

Sidney to Milton, 1580-1660

## transitions

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transitions

Sidney to Milton,  
1580–1660

Marion Wynne-Davies

palgrave  
macmillan



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First published 2003 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-0-333-69618-7 hardback

ISBN 978-0-333-69619-4 ISBN 978-1-4039-3792-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4039-3792-6

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wynne-Davies, Marion.

Sidney to Milton, 1580–1660 / Marion Wynne-Davies.

p. cm. — (Transitions)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-333-69618-7

1. English literature—Early modern, 1500–1700—History and criticism.
2. Sidney, Philip, Sir, 1554–1586—Criticism and interpretation.
3. Milton, John, 1608–1674—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Transitions (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm))

PR435 .W96 2002

821'.0309—dc21

2002026766

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03

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# General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition*-, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. **a.** The passing from one note to another. **b.** The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation . . . change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character . . . the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages and movements in language, literature and culture from Chaucer to the present day. The series also seeks to examine the ways in which the very idea of transition affects the reader's sense of period so as to address anew questions of literary history and periodisation. The writers in this series unfold the cultural and historical mediations of literature during what are commonly recognised as crucial moments in the development of English literature, addressing, as the OED puts it, the 'historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another'.

Recognising the need to contextualise literary study, the authors offer close readings of canonical and now marginalised or overlooked literary texts from all genres, bringing to this study the rigour of historical knowledge and the sophistication of theoretically informed evaluations of writers and movements from the last 700 years. At the same time as each writer, whether Chaucer or Shakespeare, Milton or Pope, Byron, Dickens, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf or Salman Rushdie, is shown to produce his or her texts within a discernible historical, cultural, ideological and philosophical milieu, the text is read from the vantage point of recent theoretical interests and concerns. The purpose in bringing theoretical knowledge to the reading of a wide range of works is to demonstrate how the literature is always open to transition, whether in the instance of its production or in succeeding moments of its critical reception.

The series desires to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments. Each book in the second tranche of the series offers a pedagogical guide to the poetics and politics of particular eras, as well as to the subsequent critical comprehension of periods and periodisation. As well as transforming the cultural and literary past by interpreting its transition from the perspective of the critical and theoretical present, each study enacts transitional readings of a number of literary texts, all of which are themselves conceivable as having effected transition at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading, historical contextualisation and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in reading to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because the series seeks to move beyond rigid definitions of period. What is important is the sense of passage, of motion. Rather than providing a definitive model of literature's past, *Transitions* aims to place you in an active dialogue with the writing and culture of other eras, so as to comprehend not only how the present reads the past, but how the past can read the present.

*Julian Wolfreys*

# Acknowledgements

This book is the product of many years of accumulated teaching, research and discussions with colleagues. As such, my thanks are due to those students, fellow departmental and library staff I worked with from the University of Liverpool, Lancaster University, Keele University, and the University of Dundee. Of these there are a few to whom I am particularly grateful for their advice on the authors discussed in this book: Brean Hammond who generously shared his ideas on Thomas Middleton; Ann Thompson whose edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* brought about a re-evaluation of my understanding of that play; Helen Wilcox who first interested me in autobiographical works; Roger Pooley who helped me appreciate the power of Early Modern prose; Alison Easton who focused my work on Early Modern women writers; Richard Dutton who encouraged my work on Shakespeare; and David Robb for his tenacious belief in the project.

Beyond my colleagues I owe thanks to all those who as fellow researchers have enlightened my own work with their enthusiasm and erudition. Again those to whom a special debt in relation to the material discussed in this volume are: S. P. Cerasano, Fran Teague, Georgianna Ziegler, Alison Findlay, Stephanie Hodgson Wright, Gweno Williams, Douglas Brooks-Davies, Jim Stewart, Elizabeth Foyster and Rachel Jones. Above all I wish to thank those students past and present who have produced imaginative readings, responded enthusiastically to a range of obscure texts and, perhaps above all, told me when I was wrong.

Writing a book is often a long process and this one has assuredly been more delayed than either I or my series editor, Julian Wolfreys, would have wished. But Julian's support and his intelligent and erudite comments have been unflagging; my thanks to him and to my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Anna Sandeman.

Finally, my thanks are due to my family. The selfless support of my

husband, Geoff Ward, and the uncomprehending enthusiasm of my sons, Richard and Robbie, have provided invaluable sustenance. As always, this book is for them.

*Marion Wynne-Davies*  
*University of Dundee*

# Introduction

‘The great movement which goes by the name of the Renaissance’  
(Matthew Arnold)

It was Matthew Arnold who first categorised English sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture as the ‘Renaissance’ (or ‘Renaissance’), defining the period in terms of both ‘great[ness]’ and a unified artistic ‘movement’ (Arnold 1965, 172). Before Arnold’s description, in his essay ‘Herbraism and Hellenism’, scholars would have recognised a certain commonality amongst writers and artists of the period, but there was no precise and mutually agreed definition. Certainly the term ‘Renaissance’ was known and used by writers of the time to signify the ‘rebirth’ of knowledge, the recovery of classical material made accessible to all through the advent of the printing press. Yet, the categorisation implied by Arnold’s depiction of a rough parameter encompassing the period’s literary production would have necessarily been unrecognised by those living and writing at that time. For example he describes the period as:

The Renaissance, that great re-awakening of Hellenism, that irresistible return of humanity to nature and to seeing things as they are . . . in art [and] in literature. (Arnold 1965, 173)

Of course, the past is always organised and ordered by the present in order to make it more comprehensible, and present-day critics are equally as prone to such compartmentalising as Arnold. So that, as Arnold classified Shakespeare and his contemporaries as ‘Renaissance’ authors, so we in turn, refer to him as a ‘Victorian’ writer. Any representation of knowledge and analysis of historical material require a certain degree of such formulisation, yet at the same time it is important to read texts not only for conformity to periodisation, but for resistance to those defining boundaries. By rereading works within their historical contexts it is possible to identify

traces of the cultural struggle that define a period, not as a static and harmonious whole, but as a series of changing discourses. This book sets out, therefore, not to define a 'great movement', but to illuminate a time of transformation and a culture in transition.

The chronological focus for this study begins in 1587 with the death of Philip Sidney and concludes in 1660, the year in which a common hangman publicly burned John Milton's books. At the same time, it examines the transition of literary genres, so that poetic discourses are traced from Thomas Wyatt's Petrarchan sonnets of the 1540s, through to Anne Bradstreet's New World reworking of the form in the 1660s and 70s. The period of dramatic production considered here is more curtailed, tracing the movement from the open-air theatres in the 1590s, to the development of small covered theatres in the 1620s. Finally, the prose works excavated provide parallels and changes from the Elizabethan texts of John Lyly and Thomas Nashe, and the post-Restoration pieces of Margaret Cavendish and John Bunyan. In this manner the boundaries of period are exposed as inadequate definitions of the very genres they attempt to explain. Yet there are mutualities of discourse that stretch across genre, location and time, which are acknowledged, utilised, altered and rejected, and it is the purpose of this book to elucidate these concerns and the relationships between them.

Chapter 1 examines the overall context of the period in relation to two writers, Elizabeth I and Philip Sidney. By analysing Elizabeth's own verse it becomes possible to highlight a number of the key political discourses of the day, looking at the role of the court and monarch, questions of authority and religious schism. Similar themes emerge through a reading of Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella* and *An Apologie for Poetrie*. Indeed, the combination of the idea of Sidney as a courtly and refined writer together with texts that ostensibly set out to elevate moral and spiritual values, became a model for emulation and divergence over the subsequent century. The dialogic formulations suggested by Sidney's writings were far reaching, most notably evaluating pleasure and virtue, as well as tracing the development of poetic individualism against publicly accepted discourses. Yet Sidney's work, like that of Elizabeth I, also betrays a subtextual current that moves beyond cultural paradigms into the sphere of politics. It is, therefore, impossible to ignore the discourses of patronage, economic power and gender within works that proclaim themselves as solely concerned with literature. These are precisely the issues that this

volume traces through the authors of the ensuing century, from the courtly discourse of the sonnet (Chapter 2), through the dynamics of the Renaissance stage (Chapter 3), to the upheavals of Early Modern prose fiction (Chapter 4).

In addition to the important cultural innovations during the period itself, over the last twenty years the 'Renaissance' has also been the focus for some of the most innovative and exciting theoretical developments in Western literary criticism. In 1980 Stephen Greenblatt published *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* and, although an interest in historicism had been increasing up to this point, it was this work that irrevocably changed critical approaches to Renaissance texts. Even the name of the period was to alter, as 'Early Modern' replaced 'Renaissance' in all the most up-to-date criticisms, ironically leaving Greenblatt's own innovative text looking slightly old fashioned in terms of its title. In the United States this theoretical trend identified itself as New Historicism, while in Britain a more politicised version was produced, called Cultural Materialism, from Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's influential foreword to *Political Shakespeare*, where they emphasise a commitment to 'the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class' (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985, viii). In terms of criticism, therefore, the Early Modern period has most recently become pre-eminent in the field of historical emphasis. This overwhelming trend has, of course, not gone unquestioned, with many critics asking what was so 'new' about New Historicism, and others questioning the very validity of such an exclusively historicist approach. As such, the present volume engages with certain aspects of a historicist and/or materialist approach, but it simultaneously questions the parameters of the new orthodoxy of historicism. For example, while Chapter 2 explores the idea of self-fashioning in relation to an analysis of Walter Raleigh's poetry, various theories are utilised in reading the works of other poets, such as feminism for Rachel Speght, Marxism for Michael Drayton and Postcolonial theory for Anne Bradstreet. In each case the theoretical interpretations are integrated into the overall analysis of the poet's contribution to a particular generic discourse alongside a close reading of particular texts.

From both a textual and a theoretical perspective it will now be apparent that the issue of periodisation will be a key area for discussion and exploration in this book. While areas of study are commonly

delimited with historical events, the volume here focuses upon cultural issues, thereby creating an alternative 'history' of literature, which is bound to material concerns, but which also extends beyond a simple reflection of current circumstance. This awareness of the interplay between text and materiality also suggests a more fluid relationship between the past and our own time, for while we may excavate and uncover various historical details, we must simultaneously be aware that we can never escape our own periodisation. While historicists often suggest the need to retain this crucial self-awareness of temporal distance, in practice criticisms often become submerged in detail and fail to signpost sufficiently the difficulties encountered by present-day readers. This book calls attention to these slippages and to the deep recalcitrance of many Early Modern ideologies and literary devices for a postmodern reader. For example, although many women of the seventeenth century (e.g. Rachel Speght and Margaret Cavendish) published literary texts which demonstrated that they were aware of liberating a female voice, it would be wrong to interpret their writings as 'feminist' since such a political programme would have been deeply antithetical to their belief in a preordained hierarchy. Moreover, although today we often imagine these women as marginal writers because they have, until very recently, been excluded from our canon, this categorisation hardly corresponds with their actual status. By far the majority of Early Modern women writers (all in this volume) were from the noble or middle classes and their works often came out in several editions during their own lifetimes, mainly because of the social and economic influence their families were able to exert. In light of these challenges to conventional judgements on the period's literary productivity, this book includes rereadings of traditional material, alongside the uncovering of less well-known works. So that the poems of Philip Sidney are compared with those of Elizabeth I, and the sonnets of Spenser, Donne and Milton are read together with the verses of Drayton, Speght and James VI of Scotland. As such, each chapter focuses upon a specific genre in order to trace the way in which discourses shifted within their material location, but simultaneously notes the manner in which our own perceptions of texts have developed through a recognition of historical position and theoretical self-awareness.

While this volume focuses upon the immensity of change that occurred during the period we now commonly categorise as the Renaissance or Early Modern age, it would be reductive to assume

that Matthew Arnold failed to note such radical cultural transitions. Indeed, Arnold annotates his use of the word 'Renaissance' explaining that:

I have ventured to give to the foreign word *Renaissance*, – destined to become of more common usage amongst us as the movement, which it denotes comes, as it will come, increasingly to interest us – an English form. (Arnold 1965, 172)

Even as Arnold specifies the literary term and its particular spelling, he simultaneously undercuts the stillness of static definition, by including at the centre of the sentence a phrase amplifying change and movement. To begin Arnold 'venture[s]', he refers to destiny and the future of our 'interest', and the movement, itself a bifurcating word implying both action and stasis, is denoted as com[ing]'. This seemingly contradictory emphasis, between content with its location of clear and defined meanings, and the vocabulary with its evocation of perpetual movement and lack of stability, may be explained in the context of the whole essay, 'Herbraism and Hellenism'.

At the beginning of this piece Arnold offers one of several definitions of the differences between 'these two points of influence [that] move . . . our world' (Arnold 1965, 163–4):

Herbraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the Universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them, the best of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital . . . the governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of conscience*; that of Herbraism, *strictness of conscience*. (Arnold 1965, 165)

While there are, therefore, some parallels, the dominant argument of the essay distinguishes the differences between the two terms and what they represent. As we have seen, Arnold classifies the 'Renaissance' as Hellenist, and he depicts the close of this period as a triumph of the Herbraist forces of Puritanism. In addition, however, he depicts these alternating forces as 'central current[s]' and 'side stream[s]' (Arnold 1965, 175) influencing our world, so that,

at one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them. (Arnold 1965, 164)

Mathew Arnold might well have been interested in offering his own age definitions of their cultural heritage that enabled them to make sense of the radical changes which were occurring in their own age. But he simultaneously demanded that such categories – ‘Hellenism’, ‘Herbraism’, and ‘Renascece’ – be recognised as in perpetual flux. It is precisely this lack of balance, these radical transitions in cultural discourses that the present volume addresses.