

REVIEW ARTICLE

Early modern European languages and literature: A short review

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Abstract: This article engages with several recent books about language and literature, with a general focus on the early modern period in Europe. One of these books discusses language study in early modern England. Another examines the histories of words relating to ‘ingenuity’. The third provides a theoretical look at the aphorism with a wide historical scope but with some chapters relating to early modern literature. Each is of general interest for linguistic and literary scholars.

Keywords: early modern; language study; genius; ingenium; aphorism

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This review article covers three books relating to language, literature and the European early modern period. John Gallagher’s *Learning Languages in Early Modern England* places language learning in the context of the ‘English encounter with the wider world’ (p. 4). In doing such, it explores both how English speakers went about learning vernacular European languages and what was considered ‘competence’ in another language. The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1, on language teachers and language schools, looks also at other diverse means of language study, such as attendance at foreign language churches in London, during this period. This chapter emphasises the role of studying European vernacular languages in educational reform and its importance in trade and language skill as sign of social accomplishment (p. 52). The most popular European language studied in early modern England, was French, followed by Italian, which is reflected in the study, but other languages such as German, Dutch and Spanish (studied less in this period due to English concerns over Spanish power and Catholicism) do not escape notice. The diversity of language teachers themselves is duly noted: ‘At the same time, the concept of “teacher” as a profession was an elastic one in the early modern period. As we have seen, the idea of a fixed vocation of “teacher” can obscure the educational labour of many who do not easily fit a modern conception of the professional educator. Furthermore, for many early modern language masters, teaching was just one element of a constellation of activities that made up a precarious career’ (p. 53). Chapter 2 is dedicated to the genre of the multilingual conversation manual, vocabulary and pronunciation. The supplementary bibliography (p. 249–263) listing these manuals speaks to

the range of such texts, which are explored in detail. Chapter 3 looks at the complex problem of linguistic competence. Chapter 4 examines travel and language learning through the study of travel narratives and surviving letters and travellers' notebooks in order to reflect on linguistic experiences of English-speakers travelling in continental Europe. In a later period to this study, Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) wrote “‘That which is best administered, is best.’—In England the people may boast that their forefathers had a king, in “Alfred the Great” the wisest the bravest & the best, the World ever knew, & by whose whole excellent conduct was laid the foundation of the liberties of his country from the influence of which, there can be no doubt that the English language will be spoken over the whole Globe’ (p. 94). And now in the age of global English, it is particularly necessary to note that the English language in the early modern period had little international prestige; therefore multilingualism was requisite for English speakers wishing to engage with a wider commercial or literary life or to travel abroad.

The social aspects of language learning are centered in each chapter and both manuscript and printed texts are analyzed in terms of their presentations of class relations, gender politics, and grammatical instruction. Some summary observations of these materials are illuminating, for example: ‘One surprising feature of conversation manuals printed in England is that they give relatively little space to cultural differences. Manuals like John Florio’s for Italian and William Stepney’s for Spanish set their dialogues in London rather than abroad’ (p. 144). Topics explored include: how to address social equals, superiors and inferiors, how to talk about food and alcoholic beverages, how to navigate socially delicate religious and political issues in conversation when abroad, and how to determine whether the social setting allowed one to speech freely, or as one early modern writer put it ‘how to “avoide Arguments and too much libertie in speech”’ (p. 205). A commendable emphasis is placed throughout on language learning and language use as an oral and aural social activity, and attempts at reconstructing the historical record of those activities as far as possible should be of considerable interest to readers interested in historical multilingualism and sociolinguistics in addition to early modern historians and scholars of English literature. As throughout the study one finds very extensive bibliographical footnotes of related scholarship, it is somewhat surprising that its central topic has so far escaped a dedicated monograph, though that lacuna has now been filled commendably. Particularly pertinent to post-Brexit Great Britain, Gallagher emphasizes: ‘The idea of the monoglot nation-state is a recent one. Early modern states were commonly multilingual: their rulers and elites were increasingly convinced of the usefulness of a shared language in this period, but cultural pressure and legislative action would take centuries to bring about “national languages” as we think of them today’ (p. 13) and as a whole this monograph provides detailed evidence of the role multilingualism in early modern Europe.

Another recent monograph by Alexander Marr, Raphaële Garrod, José Ramón Marcaida, and Richard J. Oosterhoff, *Logodaedalus: Word Histories of Ingenuity in Early Modern Europe*, offers a detailed study of the pre-history of the words ‘ingenium’ and ‘genius’ as well as related vocabulary. The history of these words is traced throughout the early modern period, roughly ca. 1470 - ca. 1750 with some variation between different languages. Romantic and post-romantic notions of ‘genius’ have been studied at length in such monographs as Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik, 1750–1945* (1985), Hubert Sommer, *Génie: zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes von der Renaissance zur Aufklärung* (1999), Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (2013) and Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France:*

An Idea and Its Uses (2014). Closer to our period, Noel L. Brann, *The Debate Over the Origin of Genius During the Italian Renaissance* (2002) looked at the Platonic theory of divine frenzy and an Aristotelian notion of melancholy genius in the context of the Italian Renaissance. The word histories contained in this study begin with a chapter on the Latin *genius* and *ingenium*, and follows with chapters on vernacular languages: Italian *genio* and *ingegno*, Spanish *ingenio* and *agudeza* (especially in the phrase ‘agudeza de ingenio’), French *engin*, *esprit*, *naturel*, and *génie* and in German and Dutch (together in a single chapter): *Art/Aerd*, *Sinnlichkeit/sinnrijk*, *Gemüt* (German), *geest* (Dutch), and finally English: genius, ingenuity, wit, and cunning (p. 3).

In spite of the range of languages studied, the vocabulary is handled very well, though slip ups with Latin are not uncommon. For example: “‘Eam itaque lectoris iudicio maluimus divinandam relinquere, quam temere ex nostro Marte atque ingenio apponere’ (And so I leave to the judgment of the reader to conjecture what he can supply from our art and ingenium)’ (p. 11) is quoted from Robert Estienne’s 1536 edition of his *Thesaurus linguae latinae*. But the translator must have mistaken ‘ex nostro Marte’, which is an ancient adage meaning ‘by our own prowess’ or ‘without any assistance’, for ‘ex nostra arte’ (‘from our art’). And the emblem ‘Vinum *ingeniis* fomes (wine is kindling for wits)’ should read ‘ingenii’ as it is in the picture directly above (p. 27). Mistakes of this kind are not dire, but are unfortunate in close studies of vocabulary. However, this study, primarily focusing on early modern dictionaries and lexicographical materials, conveys the linguistic complexity of ‘ingenuity’ very well as it traverses through various languages and usages in literary, philosophical, social and scientific contexts. Layers of Post-romantic semantics are peeled back and the early modern meanings of ‘ingenuity’ are successfully revealed. ‘Unlike Romantic genius, *ingenium* was something everyone had’ (p. 7) put what it was varied between languages and contexts. The impetus is the pre-history of the concept genius before its more common meaning. The Latin term genius had a relatively ‘stable’ meaning, ‘as a god, genius either stands for natural powers of generation or growth—hence its association with the elements as seeds of things and astral influences—or is a tutelary, protective spirit. As an individuating principle, genius comes loosely to denote the cognitive, moral, and temperamental senses that are mapped, more precisely, by *ingenium*’ (p. 29). From there, a number of interesting linguistic differences are elucidated, for example, Italian *ingegno* and Spanish *ingenio* are identified as closely adhering to Latin *ingenium* ‘ensuring their clear definition as devices and machines, as a creative faculty, and even as the whole person’ while ‘early sixteenth century French had poured all the meanings associated with ingenium (individual identity, courtly display, and even artistic style) into the lexis of *esprit*.’ (p. 236), while the term *génie* overtook *esprit* in the mid-eighteenth century. Interesting, *ingenium* had common medieval meanings ‘as siege engine or malicious ruse’, at it is noted that these meanings were first ignored by sixteenth-century lexicographers, but later ‘reinstated in later seventeenth-century antiquarian and legal dictionaries’ (p. 38–39), which illustrates the earlier humanist concern with discarding medieval Latin usages and the later antiquarian and historical interest. Although there are many such useful observations, it is impossible to summarize in a short space the vast lexical landscape contained in this study. This book is a significant contribution to comparative lexicography and cultural studies, and demonstrates how close attention to a cluster of words can improve the historical and linguistic understanding of the early modern period.

Andrew Hui’s *A Theory of The Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter* is an ambitious work. Hui defines an ‘aphorism’ as ‘a short saying that requires interpretation’ (p. 5) and emphasises its

density and the contrast between its pithy form and the complexity of interpretation and exegesis. The density of the aphorism requires work on the part of the reader: ‘My point is that deciphering the meaning of the aphorism requires that both the aphorism and the reader be brilliant’ (p. 92). Aphorisms can be quickly read but interpretation is endless. The first of six chapters looks at the *Analects* of Confucius, their collection and compilation and the flourishing of commentaries that developed around them eventually creating a state-sponsored Confucian system. Chapter 2 turns to ancient Greek and the fragments of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, emphasizing their obscure and oracular nature. Chapter 3 turns to the Gnostic Christian Gospel of Thomas, which contains a purported list of sayings of Jesus. Hui explores these sayings in relation to the four Biblical Gospels and draws parallels with other ancient Egyptian and near Eastern literature. In Chapter 4, which most closely relates to the early modern period, Hui first looks at Erasmus’ collections of *Adages*, which compiled and explained ancient Greek and Latin proverbs. In contrast to Erasmus’ looking to the past, Francis Bacon is presented as an intellectual ‘fresh start’ (p. 103), and he is represented as turning to the aphorism, not as a compiler of old information, but to “‘add and supply further” to the sum of knowledge’ (p. 108). In terms of aphorisms Chapter 5 looks at Pascal’s *Pensées*, a large and unorganized compilation of writing, set against the methodology of Cartesian natural philosophy. Attempt of readers and editors to organize this disparate material are contrasted with past attempts to organize sayings of Confucius, Heraclitus, and Jesus. Chapter 6 looks at the German philosopher Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human* and his later aphoristic writings. The final epilogue turns to Twitter as the title promises, as well as reflections on Japanese Zengo, Sanskrit Sūtras and Zen/Chan Calligraphy.

Provided his emphasis on close reading and interpretation, it is not surprisingly that Hui provides some attention to the original languages of these texts, though in doing so he is not always accurate and although individual words are sometimes quoted in the original languages they are not often further discussed. Chinese characters are sometimes quoted and transliterated but little is said about them for the benefit of unfamiliar readers. The idiom ‘述而不作’ is translated as “I transmit rather than innovate’ (p. 34) but more could have been said about its usage in both the *Analects* or other contexts. Greek accents and breathing marks in particular are inconsistent, as one sees in ‘εἰ δὲ καὶ ἡ παρουσία σοφόν’ (p. 85) and ‘γνώθι σαυτον’ (p. 76) and there are mistakes in transliterations, such as the last word in ‘hoi logoi hoi [apokrupoi]’ (p. 62) should be ‘apokruphoi’.

Among other things, this book is a contribution to the study of reading and hermeneutics, and in that regard, there are many authorial observations that stay with the reader. For example, ‘My hypothesis is that, at least in the *Analects*, the amount of scholarly commentary produced is inversely proportional to the succinctness of the original sayings. In other words, the pithier the teacher, the more voluminous the tradition’ (p. 27). Or Hui’s observation that each of the 114 remarks in the Gospel of Thomas begin with ‘Jesus says’, akin to ‘The Master says’ in the *Analects* (p. 67), which for further comparison ‘almost all Buddhist texts in Pali and Sanskrit begin with the formula “Thus have I heard.” ’ (p. 68). As a book on reading and interpretation, this particular monograph is rewarding for how it selects a disparate set of texts and compares and contrasts their content and genesis as well as in what framework the reader can approach them. As a work of comparative literature it is exemplary in its literary range and coherence. Although this is less the case with this final book, all three works reviewed here cover grounds that could delegate them to the hands of various academic specialists but all three due to their methodologies and scope should

be of general interest to literary and linguistic scholars of any stripe.

Books discussed

Alexander Marr, Raphaële Garrod, José Ramón Marcaida, Richard J. Oosterhoff, *Logodaedalus: Word Histories of Ingenuity in Early Modern Europe*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. 358 pp. ISBN: 9780822945413

Andrew Hui, *A Theory of The Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 272 pp. ISBN: 9780691188959

John Gallagher, *Learning Languages in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 288 pp. ISBN: 9780198837909

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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