



**The Culture of Cloth in
Early Modern England**
Textual Constructions of a National Identity

Roze Hentschell

ASHGATE e-BOOK

THE CULTURE OF CLOTH IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

For Tom and Eleanor

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Early Modern England
Textual Constructions of a National Identity

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ASHGATE

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction: Ancient, Famous, and Decayed: The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England	1
Part 1 Resistance in the Flock: Labor Rebellion in Pastoral Poetry and Prose Romance	
1 Pasture and Pastoral: Sheep, Anti-Enclosure Literature, and Sidney's Seditious Peasants	19
2 Clothworkers and Social Protest: The Case of Thomas Deloney	51
Part 2 The Circulation of Subjectivity in the Cloth Trade	
3 "Vente for our English Clothes": Promoting Early New World Expansion	75
4 Treasonous Textiles: Foreign Cloth, and the Construction of Englishness	103
Part 3 Staging the Cloth Crisis	
5 The Fleecing of England, or the Drama of Corrupt Drapers: Thomas Middleton's <i>Michaelmas Term</i>	129
6 Politics on Parade: The Cockayne Project and Anthony Munday's Civic Pageants for the Drapers	153
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>179</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>201</i>

List of Figures

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | F.H. Van Hove, <i>England's Great Joy and Gratitude</i> , c. 1690 | 14 |
| 2 | Andrew Boorde, <i>The First Book of the Introduction of Knowledge</i> , 1562 (A3v) | 109 |
| 3 | Robert Greene, <i>A Quip for an Upstart Courtier</i> , 1592 (title page) | 121 |

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Introduction

Ancient, Famous, and Decayed: The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England

It is impossible to comprehend the development of English nationalism during the early modern period without also understanding the culture of cloth. Although wool had a prominent place in England's economy from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth century, from about 1550 to 1650 wool cloth occupied a position of centrality not seen before or after. Certainly we can look, as many economic and social historians have, to assize documents, county registers, or guild records to find evidence for such a claim. My purpose in this project, however, is not to revisit the already well-trod ground of cloth history. My argument begins with the assumption that the wool industry held a crucial place in early modern English economies. And while my primary object of inquiry is English cloth during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I look beyond its role as a factor in England's economic development. To that end, I focus on wool cloth as an object of tremendous *cultural* importance. I argue that cloth reached far beyond its status as an object of production and commodity for exchange. It was also a locus for organizing sentiments of national solidarity across social and economic lines. Through the culture's textual output, we see that an ostensibly material, mundane, and economic topic is transformed into something larger, more symbolic, and more allegorical to contribute to an emerging and coalescing national identity.

The dominant perception of the wool industry in early modern England, at least for England's own writers, was that it was "ancient." In *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), for example, Robert Greene asserts that wool goes back to the founding of the nation, "ever since Brute an inhabitant in this island" (294). In 1613, John May, the deputy wool examiner for James I, claimed that "[t]he antiquitie of Woll within this Kingdome hath beene, beyond the memorie of man" (1). The wool industry, then, was not merely historic; it claimed a sort of mythic status "beyond ... memory." Equally prevalent in the early modern mind was the image that the wool industry was "famous." In Thomas Deloney's, *Jack of Newbury* (1597), he articulates that "[a]mong all manuall Arts used in this Land, none is more famous for desert, or more beneficiall to the Commonwealth than is the most necessarie Art of Cloathing" (3). While the "art" of clothmaking was crucial in securing this acclaim, the source of the cloth was celebrated as well. According to William Lambarde, a London lawyer recording his observations of the Kentish landscape in 1576, England's sheep are "woorthy of great estimation, both for the exceeding fineness of the fleese ... and for the abundant store of flocks so increasing every where" (225–6). Many authors of the

late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries understood that England's wool was both "famous" and "ancient" and its esteem was largely due to its longstanding presence in England. In Richard Hakluyt the Younger's *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584), a promotional text for New World colonization, he notes that "for certen hundredth yeres ... by the peculiar commoditie of wolles, and of later yeres by clothinge of the same ... [England] raised it selfe from meaner state to greater wealth and moche higher honour, might and power then before" (118). And the title alone of Anthony Munday's civic pageant commemorating the inauguration of London's Lord Mayor, *The Triumphs of Olde Draperie, or the Rich Cloathing of England* (1614), indicates the connection between fame and history: the clothing is "rich" because it is "olde."

While English wool enjoyed a positive reputation in the early modern period, almost as common was the understanding that the industry was in crisis; it, and thus England, was in a state of "decay." For instance, a proclamation "for the True Working and Dying of Cloth" (1613), asserts that "the Trade of Clothing hath been much discredited by the corrupt desires and practices" of some members of the clothmaking community (301). Here, blame for this dissolution was fixed on the manufacturers. Other times it was understood as caused by the consumers themselves. In 1583, Philip Stubbes attributed the degradation of English cloth to the desire to purchase foreign goods: "if we would contente our selves with such kinde of attire as our owne countrie doeth yeeld us, it were somewhat tollerable." Instead "we impoverish our selves in buying their trifling Merchandizes" (69–70). That the wool industry was in crisis was simply a well known fact: Robert Johnson, writing his *Nova Britannia* (1609) on behalf of the Virginia Company, hoped that a New World expansion of the cloth trade would "cause a mighty vent of English clothes, a great benefit to our Nation, and raising againe of that auncient trade of clothing, so much decayed in England" (245). In Johnson's argument, all three prevalent conceptions of the industry are at work: the "decay" in the industry may be rectified by a revision of the cloth trade, which will bring fame ("great benefit") and resurrect the "auncient" industry.

As this sampling of sentiments reveals, the ancient, famous, and decayed wool and woolen cloth industry was, importantly, England's own. Perhaps above all in the period's textual output, we see that for better or for worse wool manufacture and trade were largely considered to be national enterprises that affected nearly all subjects. Greene lauds wool's presence on "this island," and May "within this Kingdom." Deloney cites the benefit of clothmaking to "the Commonwealth," while Munday's "rich cloathing" belongs to "England." Writers also acknowledged that the state of decline into which wool had fallen was a problem of "our owne countrie." Wool was seen throughout the early modern period paradoxically as both England's pride and shame, that which brought glory and honor to the nation—and in many instances defined it—while simultaneously engendering contempt and ignominy for the nation. That interest in the national industry was held by such a wide swath of individuals should be apparent by the diversity of texts cited above. Greene's text is a satirical prose narrative, while May's document was officially commissioned by the crown. *Jack of Newbury*, a wildly popular romance in prose and verse, shares some of the same sentiments as Lambarde's text, a narrative about his "perambulations" in Kent. Hakluyt's *Discourse* and Johnson's *Nova Britannia* promote New World expansion, while Munday's Lord Mayor's pageant is a script describing spectacular tableaux involving mythical and historical figures. And Stubbes' text is famous as

moralistic polemic, yet has much in common with proclamations issued by the Crown. Imaginative, propagandistic, fictional, polemical, satirical, and official, as I hope this study will show, almost all types of early modern writing engaged with issues of the English wool cloth industry.

The story of textile manufacturing and trade in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century is largely a story of wool cloth.¹ However, throughout the medieval period and up until the mid sixteenth century, raw wool dominated the English economy. Raw wool was exported to European nations to manufacture and finish it however they saw fit. England's raw wool came from sheep that produced a fine staple, less than two inches in length. The wool produced by England's sheep was considered superior because the country had several breeds of sheep that provided the carding wool necessary to make fine cloth.² This wool had fibers that were curly and serrated, allowing for substantial felting and shrinkage during fulling. The shrinkage was important to give the wool cloth a heavy, dense quality, which lent to its strength and cohesion (Munro, 45). The best wool came from sheep raised in Herefordshire and Shropshire in the Welsh marches, from the Cotswold region, from East Anglia, and from the Midlands. This English staple enjoyed a fine reputation among European nations and the ports of the north and east coasts dominated the market throughout the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

In the mid-sixteenth century, however, there was a rapid increase in the production of wool cloth. While the term "cloth" for us indicates an endless variety of textiles, for the early modern English, it generally designated textiles derived from sheep's wool. While I will discuss a variety of fabrics in the course of this book, I am primarily concerned with England's understanding of itself vis-à-vis the wool broadcloth industry. Broadcloth was a dense, tightly woven woollen, which was manufactured into large pieces, approximately 28 to 30 yards long and weighing up to 90 pounds (Ramsay, *English Woollen*, 13). In general, the process of manufacture was as follows:³ the *shepherd*, usually an independent peasant or servant of a landowner, would sell the sheared raw wool to a wool *brogger* (broker), who would have the wool packed. It would be sold to a *clothier*, who then owned the product and saw to the rest of the manufacturing process.⁴ It would be cleaned, oiled and

1 It is not my intention here to review the rise and fall of the wool cloth industry; historians of this topic have been doing this for the better part of the twentieth century far more comprehensively than I could. For an overview of the English cloth industry, see especially, Bowden; Kerridge, *Textile Manufactures*; Leggett; Lipson; Ponting; Ramsay, *The English Woollen Industry*; and Van der Wee.

2 For a discussion of sheep breeds in early modern England see Kerridge, *Textile Manufacturers*, especially Chapter 1.

3 See Ramsay, *The English Woollen Industry*, Chapter 1, and Zell, Chapter 6 of *Industry in the Countryside*, for a more thorough description of the process of manufacture.

4 In the medieval period and through the early sixteenth century, cloth was produced in a sort of a cottage industry system whereby each person responsible for a particular point in the process would own the cloth at that point, and then sell it to the next individual in the manufacturing process. An increase in exported cloth, and thus a more centralized selling at market, led to a significant change in the ownership system, which came to be known as the "putting out" system. See Van der Wee, p. 423; Zell, *Industry in the Countryside*, Chapter 7; and Bowden, Chapter 3, for a discussion of the rise of the clothier.

carded and sent to a *spinner*, who would spin it into yarn with either a distaff or a spinning wheel.⁵ It was then given to the *weaver*, who would feed the yarn onto a loom to create the piece of cloth. The cloth would be given to the *fuller* or *tucker* who would scour it in a trough of water and then beat it. The cloth was then stretched out to dry on wooden racks, known as tenters, with iron hooks. The *rower* would raise the cloth's nap with teasels and then the *shearman* would clip off the rough wool nap to create a smooth surface. Rowing (or barbing) and shearing would have been repeated several times to achieve the desired quality. Since most cloth was exported undyed and undressed (also known as "unfinished"), the cloth would at this point have been wound or folded and sold at market, bound for either domestic customers or international shores.⁶

The mid-sixteenth century shift to cloth production was a watershed in the history of the English industry and allowed for an enormous expansion in exports. One reason behind this shift was that the government imposed large duties on exported raw wool while the export of wool cloth was hardly taxed at all, thus encouraging the Merchant Adventurers, the guild company that was primarily responsible for international trade, to focus their attention on the export of unfinished wool cloth (Van der Wee, 399). At mid-century, then, the overseas market for wool cloth—especially the market at Antwerp—expanded rapidly, leading to the great boom years in the cloth industry. The reasons for this expansion are several. First, the English Merchant Adventurers enjoyed a cooperative relationship with the city government in Antwerp as well as with those involved in the finishing trades. As the Merchant Adventurers were based in London, the capital became a much more prominent trading port than it previously had been.⁷ The London merchants were given liberty to import cloth into the Netherlands with very few restrictions and the local cloth finishers in the Low Countries, particularly the dressers and dyers, benefited from an increase in demand for their expertise (Van der Wee, 412). Moreover, the English Crown gave the Merchant Adventurers a virtual monopoly over the export trade (Van der Wee, 413). Thus, by the mid sixteenth century, wool cloth surpassed raw wool as England's primary export and dominated the European market. By the 1570s, the export of raw wool was "no more than a trickle" (Ramsay, *The English Woollen Industry*, 19). Up until 1563, English wool cloth accounted for the "largest value of commodity" in Antwerp after silks and satins, which were produced elsewhere (Van der Wee, 418), and Antwerp alone took an astonishing 65 per cent of England's cloth exports (Croft, "English Commerce," 243).⁸ While England's raw wool had always

5 The best quality yarn was produced by the distaff, a process known as rock spinning. See Alice Clark, Chapter 4, for the indispensable role women played in the cloth industry, particularly in spinning, which was largely the labor of women. See also Zell, pp. 166–8 of *Industry in the Countryside*.

6 By and large, the English had neither the labor skills for dressing nor the raw materials for dyeing to compete with dressers and dyers overseas.

7 The decline of the export of raw wool diminished the importance of the wool ports in the north and east of England. Wool cloth was principally traded through London, which handled 80 per cent of England cloth exports by the early sixteenth century (Wrightson, 107).

8 For a discussion of the important reciprocal relationship between London and Antwerp in the sixteenth century, see Keene. There were, of course, vicissitudes in the market and the

enjoyed a good reputation overseas, its wool cloth began to be perceived as the finest in the world. Importantly, the English recognized that with this product came a kind of national wealth and reputation that allowed England to emerge as a player on the world stage and became a focal point for emerging national solidarity.

Not long afterwards, however, English cloth suffered a grave setback when the Eighty-Years War between the 17 Dutch provinces and Spain interrupted the trade. More than any other episode, the unrest in the Low Countries created a crisis for the thriving cloth trade in England. In 1564, before any major conflicts erupted, Margaret of Parma, the governess of the Spanish Low Countries, temporarily banned the import of English wool cloth (Van der Wee, 420).⁹ This and other measures to restrict the flow of English cloth caused a “violent contraction in the export market” (Bowden, xvii) and a sharp increase in domestic unemployment (Bowden, 158). After 1576 when the Spanish took the city, the port declined until it collapsed entirely in 1585 as the Dutch rebels closed off the Scheldt to traffic. The singular dependence on cloth as a commodity and the reliance on the port of Antwerp ultimately proved crippling to England.¹⁰ And although the English set up new markets and shipped cloth to other ports, including those of Hamburg, Amsterdam, and Bremen, the loss of the Antwerp cloth market ushered in a years-long slump for the English cloth trade. While I will not discuss in great detail the mid-century crisis of trade, I want to underscore its prominence in the English imagination for the later years of the sixteenth century. The mid-century boom in the cloth century brought England so much prosperity and provided England with such a robust reputation, that this period was seen as a golden age, one which later generations strived to, but never could, recover.¹¹ There is, then, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a recurrent strain of loss and nostalgia in the writings about the industry.¹²

industry was by no means without challenges during this boom period. As Wrightson points out, “[t]he long upward trend in cloth exports had quickened in the 1540s as the price of English cloth fell in overseas markets. In 1549–50, however, it peaked and then collapsed as the market became glutted, precipitating widespread distress in the export-oriented clothing districts” (155).

9 According to Bowden, this restriction was “under the pretext of taking precaution against the plague raging in London” (158).

10 See Youings, p. 49, for a discussion of England’s dependence on cloth and Davis, pp. 14–15, for a discussion of the decline of the Antwerp market.

11 Cloth remained a vital part of the English economy, but the high times of the mid-sixteenth century were never to be seen again. According to Van der Wee, “[b]y 1614, English cloth exports had achieved a new peak of 127, 215 cloths, which, however, was still well below the peak exports of the 1550s” (422).

12 The decline of the broadcloth industry led to innovations in cloth production in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Worsteds, woolen produced from the longer hairs of the sheep, which was then combed instead of carded, were particularly prevalent. Worsteds were also lighter, using less wool per yard, and proved to be a popular fabric in warmer climes and also became a very important sector of the wool trade due primarily to the knitted stocking industry. See Thirsk, ““The Fantastical Folly of Fashion;” Schneider; and Chapman for discussions of the worsted stocking knitting industry. Another important change in the cloth industry in England in the late sixteenth century was the advent of the so-called New Draperies. Lighter, often cheaper cloth derived from the long staple wool, the New

While the closure of the Antwerp market proved to be the most significant challenge to the English cloth trade in the late sixteenth century, and led to a number of other problems, there were also several other threats to the health of the industry throughout the period. First, in the mid-sixteenth century, complaints over land use, specifically the enclosure practices of landlords, led to an antagonism toward sheep farmers. Although land was enclosed for a number of reasons, in the popular imagination the proliferation of sheep pastures was blamed for impoverishing agrarian workers by turning them off lands. Anti-enclosure riots threatened landowners' livelihood and created a widespread sentiment that the unabated increase in sheep farming was deleterious to the nation. Second, crop failures of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and most significantly the weak harvests of 1595–97, devastated clothworkers who relied on the grain market for provisions. Rising prices for grain also decreased expendable income across the population, resulting in a severe drop in the purchase of cloth. Third, in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, immigrant weavers from the Netherlands seeking asylum from Spanish persecution flooded into English cloth producing towns, particularly Norwich and Colchester. While the native clothworkers initially welcomed the foreign weavers to help increase cloth production, the English came to regard the strangers as a serious threat. They were blamed for producing an inferior product, trading secretly and illegally with one another, not keeping their profits in England and, perhaps most grievous, not respecting the venerable English industry.

Fourth, after the closure of the Antwerp market, England struggled to reformulate its trading organization. The export of cloth through the Muscovy, Levant, and East India companies did not flourish as expected. Further, English traders complained about having to rely on trade arrangements involving the expanding Spanish empire just as Spain was becoming an increasing military danger to England. Finding suitable trading partners to expand or at least stabilize the trade proved to be an ongoing challenge. Fifth, the wool broadcloth industry was tested by the increasing popularity of luxury textiles that were imported from the continent. Silks and satins from Spain, France, and Italy were seen as creating a new kind of crisis for the wool industry whereby individuals across classes rejected wool in favor of luxury goods.¹³ For the first time, wool cloth had real competition in the form of products

Draperies were originally produced in Flanders, but proliferated in England with the influx of Flemish immigrants. New manners of weaving diverse types of yarn allowed for seemingly endless combinations, and were reflected in the proliferation of cloth with new and unusual names, such as bays, says, serges, perpetuanas, calimancoes, mockadoes, and bombazines, just to name a few. For more on the New Draperies, see Coleman; Harte, p. 4; Holderness; Munro; Luc Martin; and Wrightson, p. 166–7. While the contribution of the New Draperies to the economy should not be underestimated, it is crucial to remember that these textiles did not replace wool broadcloth's place in England's economy or imagination. The broadcloth industry still accounted for a sizable portion of English exports through 1615, the year this present study concludes.

13 This was especially the case after 1603, the year that the sumptuary laws were repealed. Because these laws were notoriously difficult to enforce, however, there is reason to believe that a large portion of the population who could afford luxury goods did buy them even in the sixteenth century.

that were also seen as morally suspicious. Sixth, there was a perceived widespread corruption among wool manufacturers. Clothiers were charged with allowing and indeed encouraging the manufacture of a debased product that was too short, too stretched, or too light. Moreover, London drapers and merchants were accused of knowingly selling the fraudulent fabric, thus duping the unsuspecting customer and diminishing the reputation of wool. While these were not the only challenges to the wool broadcloth industry in the early modern period, they were the ones that figured most prominently in the English cultural imagination, contributed to the reputation that wool was in a state of “decay,” and prompted the writers of the period to offer solutions to rectify the problems.

While obviously perceived of as problems, these challenges to the industry were crucial in defining the importance of cloth. As I argue, it is primarily through bringing the problems to light and imagining solutions to them that authors of the period were able to articulate how important wool broadcloth was to a national identity. While the study of material culture as a whole has gained significant attention in recent scholarship and new studies of physical objects have contributed to a greater understanding of the early modern world, this book is primarily a study of the culture of cloth and the singular importance that wool had in contributing to England’s understanding of itself in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹⁴ One reason cloth held such a prominent place in the early modern imagination was due to the personal relationship individuals had with textiles. Because so many individuals were involved in the production and trade of cloth, it was a material that became a focal point for thousands of laboring English men and women. Moreover, all English people wore clothing and most of them exclusively wore cloth that had been manufactured domestically. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have shown us the intimate connection early modern subjects had with the clothes that they wore. In their magisterial *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, the authors demonstrate the crucial and pervasive relationship between subjectivity and clothes, which possess the “power to constitute subjects” (2). As they eloquently assert, “[t]he material of cloth matters so much because it operates on and undoes, the margins of the self” (202). While Jones and Stallybrass’s study is primarily one of finished cloth and its functions as clothing, their formulation is nevertheless helpful here. Cloth is important as an object in and of itself in serving a vital function in the lives of subjects; it “operates” as a source of clothing, an object of manufacture, a product for international trade and thus intersects with the subject at many turns. But because cloth is so socially complicated, it also deconstructs or “undoes” its

14 Criticism of the early modern period has given much attention to the study of material culture. While late twentieth century criticism of the period has been preoccupied with subjectivity, “self-fashioning,” and the understanding of “the human,” in the last 15 or so years scholars have paid increasing attention to the objects that constitute the subjects’ world and indeed constitute the subjects themselves. For examples of recent work exploring material culture in the early modern period, see in particular, de Grazia, Quilligan, Stallybrass (eds), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*; Fumerton and Hunt (eds), *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*; Orlin (ed.), *Material London, ca. 1600*; Yates, *Error, Misuse, and Failure*; and the special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* entitled “Renaissance Materialities” edited by Quilligan.

mere status as an object. Cloth comes to represent something more for the subject than its mere materiality. Indeed, it dismantles epistemological certainty for the subject. And it is this space of uncertainty that allows individuals to make meaning of cloth, to tell stories about it. This study hopes to expand on the work of Jones and Stallybrass to ask what happens when we investigate a national, rather than an individual relationship to cloth. We then may begin to understand that the identity of a people was just as bound to the materiality of their culture as that of individuals. The material commodity of cloth was so closely linked with the abstract idea of nation that England, in effect, became knowable through the cloth industry.

Because I am interested in exploring why cloth held such a prominent place in the English imagination, I look to textual productions—both fiction and non-fiction texts that often treat the cloth industry with mythic importance—to help explain how cloth comes to be a catalyst for nationalism.¹⁵ My argument assumes that narratives, like nations, are cultural productions with specific agendas and ramifications.¹⁶ Although “the nation” may be regarded as that which is always already in existence, handed down from generation to generation, the story of a nation can never be an essential or teleological one. The nation, and the sentiment of belief in that nation—nationalism—is always being refashioned, constructed, performed.¹⁷ One important way in which nationalisms are continually created is through printed texts. Benedict Anderson argues that printed language is a fundamental aspect of the creation of nationalism because subjects understand that they are part of something larger than themselves once they can imagine others reading the same material: “these fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed ... the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (47). Printed matter allows for the nationalization of various regionalisms and assists in the inclusion of a wide number of readers. At the same time that print introduces new national epistemologies, it also creates tradition where none may have been: print “fixes” language, gives it permanence over time and space, which “helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of a nation” (Anderson, 47–8). The idea that the nation has always “been” is one that is constructed through a culture’s various stories and metaphors. In this sense, texts can create a history of the nation. For early modern England, it was the collective belief in the antiquity of the cloth industry that allowed the culture to equate it with England itself. The texts that I discuss participate in the construction and reification of an ancient and venerable cloth industry that creates a past for England, thereby creating a sense of England as a nation.

The texts that I examine are largely topical in focus, informed by and participating in the contemporaneous debates surrounding the complexities of the cloth industry. And just as I am committed to rethinking canonical texts by looking at them in the

15 For Barthes, myth is necessarily “a mode of signification” (109), created by discourse, the “materials of myth” (110).

16 See Helgerson’s remarks on the “four-way exchange” of texts, nations, authors, and discursive communities: “all are both produced and productive, productive of that by which they are produced” (*Forms of Nationhood*, 13).

17 See Bhabha’s “DissemiNation,” p. 299, for a discussion of performativity and nation formation.

context of the early modern cloth industry (Sidney's *Arcadia* in particular), I am also interested in examining texts on the margins of the literary canon, texts that have been given little critical attention despite the popularity with which they were often received in their own time. Agrarian verse, propaganda for New World expansion, religious polemic, ballads, and proclamations were among the types of writing that were crucial in contributing to an understanding of the national prominence of the cloth industry.¹⁸ The pervasive sense in texts across genres is that the cloth industry is England's treasure, one to be promoted and protected.

The cloth-nation connection became legible through a vast array of texts. That a concern for the industry should appear in so many different sorts of textual modes shows a diversity of response befitting a complex industry. No one genre or mode could possibly attend to all the disparate elements of the trade, just as diverse genres could not attend to a particular element in an identical manner. Throughout this study, I argue that distinct genres perform particular kinds of cultural work; they make sense of unique cloth-related situations in unique ways. Despite this diversity of attention, I assert that authors working in a multiplicity of modes do possess a commonality in their concerns. What these texts all have in common—the traditionally literary as well as those usually considered to be historical documents—is their contribution to an understanding of how diverse sectors of the population perceived the cloth industry and its role in constructing England's nationhood. While the texts and issues on which my project focuses are wide-ranging—linking pastoral with issues surrounding land enclosure, prose narrative with cloth production, promotional literature with cloth exports, satire with foreign imports, drama with corrupt mercantilism, and civic pageants with an international trade crisis—I argue that they all help us to understand the interwoven relationship between literature and the cloth industry in early modern England. Attending carefully to the language of all of these texts, we see how poets, propagandists, and prose writers, satirists, sovereigns, and sermonists share a concern for the fate of the English cloth industry. Texts and textiles are inextricably tied in their power to materially articulate national identity.¹⁹

The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England focuses specifically on texts from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (approximately 1575–1615). In these years the cloth industry was indispensable to England's economic vitality both at home and abroad. At the same time, it is in this forty-year period that the industry also faced challenges never before encountered on a major scale. Once

18 While recent critics have shown the complex and inextricable relationship between emerging nationalism and literary production during this period, they primarily focus on canonical texts and authors. See, for example, Baker, Escobedo, Hadfield, Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*; Howard and Rackin, Joughin, Maley, McEachern, and Schwyzer. I do not claim that texts that have been read and loved over time cannot help us to understand the emerging of English national identity during the early modern period; I am proposing, however, that we expand the body of literature that we study to complicate the important connections between nationhood and literature.

19 To be sure, not all sectors of the population necessarily would have cared to read all the texts I discuss in this book. However, with only one or two exceptions, all of the texts that I investigate were printed in their own time, and thus participate in a sort of public discourse in a way that archival manuscripts do not.

a booming and well-organized industry, the cloth trade had become damaged and broken under the pressure of so many challenges. In spite of these challenges, or likely because of them, the authors who were concerned with the cloth industry persisted in imagining a future thriving industry which, as it would resuscitate the economy, would also bind the nation's people. In Julian Yates's study of material objects in the early modern period, he asserts that "the success of these objects may be gauged by their relative invisibility. If they work well, no one notices them." However, "each is prone to error, misuse, and sometimes failure" and "it is with these lapses" that we may "recover the silent work of 'things' in the production of what we take to be human drama" (xix). This is a helpful formulation for thinking about woolen cloth. Although cloth is not just one "thing," having many forms and residing in many places, the writers of the early modern period notice it more when something is amiss: when the laborers are unhappy with their conditions, when the cloth itself is seen as adulterated and sold by corrupt merchants, when wool is threatened by silk. It is in these times of crisis, of "error, misuse, and failure," that discourse surrounding the industry speaks the loudest. I am interested in how texts engage with these moments of crisis, how authors, some who had little to do with the cloth industry, felt compelled to add their voices to the conversation and, importantly, how this often cacophonous conversation contributed to a national discourse. As Homi Bhabha has argued, "[t]he language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past" (294). That is to say, the understanding of the nation is only possible in times of crisis; it is the moments of failure that enable and engender the texts that become a nation's story, which includes a narrative of its history. The writing of the nation is that which "turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (Bhabha, 291).

The Culture of Cloth is divided into three sections, each comprising two chapters. The first section, "Resistance in the Flock: Labor Rebellion in Pastoral Literature and Prose Romance," focuses on the ways in which the romance, a traditional and celebrated literary form, becomes the unlikely vehicle for sentiments of social protest. In my first chapter, "Pasture and Pastoral: Sheep, Anti-Enclosure Literature, and Sidney's Seditious Peasants," I read pastoral literature against the backdrop of didactic agrarian texts and the land enclosure debates in the second half of the sixteenth century, focusing particularly on anti-enclosure literature and on the rebellion of the rustics in Sidney's *Arcadia*. The bucolic landscape dotted with grazing sheep and their shepherds is a mainstay of the pastoral mode and for years critics have seen pastoral as obfuscating agrarian labor in the interest of exploring more allegorical themes or reframing the classical eclogues of Virgil. However, many pastoral texts reveal an unlikely engagement with the material conditions of sheep and shepherding of the sixteenth century, and particularly with the hardships that this occupation entailed. The conversion of arable land to sheep pasture at a time when the cloth industry was shifting from the raw staple to woven cloth led to depopulation of agrarian laborers and a placing of blame on the enclosing landlords and their voracious sheep. Anti-enclosure sentiment written by poets, polemicists, and economic thinkers became a popular strain of literature and, as I argue, must share the textual landscape with pastoral literature. While pastoral seemingly erases the problems of the changing agrarian landscape by privileging the otiose life of

shepherds and their benevolent sheep, the violent uprising of the peasants in *The Arcadia* reveals the extent to which the discontent of agrarian laborers was a concern for the landowners, including Sidney himself, in the late sixteenth century. The stable notion of the English countryside and thus the nation promoted in pastoral literature, is disrupted by the discontent among agricultural workers with shepherds and landowners. The decisive squelching of the rebellion in *The Arcadia* allows for the triumph of the landowner and his sheep. That Sidney includes the skirmish at all, however, reveals the dangers that the landowners faced during a time of changes in land use due in large part to the burgeoning cloth trade.

In Chapter 2, “Clothworkers and Social Protest: The Case of Thomas Deloney,” I examine Deloney’s *Jack of Newbury* in the context of his dual career as a silkweaver and balladeer during the difficult decade of the 1590s, a time of harvest failures at home and depressions in the cloth market abroad. Deloney was outspoken against what he saw as threats to his profession, particularly the challenges posed by successful immigrant weavers and government apathy to the plight of clothworkers in the face of grain shortages, and was twice in trouble with the authorities for his activism. Rather than seeing his popular prose romance, *Jack of Newbury*, as a departure from his activist writing, I argue that it too participates in a culture of social protest. The text’s dedicatory epistle, the description of Jack’s workshop, and especially Jack’s dealings with the King and his advisors, show an ironic idealism that belies the calamity that besieged the cloth industry. Like pastoral, the genre of prose romance may seem to obfuscate the troubles afflicting the clothworkers in the text. However, I argue that the narrative presents a populist nationalism that imagines cloth laborers as vital to England’s wealth and security at a time when the government was denying their existence as such. Both of these chapters engage with issues of resistance against what was perceived of as unfair treatment of rural laborers. But while Deloney’s text takes up the cloth manufacturer’s cause and celebrates his work as constitutive of a robust nation, Sidney’s *Arcadia* shows that agricultural workers were sometimes violently at odds with, and vastly inferior to, their counterparts who contributed to sheep farming. In both instances, however, the cloth industry emerges as the victor and as central to a thriving and cohesive nation.

Part Two, “The Circulation of Subjectivity in the Cloth Trade,” investigates how the overseas cloth trade both in imports and exports contributed to an increased sense of national identity among English subjects. To be sure, domestic manufacture was crucial in creating an epistemology of the industry because so many individuals were involved in wool production. However, as wool cloth exports became more and more important to England’s economic well-being, international trade relations emerged as the focal point for many. Writers saw that slumps in the industry, then, would necessarily need to be rectified by a revision in trade arrangements with foreign nations. In Chapter 3, “‘Vente for our English Clothes’: Promoting Early New World Expansion,” I focus on propaganda for exploration and colonization of the New World in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, showing how authors of promotional texts based their arguments for expansion in large part on the claim that the decayed cloth industry would be revived. Conflicts with Spain had proved challenging to England’s European trade routes and exporting to lands further east had not panned out as the Merchant Adventurers had hoped. The voyages to the New World, still in