

Early Modern Communi(cati)ons:
Studies in Early Modern English Literature
and Culture

Edited by

Kinga Földváy and Erzsébet Stróbl

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

EARLY MODERN COMMUNIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

KINGA FÖLDVÁRY AND ERZSÉBET STRÓBL

The essays in the current volume have grown out of the fruitful discussions that characterised both the panels on early modern literature and culture, and the series of Shakespearean sessions at the 10th biennial Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, held on 27–29 January, 2011 at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Piliscsaba, Hungary. The number of papers dedicated to Renaissance and particularly Shakespearean research at the conference aptly demonstrated the powerful presence of early modern studies in Hungarian academia, a presence which has been one of the traditional strengths of English studies in the country, and the animated discussion among scholars of early modern studies proved that there is not only a past but also a promising future for such collaborations. Taking up on the offer of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, the essays have been developed into research articles, with a conscious effort to emphasise links among individual contributions, thus strengthening the cohesion within the volume as a whole.

The title of the volume, by its rather general tone admitting to the simple fact that there are many types of connections and communications within a field as diverse as early modern studies, also speaks of each and every contribution in particular, and the whole volume in general. More than anything, the volume demonstrates that the connections and common points of reference within early modern studies bind Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural studies and Shakespearean investigations together in an unexpected number of ways, and therefore no researcher should afford to keep themselves excluded of this discussion by focusing exclusively on a narrow and limited field.

The variety of meanings associated with both key words hidden or laid over each other at the heart of the title *Early Modern Communi(cati)ons*, lend themselves to a particularly easy introduction of the individual

contributions. At the same time, the words also reflect on the ties that bind the various topics and discussions to the collection as a whole. “Communion” is rooted in the Latin adjective *communis*, meaning “common,” and this sense of sharing notions, images, or particular pieces of creation and tradition is central to the argumentation of most essays in the collection. Communion is also defined by the *OED* as “the sharing and exchanging intimate thoughts and feelings, especially on a mental and spiritual level,” and it is hard not to feel this intimacy of approach, this emotional proximity that each and every author displays toward their own respective topics. Moreover, most pieces also focus on an exchange, a handing over of traditions, over time and space, from classical and medieval origins, frequently pointing beyond the early modern period. Communion is also regularly used with strong religious connotations, which is equally relevant in our case, since several of the essays deal at least in part with a sacred or clerical context within which elements of literary tradition gain an additional meaning of divine import.

The root of “communication,” on the other hand, is none other than the Latin verb *communicare*, meaning again “to share,” and as most of the essays in the collection demonstrate, sharing is an inherent feature of the early modern period, in between the relatively closed cultural spheres of the Middle Ages, and the liberated thinking of the enlightenment. Early modern culture could not choose but share most of the traditions it inherited from the medieval period, particularly in the more informal spaces of low and popular culture, even though authors associated with high culture are often characterised by a conscious turning back to the art of the Antiquity. At the same time, the period also functioned as a bridge towards modernity, selecting and transforming elements of both pagan Antiquity and Christian Middle Ages to preserve and share with later eras.

Set in the above delineated contexts of communions and communications, the first group of essays deals with early modern culture, presenting the socio-historical context which is necessary for any in-depth literary investigation, as exemplified through analyses of outstanding literary achievements from the period. The section is headed by Erzsébet Stróbl’s reading of a prayer book compiled for Queen Elizabeth I, where the significance of the visual layout of an Elizabethan book with the alternative narrative presented by the border illustrations is underscored. While the inherent relationship of text and margins is widely acknowledged in the context of pre-Reformation devotional books, the essay argues that during the first half of the Elizabethan period this tradition survived and was fostered by one of the outstanding publishers of Protestant works, John Day. In her essay Stróbl examines both the

religious and political implications of the parallel messages offered by the dramatic juxtaposition of the prayers of the English Queen and the accompanying images of the *danse macabre* cycle.

The following essay, still dealing with the mid-Tudor era, focuses on a short chapter from William Harrison's *Description of England*, the chorographical text published as an introduction to Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Kinga Földvály's reading of Harrison's treatise on giants shows that such a pseudo-historical topic, still in circulation in scholarly discussions of the period, helps the modern reader to get insights into themes as diverse as the Puritan belief in a providential interpretation of human history, the variety of Bible translations, and, first and foremost, the particular working methods of William Harrison himself. She argues that for all the textual and scholarly failings of the Puritan clergyman, Harrison's text displays a personal dedication to the cause of Protestantism that elevates even the passages otherwise little characterised by individual authorial creativity.

Similarly to the previous essay, Ágnes Strickland-Pajtók's piece also approaches an often neglected aspect of a well-known late Tudor literary work. She offers an enquiry into another cornerstone of early modern literature from the Elizabethan era, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, focusing on a group of characters within the epic whose fate does not often trouble readers or critics: those female figures whom she calls middle women, since they belong neither to the impeccable and exemplary positive heroines, nor to the evil antagonists of the romance, but fall somewhere in between on a moral scale. The author argues that it is precisely their fallibility, their occasional weaknesses and proneness to commit mistakes what makes them human, and what invokes the sympathy not only of modern readers, but apparently also Spenser's narrator, who shows a more lenient treatment towards them than what fallen women could reasonably expect in the age.

The last two essays in the first part of the volume move beyond the sixteenth century, and approach two of the major authors of the seventeenth, John Donne and John Milton. Noémi Najbauer chooses a new perspective to examine the vast body of the extant sermons of Donne, the theory of mind, combining the philosophical, theological and literary approaches of scholarship on Donne. After introducing the basic concept of *ars memoriae*, the antique rhetorical technique of the art of memory, the essay argues for its relevance in the Anglican preaching tradition in general, and in the construction of the structure and imagery of Donne's sermons in particular. Najbauer shows how both Donne's use of mental spaces as structural units, and the variety of striking metaphors he

employed testify to the significance of the art of memory in the homiletic literature of the early seventeenth century.

No volume on early modern English literature would be complete without reference to the greatest masterpiece of English epic poetry, and thus an essay by Gábor Ittész completes the first part of the volume, re-examining a key issue of the interpretation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: the temporal aspects of the terrestrial action. Through the careful investigation of Milton's use of cognitive and poetic-metaphorical indicators of time, and the meticulous study of the scholarship of the last three hundred years, the author offers a comprehensive analysis of Milton's earthly chronology from Satan's entry into cosmos until the day of the expulsion. Ittész also establishes the general narrative principles of presenting the passing of time in Milton's work, and calls attention to the pitfalls of the overinterpretation of the text.

Set against the backdrop of the above delineated early modern literary traditions, the second part of the volume focuses on the oeuvre of the most famous representative of the age, William Shakespeare, with individual chapters creating a tangible continuum, moving from the cultural and literary context that informs his work, to the interpretation in present-day performances and their theoretical background. Tibor Fabiny's article explores the influence of the language of the Bible upon the making of early modern culture. Going back to the time of religious controversies in the early Tudor period, Fabiny claims that the works of the first Bible translator, William Tyndale played a key role in the formation of the English language. Through analysis of the linguistic, theological and literary connotations of the word "atonement" coined by Tyndale, the essay presents how the word first used in Biblical-related contexts ultimately contributed to the artistic principle of "reconciliation" in the plays of William Shakespeare, and became the key motif in his mature comedy, *As You Like It*.

The next two essays deal with the broader context of Shakespearean theatre, investigating various literary and performative traditions of sixteenth-century popular culture. Krisztina N. Streitman's article, after introducing the most influential critical theories on early modern popular culture by C. L. Barber, Michael Bakhtin, and Peter Burke, outlines the major elements of this predominantly oral tradition, and provides an extensive analysis of its influence on the formation of the character of Falstaff in the Shakespearean canon. Writing about the arguably most famous Elizabethan entertainer, William Kemp, the essay sketches out the parallels between the life and career of Kemp as a star performer of the morris and jig, and the various character traits assigned to Falstaff by the

bard in the *Henry IV* plays. Streitman argues that the metaphorical links between the historical and the fictional figures, both associated with the carnival and the Lord of Misrule traditions, may also provide support for a biographical connection between the two.

In close communion with the previous piece, Natália Pikli's essay also investigates the popular culture of the age of Shakespeare, albeit from a slightly different perspective: she underlines its transformation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as brought about by the disappearance of certain medieval festive and religious rituals due to the Reformation. Looking at one of the most interesting elements, the figure of the hobby-horse, a physical and metaphorical link to medieval traditions, Pikli unveils the palimpsest of inherited and translucent cultural and linguistic layers that inform the dramatic texts of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, proving the hobby-horse to be no less than a treasure trove of cultural connotations.

Another exciting link between past ages and the early modern period is exemplified by the work of a young scholar, Zita Turi, in her essay on *The Ship of Fools*. Turi follows the appearance of the theme from Sebastian Brant's fifteenth-century High German text, to its development into a widely used metaphor in English literature by the end of the sixteenth century. The author relies on an in-depth reading of critical literature to show the roots of the metaphor in popular culture, and to argue that by virtue of the tradition of the emblem book and the *impresa* behind the first English translation by Alexander Barclay, the volume may even be considered as the first emblem book printed in England. She then moves on to investigate various uses of the theme in the dramatic literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, identifying and interpreting references to *The Ship of Fools* in the work of Thomas Nashe, Thomas Dekker, beside the oeuvre of William Shakespeare.

The very same rich dramatic tradition of the age provides the backdrop to the chapter by Attila Kiss as well, whose writing focuses on the presence of violence, horror, and transgression in the imagery of early modern tragedy. With examples from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, and through the analysis of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Kiss argues that the enhanced use of the "dissected, tortured, anatomized and mutilated human body on the Tudor and Stuart stage" signifies an epistemological change, and marks out the audience's interest for hitherto unrevealed dimensions of the human anatomy. To substantiate his claims about the preoccupation with representations of the human body of an anatomical precision, he turns not only to dramatic literature, but also alludes to other artistic and narrative genres of the period where an intensified desire to

present and test the “inward dimensions of the human body and mind” is detectable.

Moving on from the heritage of past ages, the following group of essays also bears witness to the communicative power of the Shakespearean text, reaching out from the early modern period to our own times, constantly re-acquiring its relevance via new interpretive and performative traditions. The chapter by Géza Kállay examines the relationship between names and personal identity in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and the related question of the various uses of the word “part” within the play. Relying on ideas of the theory of names by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Peter Strawson, John Searle and Saul Kripke, the essay analyzes the power of the name and naming above identity, and attempts to offer answers to questions such as how far a name may penetrate into the self of a person, or how it determines personal characteristics, or whether it is a social frame that can be discarded with ease.

This analytical and systematic reading of *Romeo and Juliet* is followed by the close reading of the text of *Hamlet* by a young scholar, Balázs Szigeti. His analysis of the soliloquies of Hamlet and Claudius by the methods of pre-performance criticism sheds light above all on the text’s theatrical potential. Szigeti claims that the conflict and struggle of the two characters is manifested in the power of the soliloquies to best express the two characters’ inner thoughts and to secure the support of the audience. He enumerates the alternative performance possibilities the text provides for actors and interpreters, and approaches the play from a directorial aspect, sensitive to the living connection between *Hamlet* on the page, that is, in critical writing, and in live performance on the stage.

The final chapter in the volume, Veronika Schandl’s essay may be easily read as a conclusion that reinforces many of the themes investigated by other contributors. She focuses on two Hungarian theatre productions, an 1986 performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, directed by István Somogyi, and Sándor Zsótér’s 2009 *Hamlet*. Her interpretation places both productions not only in the historical context of the fall of communism and the subsequent changes in the cultural and theatrical life of the country, but she also intends to point beyond the generally accepted categories offered by theatre historian Árpád Kékesi-Kun, and argues for the significance of metatheatricality and polyfunctionality as the key terms we may use to describe the postmodern developments in the theatre in the past two and a half decades.

In the same way as the volume comprises writings on a diverse but still coherent range of topics, the authorial team is equally representative of diversity and continuity at the same time. The authors include several

senior scholars working in the Hungarian academic community, representing all significant research centres in the field from all over the country, but a number of essays have been contributed by promising young talents as well. The editors hope that in the same way these essays have developed a network of communication between locations and generations, individual scholars and research communities, they will also manage to inspire further generations of early modern researchers, at times and places far removed from the birth of these essays.

We wish to dedicate the volume to the memory of the late Professor István Géher, the father figure of Hungarian Shakespeare scholarship, whose vision and personality contributed to the formation of the close-knit scholarly community of early modern English studies in Hungary. We hope that these essays may communicate to the world at least part of his heartfelt enthusiasm for the early modern period, and his dedication to William Shakespeare's oeuvre in particular, which is the true legacy of his life and work.