

Thinking and not Thinking About Things in Early Modern England

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Abstract

The rise of an interest in material culture has brought with it many new insights and intellectual benefits, especially for those studying early modern literature, history and culture. We now know a lot more about clothing, weapons, food, interior space and design, book production and annotation, and so on, as constituents of culture than we did twenty years ago. Many critics believe that there has been a 'material turn' in literary and cultural studies. In many ways this development cannot be disputed. However, we might also want to ask: do we actually need a theory to explain what has happened? Or do we just want a theory because we are used to having them and need one to save us from the fear that we have simply moved into a new area of empirical study? And, more significantly, does a concentration on things detract from the study of texts and simply make literary scholars (not very good) social historians? In this essay I will weigh up the evidence and ask whether knowing about things helps us understand Hamlet, and whether we need a distinct theory with its own vocabulary to do so.

Keywords: Hamlet; Hans Holbein; material culture; Ophelia; Shakespeare; thing theory.