

The Renaissance Studies Program
“Renaissance Cultures in Transit” Lecture Series
Presents the second lecture by

MIRIAM JACOBSON

*Orient Pearls and Slippery Virtue in
Marlow's Hellespont*

4:00 p.m., Friday, March 4, 2011

University Club (upstairs)

Indiana Memorial Union

This paper puts philological pressure on the association between whiteness and the West, when in early modern English, the word orient was synonymous with ‘pearlescent.’ Rather than simply indicating the East, orient was used both by the jewelers in the Goldsmith’s company and by Philemon Holland, in his English translation of Pliny’s *Natural History*, to describe the whiteness and nacre of pearls. Women’s unblemished bodies are compared to white orient pearls so frequently in early modern writing that it is tempting to dismiss the pale, shining bodies of Hero and Leander as commonplaces. But in my reading of the narrative poem *Hero and Leander* (1598), Marlowe’s use of orient pearls turns chastity on its head, reconfiguring pearly whiteness not as an emblem of feminine purity, but as indicative of a kind sexual fluidity and freedom from Western mores, a freedom that can only take place in the layered landscape of an Ottoman-inflected mythological Hellespont.

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