

“A most curious mantle”: Shakespeare’s Late Materialities

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Abstract

Considerable attention has been paid to Shakespeare’s late plays since the turn of the millennium, exploring the mechanics of their most prominent features. This essay makes a case for the significance of their distinctive materiality, a consideration of which forces us to pay due attention to both text and performance, and has the potential to get to the heart of their distinctive use of genre, language and temporality. Whilst there have been many interesting local readings of the plays’ props, we lack a general understanding of the function of a more broadly-conceived materiality which aims to explore its function in the creation of their unique effects. Focusing on Cymbeline, the essay aims to make some initial suggestions about what ‘late materiality’ might encompass, by what forces it might be constrained, and what it might tell us about the effects of the plays on their audiences – to begin to think through a method by which we might assess its role in the making of these late plays.

Keywords: Materiality; emblematic staging; romance; temporality; Cymbeline.