Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

Sophie Chiari, and Hlne Palma (eds), *Transmission and Transgression. Cultural Challenges in Early Modern England*

Florence March

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7053>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.7053

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Universit Toulouse - Jean Jaurs

Electronic reference

Florence March, "Sophie Chiari, and Hlne Palma (eds), *Transmission and Transgression. Cultural Challenges in Early Modern England*", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 22 July 2015, connection on 08 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7053> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.7053>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2022.

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Sophie Chiari, and Hélène Palma (eds), *Transmission and Transgression. Cultural Challenges in Early Modern England*

Florence March

REFERENCES

Sophie Chiari, and Hélène Palma (eds), *Transmission and Transgression. Cultural Challenges in Early Modern England* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), 208 p, ISBN 978-2-85399-940-3

- 1 It is by all means fascinating to study the emergence of the early modern period through the prism of the dialectic of transmission and transgression. Both were intimately linked in that time of experimentation in a variety of areas. New media, such as the print press and secular and commercial theatre, ensured a wide circulation and popularisation of new ideas, aesthetics and corpora, which qualified as “decentring” (Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall Harvester Wheatsheaf, (1984) 1989), 19) if not potentially subversive. As a matter of fact, the transmission process was sometimes interrupted when certain ideas and theories were deemed too dangerous to be publicised: Copernicus’s seminal work, *De revolutionibus orbium cœlestium*, first published in 1543, was thus placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1616; and there are strong grounds for claiming that the deposition scene of Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Richard II*, which failed to appear in print in Elizabethan editions of the play or in subsequent reprints until 1608, also suffered from stage censorship.
- 2 The collection of texts gathered and introduced by Sophie Chiari and Hélène Palma explores the challenging articulations of both terms of the dialectic in Renaissance

England, as well as the limits of their expression, in three major fields which delineate the ternary structure of the book: religion, ideology and philosophy (21-60); art and science (61-97); travelling and circulation (99-152). The book is the output of a conference organised in Aix-en-Provence in November 2012.

- 3 The first section provides the religious, ideological and philosophical background to the dialectic, as well as critical tools to read and analyse it in the context of the early modern period, although from a contemporary vantage point. Focusing on the ways and means of circulating the subversive tale of the wicked or fatal tree—whose ambivalent association with life and death, fruit and subversive knowledge, already contains the dialectic in a nutshell—, Jean-Marie Maguin argues in Chapter 1 that the transmission process worked through analogy in the period under study, even though post-modern criticism tends to view it through the prism of intertextuality. Relying on the Shakespearean corpus in Chapter 2, Margaret Jones-Davies shows that the process of secularization in England did not imply the sudden absence of transcendence but a shift in its nature, the focus being from then on on the power of the imagination—a power which is shared by both the creator and the receiver, whether a committed reader or spectator. Jones-Davies thus claims that the dialectic of transmission and transgression should be envisaged from the vantage points of both production and reception. In Chapter 3, Pierre Lurbe coins the meta-concept of “transmigration” to qualify the paradoxical early modern period, rooted in tradition whereas celebrating experimentation and empiricism—a portmanteau word which conveys the idea that transmission and transgression eventually met and merged. Such notion does not only apply to John Toland’s *Life of Milton* (1698) and *Amyntor* (1699)—the corpus Lurbe deals with—but also sheds light on the texts of section 2, which demonstrate that there is no clear-cut divide between transmission and transgression as far as English Renaissance art and science are concerned, both fields resisting precise definition and categorization until the Augustan Age.
- 4 In Chapter 4, Pierre Iselin shows that Renaissance music found itself at the crossroads of two conflicting perceptions, foregrounding either its power of edification or of seduction. During the Interregnum, the dialectic expressed itself in a different way, actualising the transgressive potential that, until then, lied in reception: tolerated by the Puritans, private concerts served as a cover for clandestine theatrical performances. The transgressive function of music ensured the transmission of the dramatic and theatrical heritage, music and theatre weaving tight links that may account to some extent for the emergence of the semi-opera after the Restoration of the king and stage. The Renaissance also marked the beginning of the dissemination of scientific knowledge, although such process was stamped with ambivalence, as Mickaël Popelard argues in Chapter 5, since science itself was alternately associated with progress and public welfare or black magic and the occult. It was only well into the 17th century, with the official foundation in 1660 of the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, that the transmission process, mediated by public experimentation which sometimes verged on theatrical performance, became clearly separated from transgression. It is precisely the promotion of scientific research that, according to Pierre Carboni in Chapter 6, allows Scottish poet James Thomson to transgress the generic codes and conventions of the encomium in his *Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton* (1727), and give free rein to his poetic creativity. Turning scientific discoveries into poetic epiphanies, and Newton’s work on refracted light and

colours into a metaphor of the poet's vision, Thomson's revisited panegyric addresses both science and the art of poetry.

- 5 Section 3 mainly focuses on poetry and translation as privileged vectors of the dialectic of transmission and transgression in the early modern period. Drawing from the critical input of reception studies, Jones-Davies' text in section 1 paves the way for William T. Rossiter's argument in Chapter 7 that, as far as the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt is concerned, transgression lies in the reader who is responsible for actualising the subversive potential of the text. The paradigm of travelling and circulation explored both literally and metaphorically in this section, proves particularly relevant to study not only the transmission process but also its transgressive manifestations—the etymology of the word “transgression” referring to a movement: “stepping beyond or across”, as Chiari and Palma aptly point out in the general introduction (11). Christophe Camard thus argues in Chapter 9 that, in Renaissance English literature, the detour via Italy was a narrative or dramatic strategy that unmistakably brought the reader-spectator back to his own country and socio-political issues. Through a translation process, the Italian cultural heritage was “carried across” the Channel—again, according to the etymology—and revisited so as to serve the national interest. The liberties taken with the source texts, which would nowadays be considered as the result of a transgressive cultural transfer, aimed to build up a subversive image of Italy, the Italians and everything “Italianate”—a Renaissance coinage whose pejorative suffix conveys the very notion of transgression. In Chapter 8, Anne Geoffroy also studies the translation process as a vector of transmission and transgression in the early modern period, focusing on what she calls “the Venetian paradigm” in Robert Greene's *Royall Exchange*, a collection of aphorisms translated from the Italian. In this particular case, isolated from the rest of Italy, the city of Venice escapes stigmatisation to become “a looking-glass to London's success” as a cultural and commercial metropolis (127). Johann Gregory eventually devotes Chapter 10 to the case study of John Taylor the “Water-Poet” (1578-1653), showing how the boatman's occupation fed his literary purpose, and led to a redefinition of a writer's status in early modern England, as well as of the emergence of an original pact of reading.
- 6 Co-signed by the editors, the general introduction efficiently contextualises the dialectic of transmission and transgression and the cultural challenges it raises in early modern England, endeavouring “to establish an organic link between the transmission of knowledge and its continuous transgression” (20). However, following the assertion that “the two interrelated notions of transmission and transgression have already been widely addressed” (12), as exemplified by a number of bibliographical references in a footnote, it would have been useful to indicate the state of the art in a more systematic way. Despite the attempt to give a thorough definition of the terms of the dialectic, envisaged in a historical perspective, their use nevertheless sometimes seems questionably loose or flexible, as when Thomson is said to be “transgressing his Scottish roots” (13).
- 7 The great care given to the appendices should be particularly emphasised. On top of the rich bibliography and very useful index of names and notions, the volume includes high-quality iconography (15 illustrations), and an audio CD: “Shakespeare in music”, introduced by Pierre Iselin.
- 8 Focusing on the transgressive power of new ways of thinking, rather than on established rites of transgression, as Chiari makes clear in the conclusion, this volume

undoubtedly provides a fresh insight into the culture of early modern England. The various case studies certainly evidence that specifically transgressive aesthetics developed in early modern England, even though they do not lead to conclude that there is “such a thing as a specifically English transgressive aesthetics”—one of the challenging questions raised in the book.

INDEX

Mots-clés: transmission, transgression, première modernité, Angleterre, religion, idéologie, philosophie, art, science, culture, savoir

Keywords: transmission, transgression, early modern, England, religion, ideology, philosophy, art, science, culture, knowledge

AUTHORS

FLORENCE MARCH

Professeur

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier

florence.march@univ-montp3.fr