



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early  
Modern England (review)

Gordon Braden

Renaissance Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 296-297  
(Review)

Published by Renaissance Society of America



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212602>

Museum of Art (2001), discussing the progression of mediated reality from the early modern cabinet of wonders to complex, computer-generated imagery.

The unifying goal of these essays is to “offer challenges to received wisdoms about the Renaissance” (11), and the broad range of scholarly approaches in them is meant to reflect that in Barroll’s work. The authors succeed on both counts as they assimilate key theoretical concerns of the past two or more decades and demonstrate their ongoing critical viability. Far from staging a retrospective, the essayists instead present studies that illustrate how the concerns of Barroll’s scholarship continue to reward investigation.

JULIE CAMPBELL

Eastern Illinois University

Liz Oakley-Brown. *Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early Modern England*.

Studies in European Cultural Transition 34. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. viii + 222 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$94.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5155-X.

Oakley-Brown invokes Lawrence Venuti’s call to make translation studies not “a backwater in the academy” (2) but a central critical enterprise; she proposes that vernacular encounters with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* — on a spectrum for which translations narrowly conceived are only one end — constitute “important sites of cultural and textual difference from the fifteenth to the early eighteenth centuries” through which to analyze “the fashioning of early modern English identities” (1). That broad version of “early modern” — from William Caxton to Mary Wortley Montagu — is one index of the ambitiousness of Oakley-Brown’s project, and it would be pleasant to salute the success of those ambitions. No big picture, however, really emerges, and the individual cases that miscellaneously fill the canvas are uneven in quality.

The politics in question are occasionally politics in the ordinary sense, though Ovid does not direct everyone to the same side of the street: George Sandys tailors his translation to please the court of Charles I, while in the 1690s Elizabeth Singer Rowe manifests distinctly Whiggish sentiments in Ovidian contexts, and in 1717 Samuel Garth pointedly snubs George I with the dedication of his multiauthored *Metamorphoses*. The most prominent politics are sexual: in the character of Lavinia in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, in Abraham Fraunce’s interpretations of Ovidian myths for a female patron in *The Countess of Pembroke’s Iyechurch* (1592), and in the previously unreckoned Ovidian endeavors of four women (Bess of Hardwick in the sixteenth century, Mary Lady Chudleigh with Rowe and Montagu toward the end of the book’s timeline). The chapter on Caxton attends to the cultural politics of moralizing Ovid to suit contemporary standards and of doing so within the commercial pressures of England’s infant book trade. These themes certainly have connections to one another, but Oakley-Brown does not work very hard to spell them out; her summary formulations are capacious and

abstract: “English translations of the *Metamorphoses* are the ‘very life of difference’” (193).

This diverseness would not matter if the case studies were more compelling and sharply etched. Oakley-Brown’s appetite for unfamiliar material is admirable; the chapter on Caxton, whose prose *Metamorphoses* has yet to be edited in its entirety, is especially welcome. The chapter on women Ovidians is valuable for dramatizing their notable scarcity in this patch of English literary history and for the alertness with which the exceptions have been located; they include three specimens of needlework from Hardwick Hall. Brought into the light, though, they look like modest discoveries. (As women coming to grips with suspect classical texts, these four pale beside Lucy Hutchinson translating the great atheist Lucretius.) A deeper kind of problem is an impressionistic laxness in argumentation, which keeps putting weight on shimmery evidence — for instance, to make a climactic claim about Elizabeth Talbot’s Phaeton panel: “Instead of simply depicting women in a subordinate position, Talbot’s Ovidian translation implicitly promotes their textual agency” (131). Implication here has to be routed through Ovid and Philip Hardie; the female figures in the panel are neither writing nor weaving. In discussing Sandys, a certain amount is made of his adoption of the trope of Charles and Henrietta Maria as a Neoplatonic hermaphrodite. A quotation from Graham Parry is misleadingly used to make this trope sound like the “prevailing image” in royalist ideology (74); finding it in Sandys (to set up a supposedly telling contrast with a distressing visual representation of the Ovidian myth in the illustration to book 4) requires combining passages from two panegyrics, one in which Charles is compared to, among other gods, Mercury (Hermes), and one in which his wife is called “Queen of love” (Aphrodite). It is hard to have confidence in such legerdemain once you start noticing it.

Production values are not commensurate with the purchase price. The textile panels are unattractively reproduced; one is available only on the dustjacket. A page break appears to have hiccupped onto p. 98. No one stopped Smart Quote software from turning *’tis* into *’tis*, or *locus amoenus* from transgending into *locus amoena*.

GORDON BRADEN  
University of Virginia

Michael Saenger. *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. xii + 170 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$89.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5413-3.

Michael Saenger begins his book, *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance*, by observing that modern readers are not consumers of Renaissance books in the same way as contemporary readers were. Because modern readers are not in the position to buy original books, aspects of