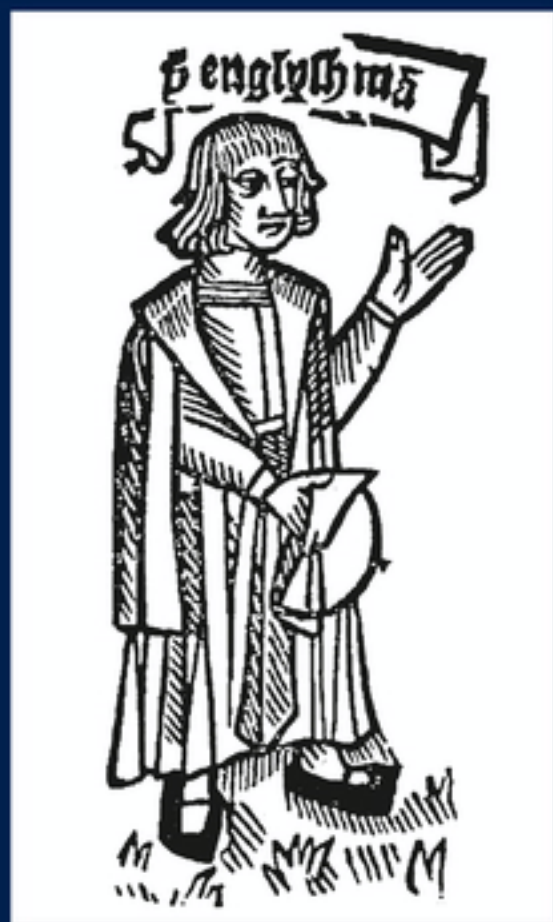


BRITANNIA TEXTS IN ENGLISH
edited by Jürgen Klein



Nicholas Breton and the English Self

Conny Loder



PETER LANG
EDITION

What is our life on earth? But as a play,
Where many a part doth come vpon the Stage,
Rich, poore, wise, fond, fayre, fowle, and great, and small,
And old, and young, death makes an end to all.¹

1. Introduction

Few will claim that Nicholas Breton excels in aesthetic writing. In fact, the twenty-first-century reader cannot but feel that Breton was a writer who seemed to focus on quantity rather than on quality, which quickly earned him the stigma of a hack writer.² It is largely due to Alexander Grosart, Jean Robertson and Ursula Kentish-Wright that most of Breton's works have become accessible in print at all. Anthologies usually neglect Breton and his works, or just mention him in passing. Although fellow writers praised Breton in the late sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century—among them, Frances Meres, George Puttenham, Thomas Dekker and John Suckling—from the late seventeenth century onward, he lost favour with his readership only to be rediscovered in the late nineteenth century.³ As fast as interest was rekindled in Breton, it also dwindled. Today, he remains neglected.⁴ One recent discussion of Breton's

1 Nicholas Breton, *Machiavels Dogge* (London, 1617). Here sig. 17^v, stanza 1.

2 See e.g. Fitzgerald Flournoy, "William Breton, Nicholas Breton, and George Gascoigne," *Review of English Studies* 16.63 (July 1940): 262-73. Here p. 262.

3 See Eva March Tappan, "The Poetry of Nicholas Breton," *PMLA* 13.3 (1898): 297-332. Here p. 301-5.

4 Biographies and bibliographies about Breton date to the same time. The most complete bibliography is Samuel A. Tannenbaum, Dorothy R. Tannenbaum, *Nicholas Breton. A Concise Bibliography* (New York: unknown binding, 1947). One of the most recent works that elaborate on Breton at large is Marcy L. North, *The Anonymous Renaissance. Cultures and Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003). North discusses the general popularity of being an anonymous writer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, elaborating on conventions, limits and the possibilities of anonymous print, especially with reference to pseudonyms, initials and anagrams. She draws attention to Breton's anagram "Salochin Treboun", see p. 16. Since initials became more and more fashionable in the sixteenth century, they not only stood for the authority of a specific print, but also contributed to confusion since some initials could indicate several authors at once, by which authority was decreased and anonymity increased, see p. 70-72. Misattribution during Breton's time already led to Breton having to correct printer's errors, such as in *The Pilgrimage to Paradise*, in which Breton attacks the printer Richard Jones for having falsely attributed poems to his name rather

texts was instigated by the University of Saskatchewan under the general supervision of Ronald W. Cooley.⁵ Major reasons for today's criticism of Breton and his works are summed up quickly. These reasons stem from several works that were falsely attributed to Breton or only nowadays correctly attributed to Breton; from the initials that close the "Ad Lectorem," which can be found in the first edition of Breton's pamphlet *Wil of Wit*,⁶ these being W.S. and ever

than to Philip Sydney. Still, as North points out, this misattribution increased Breton's fame rather than decreasing it, see p. 81. The confusion about which texts can be actually attributed to Breton has found a wider discussion, see Fredson Thayer Bowers, "An Addition to the Breton Canon," *Modern Language Notes* 45.3 (March 1930): 161-6. Bowers meticulously demonstrates that *Machivil's Dogge* is a work by Breton. Also see Edward Doughtie, "Nicholas Breton and Two Songs by Dowland," *Renaissance News* 17.1 (Spring 1964): 1-3 argues that some songs attributed to Dowland are actually by Breton. Further, Doughtie questions whether *The Passion of a Discontented Minde* can really be attributed to Breton, an attribution which has been suggested by Jean Robertson, see Jean Robertson, "Nicholas Breton's Authorship of 'Marie Magdalens Loue'" and "The Passion of a Discontented Minde," *The Modern Language Review* 36.4 (Oct. 1941). 449-59. Similarly, Mary Shakeshaft, "Nicholas Breton's The Passion of a Discontented Mind: Some New Problems," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 5.1 (Winter 1965): 165-74, addresses the question of authorship. Also see "John P. Cutts, 'The Strange Fortunes of Two Excellent Princes and The Arbor of Amorous Deuises,'" *Renaissance News* 15.1 (Spring 1962): 2-11 locates some lyrical songs which are attributed to Breton. Katharine K. Gottschalk, "Discoveries concerning British Library MS Harley 6910," *Modern Philology* 77.2 (Nov. 1979): 121-31 locates in Harley 6910 several poems which she argues are attributed to Breton but might have been in fact misattributed. Conversely, Hyder E. Rollins, "'A Small Handful of Fragrant Flowers' (1575)," *The Huntington Library Bulletin* 9 (April 1936): 27-35, and Hyder E. Rollins, *The Arbor of Amorous Devices 1597. By Nicholas Breton and Others* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1936) argue with support of some examples that the initials N.B. are not always to be identified with Nicholas Breton, which implies that many of the poems attributed to Breton are actually not his. For this study, works were selected that have been commonly agreed to be actually Breton's.

- 5 See Ronald W. Cooley et. al. "Turne Backe the Leaves," *Selected English Renaissance Religious Writing*. Dept. of English Home Page. U of Saskatchewan. 9 July 2012.
- 6 Although a pamphlet as a genre usually entails some sort of slander and libel, often associated with news, this does not really refer to Breton's pamphlets. Neither does Breton label his texts as pamphlets; yet, their conciseness and the fact that Breton wrote rapidly and had his works printed as small volumes suggests that the texts can after all be looked at as pamphlets. Pamphlets are usually categorised as being political (the main theme for pamphlets, yet only significant for England once the civil war broke out), being part of the horror genre (such as prison and rogue literature, notably rogue literature as entertainment) or being satires (criticising and ridiculing habits and spleens that are considered immoral and disruptive for the realm). Most importantly, as Andrea

since believed to belong to William Shakespeare; or from Ben Jonson's eulogy for Breton.⁷ Further, Nicholas Breton's stepfather, George Gascoigne,⁸ who surpassed Breton in poetic fame, entices scholars to at least take note of his stepson's works in passing. In contrast, much has been written about the person Breton, of which only little can be proven.⁹ In this study the private person Nicholas Breton is of little significance, since it is not my intention to shed any new light on the person. Instead, this study focuses on a selection of Breton's writings.

Grosart's late nineteenth-century collection of Breton's oeuvre is still today's standard edition, of course with Robertson's and Kentish-Wright's editions having added some significant and important works to the Breton canon. Breton's writing can be roughly separated into religious, satirical and political. All of Breton's writing concentrates on man: the Self, the human essence and

Halasz has argued, "no clear and stable lines can be drawn to distinguish between a pamphlet, a small book, and a book." Andrea Halasz, *Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997). Here p. 3. For further information see: Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003). Here p. 12; 14; George Saintsbury, "Introduction," *Elizabethan & Jacobean Pamphlets*, ed. George Saintsbury (New York: Books for the Libraries P, 1970): vii-xix; Saintsbury in his anthology of pamphlets includes Breton's *Wits Will*. Also see Sandra Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers. Popular Moralistic Pamphlets 1580-1640* (London: Athlone P, 1983); Herbert Grabes, *Das Englische Pamphlet I. Politische und Religiöse Polemik am Beginn der Neuzeit. 1521-1640* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1990); Ulrich Bach, *Englische Flugtexte im 17. Jahrhundert: Historisch-Pragmatische Untersuchungen zur frühen Massenkommunikation* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1997) and Paul J. Voss, *Elizabethan News Pamphlets. Shakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe & the Birth of Journalism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne U P, 2001).

- 7 See Ursula Kentish-Wright, "Introduction," *A Mad World My Masters and Other Prose Works by Nicholas Breton*, ed. Ursula Kentish-Wright, vol. 1, 1929. (Grosse Pointe: Scholarly P, 1968): vii-xxx. Here p. xvii.
- 8 Cf. Cooley; Flourney; also see Eva March Tappan, "Nicholas Breton and George Gascoigne," *Modern Language Notes* 11.4 (April 1896): 113-114.
- 9 On Breton's life see e.g.: Alexander B. Grosart, "Memorial Introduction," *Nicholas Breton: The Works in Verse and Prose*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol.1, 1879 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969): ix-lxxvi. Tappan, "Poetry of Nicholas Breton," 1898; James Neilson, "Nicholas Breton," *Dictionary of Literary Biography. 2nd Series, vol. 136. Sixteenth-Century British Nondramatic Writers*, ed. David Richardson (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994): 31-38; Jean Robertson, "Introduction," *Poems by Nicholas Breton. Not Hitherto Reprinted*, ed. Jean Robertson (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1952): xi-clix; Oskar Heidrich, *Nicholas Breton. Sein Leben und seine Gedichte*, Diss. U Leipzig, 1901 (Leipzig, 1901); Theodor Kuskop, *Nicholas Breton und seine Prosaschriften*, Diss. U Leipzig, 1902 (Leipzig: 1902).

the individual. These terms are viewed critically today, since they bear in themselves a certain complexity; they even appear to cancel each other out in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century criticism.

Today, New Historicism is no longer a heterogeneous approach to Early Modern literature. Its focus on the marginal voices in literature makes Cultural Studies still appealing as an approach to Renaissance texts. With the aim to arrive closest at writing that was “not poetry or fiction but verbal traces less self-consciously detached from the lives real men and women actually live,”¹⁰ New Historicism concentrates much on non-canonised writers. New Historicists not only focus on a re-evaluation of post-modern understanding of literature, but also on the Self within its own culture.

A contrastive concept of the Self and the Other dominates not only New Historicism but also Cultural Studies and it has been attacked by some critics who argue that not contrast, but relation shaped Early Modern thinking.¹¹ Alistair Fox claims that it is less “through opposition” but “through a series of triangulations” and “of constructive selection, correction and assimilation” that the Early Modern man constructs his Self.¹² Being further criticised for describing Early Modern man too much as a cultural construct that is bound by epoch-making eras,¹³ some New Historicists now speak more of a tension between “the socially constructed character and the self-conscious individual”.¹⁴

Some criticism yet questions the validity of Early Modern individuality. Michel Foucault observes that the late sixteenth century created a state that “ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality, or [...] of a class

-
- 10 Catharine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000). Here p. 21. Gallagher and Greenblatt refer here to Clifford Geertz and his view of anthropology that paved the way for New Historicism. Also compare to p. 10/11 and 14-16 where Gallagher and Greenblatt list what they consider to be the aims of New Historicism.
 - 11 See Richard Levin, “Thoughts in the New Historicizing of English Renaissance Drama,” *New Literary History* 21.3 (Spring, 1990): 433-447; also see Alois Wierlacher, Corinna Albrecht, “Kulturwissenschaft Xenologie,” *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2008): 280-306. Here p. 284.
 - 12 Alistair Fox, *The English Renaissance. Identity and Representation in Elizabethan England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). Here p 14.
 - 13 See Olav Lausund, Stein Haugom Olsen, “Introduction,” *Self-fashioning and Metamorphosis in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. Olav Lausund and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oslo, Novus P: 2003): viii-xxx.
 - 14 J. A. Piesse, “Identity,” *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Hattaway, reprint (Malden: Blackwell, 2003): 634-43. Here p. 639.

or a group among citizens.”¹⁵ Foucault, who concentrates on the modern subject rather than on the Early Modern subject, sees the subject “historicized, [...] held to be wholly and only the product of history.”¹⁶ Robert M. Strozier concurs when he argues that as far as Early Modern man is concerned, one needs to speak of an “individual”, i.e. an “*individuum*” that signifies “the human material entity (including mind)” that is not yet “a cultural subject”.¹⁷ According to Strozier, the Early Modern man is not a self-determined cultural individual yet. For Elizabeth Hanson this lack of self-determination is also mirrored in the term “subject”. She argues that there are two “different grammars of knowledge. The first supposes that the subject knows transitively, taking the world as the object of his thinking. The second posits that to the extent that the subject knows (and this may not be his defining activity) he must do so self-reflexively, recognizing his place in the hierarchical order.”¹⁸ To Tina Belsey it is not only knowledge but also power that defines subjectivity. Her work concentrates on the difference between a “subject” as someone being subjected to a power of monarch and a “subject” as someone being an individual.¹⁹

If one accepts that, as New Historicism has suggested, the Early Modern man is less a being described by its human essence, than a construct, described by its social, political and cultural surrounding, then “individuality must be seen in the light of cultural context” and “any exposition of self is a manifestation of a series of options, rather than something intrinsically different from anything else.”²⁰ Some New Historicists even suggest that the Self is not part of a common consciousness. Instead, the Early Modern Self should be seen as a “de-centered, provisional, contingent self incapable of a unified subjectivity,”²¹ as for example Terry G. Sherwood suggests. Hugh Grady sees Early Modern period as bringing forth a “fragmented subject”,²² i.e. a subject, who performs

-
- 15 Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-84. Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, vol. 3 (Penguin: London, 1994). Here p. 332.
 - 16 Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008). Here p. 225.
 - 17 Robert M. Strozier, *Foucault, Subjectivity, and Identity. Historical Constructions of Subject and Self* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2002). Here p. 9.
 - 18 Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998). Here p. 2.
 - 19 See Tina (A.C) Besley, Michael A. Peters, *Subjectivity & Truth. Foucault, Education and the Culture of Self* (Peter Lang, NY: 2007). Here p. 4.
 - 20 Piesse, “Identity,” 635.
 - 21 Terry G. Sherwood, *The Self in Early Modern Literature. For the Common Good* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne P, 2007). Here p. 2.
 - 22 Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne. Power and Subjectivity From “Richard II” to “Hamlet”* (Oxford: OUP, 2002). Here p. 54.

roles and thus becomes a protean player.²³ If the Early Modern man, however, had no conception about his Self, how can plays and literary works engage in a discourse on mistaken identities, Levin wonders, and suggests that after all there must have been a notion of a fixed identity.²⁴

As already pointed out, Breton makes continuous reference to man's Self and his identity, drawing a distinction between a desired and an undesired identity, particularly within a cultural frame. It is the aim of this study to elaborate on Breton's understanding of man's Self. This study will use the term *individual* to signify the human entity, including both body and mind. The aim of analysis is to locate the individual and its power in Breton's texts: Breton's individual is after all a source of subversion, whose reflective and creative capacity could easily dislocate the individual from the community and from authorities' control.

At this point it also has to be stated that Breton's readership is chiefly male. This is also the case when Breton elaborates on women in his texts: while the ideal woman is discussed, be it as far as her character or her social position are concerned, it is, nevertheless, the male reader whom Breton addresses. This is also true for Breton's works that are specifically dedicated to a female patron. This study therefore will consider the Self and the individual as predominantly male, although not exclusively. I am aware that his might be received as gender discrimination or gender stereotyping, yet I would like to stress that I include both sexes in my analysis whenever Breton's texts imply that "man" includes both male and female and that the reception of his texts is directed towards readers of both sexes.

Although today only few read Breton, he was one of the most prolific writers of his time and left behind a vast oeuvre. Since the topic of this study is not Breton but rather Breton's reaction to the political, social and cultural English Self in the Early Modern period, only those works were selected that deal particularly with politically and culturally infused topics. As a consequence, this study neglects a large part of Breton's religious texts. The objection that culture and politics are interwoven into the shaping of a Christian identity is certainly valid; to call for an inclusion of religious texts into the discussion within this study is equally valid. Yet, Breton's religious texts are so complex and so nu-

23 See Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*, 56.

24 See Levin, "Thoughts in the New Historicizing," 443/4. Greenblatt reacts to these attacks against New Historicism in one of his latest books, claiming New Historicists' focus on the single voices helps to grasp individuality after all, see Gallagher/Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism*, 16.

merous that including them would restrict them to a superficial discussion. A discussion that does these religious texts justice requires a study of its own.

This study reads Breton's cultural and political texts against Breton's own time and against the cultural and political context that preceded Breton: Pico della Mirandola, Machiavelli and More. Influences of Pico's unrestricted Prometheus, Machiavelli's deceptive *Übermensch* and More's pseudo-altruistic socialist can all be located in Breton's construction of the English Self. Furthermore, Breton's texts will be read against Montaigne, Bacon, Descartes and Hobbes.

Chapter 2 places Breton into the Early Modern context. The enthusiastic view that portrays man in his unlimited possibilities, his free will and his artistic skill to shape his own life is compared with Machiavelli's *Übermensch*. Equally it will be shown that man's unlimited possibilities can, as Montaigne argues, throw him into a state of flux: the Early Modern man is seemingly invincible, yet without an identity.

Against this context of the Early Modern man, chapter 3 discusses Breton's account of human nature. Despite criticism's bias against the concept of human nature, Early Modern man and his nature are essential questions of humanist thought. Breton discusses human nature from a *pre-lapsus* and *post-lapsus* perspective, elaborating on how far nature and nurture are interdependent. *A Dialogue full of pithe and pleasure*, *The Good and the Badde* and *The Pilgrimage to Paradise* form the primary texts for this chapter.

Chapter 4 explores Breton's view of man's rational faculty, his will and his intellect. In the pamphlet *Wits Trenchmour* Breton draws on Plato's dialogues, exposing man's intellectual frailty. In *The Pilgrimage to Paradise* Breton explains how man's cognitive action is directed towards spiritual salvation. Here Breton suggests that man's mind must be kept in spiritual motion.

Chapter 5 establishes the English Self. This chapter analyses how Breton addresses instrumental questions of his time, especially those of identity, the Self and nationality. The Self is thereby contrasted against the Other: the foreign, the unknown and the indecipherable. In this chapter, Early Modern culture is scrutinized under the aspect of unity or, to be more exact, lack of unity. It will be shown how Breton resists the dynamics of culture, dynamics that make any culture "contested, temporal, and emergent" as James Clifford has argued.²⁵ Read against a linguistic understanding of Peirce and Saussure, Breton's non-Englishman is an indecipherable sign, opposed to the transparent and uniform

25 James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986): 1-26. Here p. 19.

Englishman.²⁶ Breton's depiction of the English Self can be found foremost in his satirical texts, *An Old Man's Lesson*; *Strange Fortune of Two Excellent Princes*; *A Mad World my Masters*; *Strange News out of Divers Countries*; *Choice, Chance, and Change, or Conceits in their Colours*, the political texts, *Invective against Treason* and *A Murmurer* and the *Pasquil*-series. In these texts, Breton shows how man, when transgressing, becomes a threat to the commonwealth. It will become clear that for Breton intellectual activity and individuality are causes of a defective society.

Chapter 6 focuses on Breton's texts that deal with the consequences of individuality. Subjects that withdraw from the authoritative voice became political and moral trespassers who were seen as in need of being cured, both in a Christian and medical context. This withdrawal constitutes an undesired identity, which is exemplified by Breton's pamphlets *Invective against Treason* and *A Murmurer*. In these texts, the transgressor becomes a particular individual, located outside the English culture. The "private persons", as Breton labels the non-English outsiders, are mirrors of James I and his political propaganda. Further, it will be shown that when Breton draws on motifs of utopianism, dystopianism and England as *arcadia* or as New Eden, his view of man's destructive capacity foreshadows Hobbes's position on man in his *Leviathan*.

Chapter 7 elaborates on materialistic aspects in Breton's texts, particularly on man's social mobility. Breton's texts denounce excessive and illegitimately accumulated wealth and describe the consequences as far as morality and communal stability are concerned, which makes them essentially anti-capitalist. Underlying this anti-capitalist sentiment is Breton's xenophobia, which is amply demonstrated in *The Pilgrimage to Paradise*, the *Pasquils*, the *Vncasing of Machivils Instructions* and *Grimello's Fortunes*.

Finally, this study puts forward the argument that the individual in the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century thinking was present. Yet, the individual was perceived as a threat. Breton's construction of a patriotic, transparent and uniform Englishman not only rooted out problems from "Italianisation" or any other foreign "-isation" of the English culture, but also created a pseudo-individuality within a homogeneous community.

26 Breton's writing falls into both periods, Elizabeth's and James's. Since Breton wrote largely out of the perspective of an Englishman for fellow Englishmen, rather than from the perspective of a British subject, I decided to concentrate on the English perspective. Whenever Breton's text renders a distinction between English, Scottish or British I will address this specifically.