be useful to turn to an account that, like the *vanitas* still-lives, questions the viability of separating subject and object. In the “Lordship and Bondage” section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, they are inextricable. The subject passes into the object, the object slides into the subject, in the activity by which each becomes itself. Hegel’s dramatization of this complex dialectic goes something like this:

A subject desired verification that he was in truth a subject, more particularly, that he was free of all dependencies on objects. Verification could come only from another subject (in an act of mutual recognition), but how could one subject know the truth of the other any more than of himself? A situation was needed that required the subject to risk all objects – a fight-to-the-death. But a fight-to-the-death could only end in impasse. Though one contestant would be triumphant (unless the struggle resulted in death for both), he would never attain the recognition he desired. For the other contestant, if alive, would be reduced to an enslaved object – disqualified, therefore, as witness to the subject’s truth.⁶

Hegel’s zero-sum contest seems worth recounting because it so forcibly dramatizes the interrelation of subject and object. It is precisely this interrelation that drops out of the history which has done most to

periodize the Renaissance. Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* posits an individual as free-standing as the statue of the condottiere Colleoni on the cover of its illustrated English edition.⁷ It is only *after* the subject emerges in its individuality that it puts itself in relation to objects. In this respect, the Renaissance subject begins with just that full consciousness of itself that is the ultimate (though hardly assured) end of the Hegelian dialectic of the subject/object or lord/bondsman. What in Hegel the subject would give up its life to know is in Burckhardt the ready-given of individuality that, when not quelled by a restrictive church or state, will run its fulfilling course.

Self-consciousness for Burckhardt comes about epiphanically rather than agonistically, as the result of revelation rather than struggle. When benighting illusions are stripped away – when the medieval “veil melted into air” – Renaissance consciousness could turn both inward and outward, in both “subjective” consideration of itself and “objective” consideration “of the State and of all things of this world.”⁸ Burckhardt’s “uomo singolare” or “uomo unico” stands before and apart from the object of his attention, confident of his ability to make the object compliant with his political or scientific or artistic will.⁹ As Ernst Cassirer maintains in *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* – the philosophical study intended to supplement Burckhardt’s cultural history – the subject’s relation to the object was that of mastery or would-be mastery: the mind trained and positioned to understand and overcome the object of its interest.¹⁰

Marx seems to offer a similar narrative of separation in accounting for the rise of capitalism. His recurrent focus on alienation also appears to sever subject and object. The capitalist mode of production estranges the worker from both the product of the worker’s labor and the entire material world that is the aggregate of such products. Insofar as the two could be said to conjoin, it seems to be in the unhappy process of commodification: the object comes to overpower the subject, mysteriously incorporating the latter’s labor into itself – so that the subject’s activity looks like a property of the produced object itself. The mastery of Burckhardt’s subject is inverted in this capitalist configuration: commodities come to hold sway over their producers.

The hostility, even violence, of these subject/object relations inflects a whole series of terms which speak to their connection in the negative. To treat a subject like an object is to *reify*, *objectify*. To treat an object like a subject is to *idolize*, to *fetishize*. In the modern idiom, the substitution of one term for the other is a theoretical and political problem – a category mistake of the highest order. Might the problem lie in the artificiality of the categories themselves? – that is, in their enforced opposition as

binaries? Another look at Marx suggests the interdependency of the two. For it is not only the subject that is lost in commodification: the object too is lost. In the process of converting it to purely quantitative exchange value, commodification depletes the object of its qualities. If 100 paper cups = 5 plastic plates = 30 boxes of matches, the particular qualities of cup, plate, and match evaporate. Commodification is thus not only the vanishing point of the subject into the commodified object but also of the object into pure exchangeability.¹¹

Let us return to the lordship and bondage narrative, and continue it by tracing the object, not as Hegel in fact did but as Marx might have.¹² If we situate the bondsman in some imaginary realm outside existing modes of production, we may see her or him in relation not to the lord but to the object she or he is working upon in what Marx terms “a human manner.”¹³ The object made then takes on inestimable value. For, in working upon it, the bondsman comes to recognize her or his identity as “an objective being” or “objective personality” – that is, a being in need of outside objects and in need of being an outside object to another.¹⁴ The consciousness that comes into formation looks very different from the masterful Renaissance individual. In the experiencing of its double “objectivity,” the subject recognizes itself as “a suffering, conditioned and limited creature.”¹⁵ Quite unexpectedly, the subject’s agency turns out to lie in suffering, in feeling its own corporeal and sensual receptivity as it intently plies its object: “*Passion* is the essential *force* of man energetically bent on its object.”¹⁶

If we allow Hegel’s (working) bondsman to stand for the object-as-position and Marx’s (uncommodified) product to stand for the object-as-thing, it may be possible to break open what can seem a long and monotonous history of the sovereignty of the subject. In highlighting the subject, Renaissance studies have prodded this history on, for, from its Burckhardtian inception, the period has been identified as “the beginning of the modern era” – what we now term the Early Modern.¹⁷ Once the Modern era is seen to start with the emergence of the subject, the course is set for all of its extensions into the future, from Early Modern through postmodern. We are stuck then with what Foucault has described as “the continuous history [that] is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject.” Such a protracted history provides a “citadel” or “privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness” protecting it from displacement and preemption. According to Foucault, this history begins to be written (by Burckhardt, for example) in the nineteenth century, in nervous response to the extensive epistemological mutations (of Marx, for example) that were shaking the subject at its foundations.¹⁸ A long anthropomorphic or humanistic history was then forged to

“shelter” the beleaguered subject from dispersal and hold out the promise of its eventual reinstatement. If Foucault is right, Renaissance studies have been doubly instrumental in sustaining this obsessive teleological history: by keeping the subject out of touch with the object and by staging this exclusion as the beginning of the Modern, an exclusion rehearsed all the way through the Modern and the late Modern and the postmodern.

This collection is not unique in its attempt to reconfigure this history. Indeed, the tendency has increasingly been to reconceptualize the subject in less subjective terms: as a construct responding to changing historical structures, as an effect issuing from the reproduction of an ideological system, as a site caught in the always short-changing play of signifiers. Yet the role of the object here too has been negligible, except to mark and remark the position of the dominated or oppressed term. From the moment of its mid-nineteenth-century inception as subject-oriented, the Renaissance as Early Modern has given short and limited shrift to the object. In the wake of such a tradition, the recent tendency to periodize around the concept of the “Colonial” rather than the “Modern” seems an improvement. The period division “Early Colonial” at least assumes the presence of colonized as well as colonizer, object as well as subject.

The purpose of this collection of essays is not to efface the subject but to offset it by insisting that the object be taken into account. With such a shift, it is hoped that new relations between subject (as position, as person) and object (as position, as thing) may emerge and familiar relations change. If, for example, we do not assume the unidirectional power relationship from top to bottom, then the linkages of subject to object may differ from those of subversion or containment. The proposed shift might also reveal the linkages to be historical; that is, they may change over time, and asymmetrically in relation to each other.

The very ambiguity of the word “ob-ject,” that which is *thrown before*, suggests a more dynamic status for the object. Reading “ob” as “before” allows us to assign the object a prior status, suggesting its temporal, spatial, and even causal *coming before*. The word could thus be made to designate the potential priority of the object. So defined, the term renders more apparent the way material things – land, clothes, tools – might constitute subjects who in turn own, use, and transform them. The form/matter relation of Aristotelian metaphysics is thereby provisionally reversed: it is the material object that impresses its texture and contour upon the noumenal subject. And this reversal is curiously upheld by the ambiguity of the word “sub-ject,” that which is *thrown under*, in this case – in order to receive an imprint.

We have divided the essays in the present collection into five groups in

order to stress their shared focus on some pivotal relationships between subject and object: *Priority of objects*, *Materializations*, *Appropriations*, *Fetishisms*, and *Objections*. These groupings are somewhat arbitrary, for each essay has ties with other essays in other groups. Yet the rubrics should serve to emphasize the various logics that organize subject/object relations.

The first group takes up the issue of the *Priority of Objects*, each of the three essays demonstrating the consequentiality of objects to subjects. Margreta de Grazia shows the Renaissance to be a mid-nineteenth-century construction based on the mutual exclusivity of subject and object. Arguing against the relevance of this bifurcation in the Early Modern period, she reads *King Lear* as a play that holds both persons and property in place by locking them into one another. The play's various gestures of redistribution end up following the precise course of primogeniture and succession, so that things (estates, clothing, purses) fall back into the hands that stood to inherit them in the first place. In such a tight economy, apocalypse is imagined as superflux – a literal spilling over from the top – a shakedown of superfluous things that calls out for a redefinition of need and excess that the play cannot answer.

Patricia Parker's essay also concerns the way in which material objects impress immaterial subjects. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the crafted objects of the "rude mechanicals" work upon the "airy nothings" of the imagination. Snug's craft as joiner is of particular importance, for the act of joining is basic to theatrical practice: the joining of linguistic parts, the joining of scenes, the joining of costumes, the joint-stool. A dramatist is after all a *playwright*, a craftsman who, like a shipwright or cartwright, fashions his material for practical use. Tracing the play of "joinery" across the corpus of Shakespeare's drama, Parker suggests not only that artifacts precede artifice (the crafting of objects precedes the fashioning of tropes, scenes, and parts), but that "joinery" is part and parcel of other structures – social and political as well as rhetorical and theatrical.

As Parker shows the aesthetic to be informed by the artisanal, Louis Montrose shows the ideal of gentility to depend on material props. He analyzes Edmund Spenser's attempt to make himself a gentleman by seeking not only literary fame, but literal place by real property (house and land). Indeed the two are hardly separable in Spenser's career. *The Faerie Queene*, the great epic eternizing Elizabeth, is lodged between two works concerned with the more personal permanence of land tenure and dynastic continuity: the pastoral *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* and the lyrical and nuptial *AMORETTI AND Epithalamion*. It is not just England and Elizabeth that are monumentalized in Spenser's verse but also (however precariously) Kilcolman and Spenser. Montrose's intro-

duction of new objective factors forces a reconstrual of certain critical relations: between public and private, monarch and subject, the ideological and the mythopoetic.

Long recognizing the force of the object in technology, scholarship has charted the revolution caused by the printing press during the Early Modern period. When this focus is enlarged to include printed objects, we begin to see how one selfsame text can be two objects: both a full folio on vellum mimicking a codex with hand-tipped illustrations *and* an inexpensive and portable pocketbook. Editors, intent on reproducing the text as a single author's subjectivity, tend to smooth over material differences between volumes, thereby effacing their status as discrete objects. When released from service to sovereign authorship, these objective texts can be seen to have their own surprisingly proliferative semantics, especially when registering the unstable objectifications of gender. Our second group of essays, *Materializations*, traces out the signifying potential of three different sorts of objects: engraved image, (cheaply) printed book, and painted masterpiece.

Stephen Orgel begins this section by insisting upon the power of Renaissance emblems to resist the supposed "fixity of print" by shifting meaning with each context, often with the effect of producing superfluous meanings, particularly in a sexual register. After surveying a series of sexually ambiguous images of royalty ranging from benign nurturance to horrific hermaphroditism, Orgel asks how we are to read a cartouche of Peace and Justice kissing that surmounts a triumphal portrait of Elizabeth I on the title page of an elaborately illuminated atlas. The image regenders a complex series of emblems of male figures in similar gestural contexts; in each instance no certain means can be found for fixing the body within a stable, asexual allegorical meaning. Demonstrating that it is impossible not to see the surface gesture as well as the imperial scheme, Orgel shows how the emblem offers both the excess of tribadism as well as the transcendence of female sovereignty.

Nancy Vickers asks how we can make sense of a more modestly reproduced object: a tiny volume published in 1539 which included the *Hecatophile* and two separate collections of poems. There is no single author from whose subjectivity the texts proceed; there is no title which can summon a single perspective from which to view the diverse contents. Cheaply produced, it is clearly intended for a popular non-courtly audience; illustrated with the crudest of woodcuts, it is designed to be affordable to a non-elite readership. By displaying the dismembered corpus of feminized love lyric, the volume provided a new juridical class

of bureaucratic managers who served the Valois monarchy with a means to consume court culture.

Like Vickers, Ann Jones begins with an object without a certain title and therefore without designated "subject matter." Like Orgel, she encounters the excess of meaning in an image: Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas* (*The Spinners*), a painting of four women spinners before a background in which elegantly dressed women view a tapestry representing Athena's judgment of Arachne's weaving. The painting foregrounds the gendered labor which produces the material precondition of the tapestry – spun thread. Jones traces the literary tradition of weaving contests centered on Arachne from Ovid through the Renaissance, a tradition of contest replayed by the other title given the canvas, *The Fable of Arachne*. The displacement of the first title by the second parallels the absorption of the labor which produced textiles, canvas, and dyes into the self-sufficient work of art.

If the subject (or author or painter) is no longer assumed to be prior to and independent of objects, criticism can attend to a dialectic in which subjects and objects reciprocally take and make each other over. At a time when western Europe had embarked on an extended colonization of the world, such acts of appropriation can be seen as a circulation of objects as well as the oppression of one set of people by another. Objects from the New World circulated in trade networks which placed great value on American artifacts and African slaves as both signs and producers of wealth. Such transvaluations pressure the colonist not only to objectify the other but to entitle himself or herself. The third group of essays, *Appropriations*, concerns specifically colonialist constructions of the object.

As Jones analyzes the appropriation of labor in terms of gender, Maureen Quilligan focuses upon the massive appropriation of labor in the seventeenth-century slave trade. Arguing that the objectifying of the slave is constitutive of the "free subjectivity" of the master, Quilligan points out that the new "liberty" of the Lockean individual is formulated simultaneously with the expansion of slavery. Even more importantly, the notion of property in oneself emerges from the possibility of having property in another. The liberal humanist subject installed by *Paradise Lost* takes shape in part against the African slave, who then becomes the fundamental object. Such a division finds its way into the poem in the guise of problematically gendered discourses about nakedness and labor, distinguishing between free and enslaved labor in terms of the curse on male and female work.

Along with Quilligan, Margaret Ferguson considers gender in relationship to what Arjun Appadurai has called the "social life of things," in

this case, feathers as they circulate (or are appropriated) from Guiana to the English stage.¹⁹ At the same time, Ferguson questions an uncritical celebration of Aphra Behn's positioning of herself as a female writing subject. Ferguson argues that while Behn may interrogate the stability of gender categories, she simultaneously reinstates slavery as spectacle. The fetishized feathers come to represent a crucial ambivalence in the staging of the colonized: as naked, pure, innocent *and* as ornamented, luxurious, theatrical. This ambivalence reinstates the dominant categories of femininity which Behn displaces in her representations of European women. Ambivalence here, far from undoing the gaze of the colonizer, proceeds from the production of the colonized as objects: objects of the theatrical spectacle.

Gary Tomlinson turns to a different technique of appropriation: writing. The late sixteenth-century manuscript *Cantares mexicanos* fixes ninety-one Aztec songs in writing – and in the alphabet of the Spanish conqueror. As Tomlinson argues, European writing itself would have been unimaginable to the Mexica for whom language was constitutive of reality rather than representative, participating in a “syntax of things” rather than merely signifying it. Yet Tomlinson insists that the properties of the Aztec words and music can be recovered even from the western document, however foreign its signifying system is to the system it purports to represent. A new semantics is necessary for reading the textual object and for hearing the Mexica voices within it, a reciprocal semantics that would question western perceptual categories at the same time that it would articulate those of the remote Aztec.

The fourth section concerns other forms of reciprocity across time and space – those stimulated by memory. The subject recalls the object and the object recalls the subject. To name such relations *Fetishisms* is not merely to invest objects with the animating properties of subjects, but to underscore the object as a surrogate whose very material stuff can remake the desire for that which it substitutes. Clothes and communion bread are laden with their own materialities; yet they can be made to absorb otherwise evanescent cultural realities especially within the institutionalized contexts of Early Modern theatrical display, symbolic representation, and ritual observance. Such investments suggest that the fetish in Early Modern Europe may be different from that of a later anthropology, different too from its transposition into the marketplace via Marx's fetishism of commodities.²⁰

In each of the essays in *Fetishisms*, fixation on a specific object charges it with a life of its own. In analyzing the circulation of clothes in the theater, Peter Stallybrass argues that the modern critique of the fetish depends upon the disowning of the constitutive power of objects. Being

clothed (in household or guild livery, for example) was one of the most significant gestures of social organization in the Renaissance. Indeed, salaries were paid in clothing, with its power to incorporate and to transmit memory and status, as frequently as in the more neutral currency of money. Clothing was so valuable that it accounted for the major expense of theatrical companies, exceeding the expense of plays or even of the theaters themselves. Yet while the state unsuccessfully attempted to regulate these crucial markers of distinction, the theater drew upon the massive increase in new and second-hand clothes in the late sixteenth century to stage transfers of clothing in which the subject was constructed and reconstructed by the garments which he or she wore.

Jonathan Goldberg recovers a more personal memory from the Countess of Pembroke's translation of Petrarch's "Triumph of Death," a poem which in the countess's hand memorializes the loss of her brother, Sir Philip Sidney. Modern criticism has failed to recognize the compensatory value of the sister's manuscript, concerned as it has been to establish the secondariness of the female translation to the male original. Discussions of the translation have, therefore, missed the extent to which its complicated switches of gender between speakers (both Petrarch and Mary Sidney) and lost objects (both Laura and Philip Sidney) allow Mary Sidney to compensate for the loss of her corporate identity as sibling, an incestuous identity she preserves too in putting together her brother's posthumous textual corpus, the act by which she consolidates her own position as author.

Stephen Greenblatt looks at another corpus, that present in what is arguably the most problematic sentence in Christianity: *Hoc est corpus meum*. The miracle of transubstantiation was followed by what Greenblatt terms "the problem of the leftover": the status of the Eucharist's material remainder. If Christ was corporeally present in the bread, what happened if the bread made crumbs which mice might eat? It was precisely Christ's material presence that Catholicism insisted upon, as if the Son had been born in a *manger* (as if the Word had been made flesh) in order to himself be *eaten*. And it was precisely the alimentary implications of that insistence that Protestant Reformers fixed upon in demystifying Catholic ritual. As Greenblatt suggests, the material remains of the mystery, the lingering of the scatological after the eschatological, shadows over the literature as well as the theology of the period.

The final two essays by Marjorie Garber and Jonathan Dollimore we have called *Objections*, for objects there are so much in the image of the subject's desire that they seem more like simulacra or sites of loss. Both essays reopen the question of the subject by drawing on psychoanalysis