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### Johnston, Mark Albert. Beard Fetish in Early Modern England. Sex, Gender, and Registers of Value

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**Johnston, Mark Albert.**

*Beard Fetish in Early Modern England. Sex, Gender, and Registers of Value.*

Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. 312. ISBN 978-1-4094-0542-9 (hardback) \$104.95.

This book makes a significant and important contribution to studies of fetishism, masculinity, embodiment, early modern drama, ideology critique, and Lacanian theory. Johnston argues that the historical contingency of the meaning of the beard reveals and illuminates the nature of fetish while advancing a thesis that the fetishization of the beard in early modern England involved a process of “imbricative naturalization.” The merits and weakness of the book rest neatly on either side of the fault line of this phrase. The term “imbricative values” refers to the fact that the values accorded to the beard work on multiple registers, which do not always align perfectly. This emphasis allows Johnston to make several nuanced, provocative, and innovative readings of early modern texts. On the other hand, Johnston’s command of a variety of early modern texts lends his argument a suppleness that makes for an odd juxtaposition to its theoretical rigidity. His insistence on a historically inflexible drive to justify domination by naturalizing ideology leads Johnston to make claims that often lead to a distorted view of early modern experiences.

Johnston gives a synchronic reading of beards from the reign of Henry VIII to the death of Charles I, with occasional forays into the Restoration when it serves his purpose. He opens with a chapter summarizing scholarship on theories of the fetish and their applicability to early modern societies. He proceeds to a detailed examination of the variety of ways beards signified manhood. His chapter on beardless boys significantly advances our understanding of the way early moderns inflected biological sex through age. A chapter on bearded women discusses first women’s pubic hair and then the exhibition of bearded women. Finally, he delves deeper into the complications of the semiotics of the beard by examining half beards and hermaphrodites. Throughout his argument, he is primarily concerned with disrupting seemingly unified meanings of the beard by attending to contradictions between and within various registers of signification. In his view, such slippery meanings regularly occasioned patriarchal anxiety over the fragility of the semiotic system that grounded male subjectivity as approaching a natural perfection over against the deficiencies of various “Others.”

Johnston shows how the ideological work of fetish makes the instable appear stable, but never explains why theories of fetishism are exempt from the historical contingency to which everything else is subject. Throughout, Johnston uses the spelling “(f)act” to highlight that facts are made, not revealed. He does not consider historical studies by Barbara Shapiro or Mary Poovey on the historical emergence of the centrality of “fact” as a unit of knowledge. In contrast, the medieval concept of *figura* shows a great deal of comfort with the inevitable intersection of the given and the made. In a footnote, Johnston shows that he has at least passing awareness of scholarship that traces a historical shift over the seventeenth century from an understanding of nature as including social custom to one that construes nature as inviolable law. Nowhere in his argument does this development shake his firm conviction that the legitimization of ideology always proceeds through “naturalization.”

This totalization of naturalization as the means of establishing ideology rests on a failure to recognize the crucial distinction between “naturalized” and “divinely ordained.” Johnston expresses bafflement that the biblical story of Jacob and Esau subverts the social order in revealing God’s will in the disruption of primogeniture rather than in the natural hierarchy of birth order, missing the entire point that divine election is not a matter of natural necessity. He bases his understanding of the relation of the physical world to divine will in the early modern world on the *scala naturae* with God at the apex of a natural hierarchy; nowhere does he explore how the *scala naturae* intersects with the basic assumption of a postlapsarian world. Attention to this central component of Christian theology might have led him to read moments of semiotic discrepancy very differently than as a simple cause of anxiety. This neglect of the most rudimentary aspects of theology is especially puzzling given that he explicitly sets out to explain how beards came to signify divine authority. It also makes the sudden turn to a scriptural basis for a Lacanian understanding of spirituality at the close of the book jarring.

Finally, in a work that claims to unmask patriarchy, it is disappointing that he is able to read women’s agency and desire in no other way than as transgression. We are well past the point where we can bypass early modern women’s authorship and patronage as culturally productive in their own right. A passing reference to Catherine of Aragon’s dislike of Henry VIII’s beard aside, women’s desires are never discussed, except as constructed in male-authored texts. In *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Amelia Lanyer described Jesus’s face in

depth without mentioning his beard; Johnston gives the reader few tools to understand the significance of this omission, though we are in his debt for drawing our attention to the fact that the omission is significant.

It is a testament to Johnston's erudition that *Beard Fetish in Early Modern England* stands up despite a severe weakness in half of its thesis. Directors of early modern drama should certainly avail themselves of the insights Johnston's hermeneutic strategy opens. Its thorough documentation of the extent to which masculinity and beardedness were fused in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is a vital contribution to an embodied historicism.

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**Kingsley-Smith, Jane.**

***Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture.***

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. x, 264. ISBN 978-0-521-76761-3 (hardcover) \$90.

Before his cherubic form graced countless postcards and prints, Cupid's history was a violent and chaotic one; the destructive desire that the boy-god unleashed wounded, subjugated, and perverted. Jane Kingsley-Smith's *Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture* lights the many faces of the young but all-powerful figure from the Middle Ages to the English Civil Wars. In her introduction, Kingsley-Smith establishes an adversarial relationship between Cupid and Protestantism, which she grounds in an iconoclastic mistrust of "Catholic" idolatry that Cupid represented. She argues that his association with lust and unruly desire were anathema to Protestants eager to emphasize chastity in marriage, and to clearly delineate legitimate and illicit love. Moving between art history and literature, Kingsley-Smith outlines a cultural history of the early modern Cupid as a lens onto larger English Protestant anxieties over sexual and religious mores.

The first chapter is titled "Cupid, Art and Idolatry." It opens with the anecdote of Captain John Harris's cabin painting of Cupid and Venus, which Kingsley-Smith uses to suggest an intriguing parallelism between the experience of idolatry and pornography in the Protestant imagination. After what is defined