Transmission and Transgression

Cultural Challenges In Early Modern England

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# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements

7

## General introduction

Sophie Chiari and Hélène Palma

9

## Part I Religion, Ideology and Philosophy

21

Chapter 1
Jean-Marie Maguin, A Tale of a Tree. Transmission of a Transgression

23

Chapter 2
Margaret Jones-Davies, The Process of Secularization in the Renaissance. Shakespeare and Modern Evil

39

Chapter 3
Pierre Lurbe, Potatoes, Theists, Atheists, and Sodomites. Transmission/Transgression in John Toland’s *life of Milton* (1698) and *Amyntor* (1699)

51

## Part II Art and Science

61

Chapter 4

63

Chapter 5
Mickaël Popelard, Between Transmission and Transgression. John Dee, Thomas Harriot and the Early Modern Man of Science

79

Chapter 6
Pierre Carboni, Transmission and Transgression in James Thomson’s Poem to Newton (1727)

91
# Table of Contents

## Part III Travelling and Circulation

Chapter 7
William T. Rossiter, Transgression *in Potentia. Translatio* and *Imitatio* in the Poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt

Chapter 8
Anne Geoffroy, From Transmission to Transgression: The Venetian Paradigm in Robert Green's *Royall Exchange*

Chapter 9
Christophe Camard, "Your Mery Bookes of Italie": Tales from Italy and Trangression in Early Modern England

Chapter 10
Johann Gregory, The Publicity of John Taylor the Water-Poet. Legitimating a Social Trangression

**General Conclusion**
Sophie Chairi

**Appendix**
Pierre Iselin, An Introduction to the Audio CD "Shakespeare in Music". Musical Transmission and Trangression on the Early Modern Stage

**General Bibliography**

**List of Illustrations**

**List of Contributors**

**The Sorbonne Scholars: List of Musicians**

**Index**
Chapter 10

The Publicity of John Taylor the Water-Poet
Legitimating a Social Transgression

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To write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route.
To read is to travel through that terrain with the author as guide—a guide one may not always agree with or trust, but who can at least be counted upon to take one somewhere.
(Solnit 2001, 72)

transgress, v.

Etymology: apparently < French *transgresser* (14th cent. in Godefroy Compl.), < Latin *transgress-,* participial stem of *transgredi* to step across, < *trans* across + *gradi* to step.2

1. Prologue

The portrait of the Parson in the prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* valorises the man who “dwelt at hoom, and kepeth wel his folde”; this “good man [...] of religioun” travels “Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf” — he does not neglect in times of rain or thunder to visit the furthest in his parish, whether they are considered to be “much or lyte”; but Chaucer’s Parson is contrasted

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1 I am grateful to those who responded to an earlier version of this work at the *Transmission and Transgression in Early Modern England Symposium* (29 Nov-1 Dec 2012), Aix-Marseille University. Thanks are also due to Alison Harvey at Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives for helping me to consult their edition of John Taylor’s *Works*.

2 *OED,* “transgress,” *v.*
with the kind of priest who “ran to London unto Seynt Poules / To seken 
him a chaunterie for soules” (“General Prologue” 2005, ll. 512, 477, 495, 494, 
509-10). On the one hand is the Parson, brother of the Ploughman, who walks 
within a specific locale and does not seek social advancement; on the other is 
the morally suspect but economically-savvy priest who runs to London and 
finds himself a plush position ostensibly praying in Saint Paul’s Cathedral for 
a deceased patron. Concerns about social and geographic mobility are writ 
large in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in a century when even pilgrims might 
be expected to carry with them the necessary permits for travelling (Wallace 
1993, 28). This was a time when the repercussions of the Black Death had 
given the labourers who survived greater power to negotiate recompense for 
their work, increasing their chances of social rise. As Anne Wallace explains, 
“the underlying principle [of the travel legislation] is that unrestricted travel 
leads to unrestricted work, and that people’s labour should be directed 
toward specific and known ends controlled by the authorities”: walkers were 
especially singled out because they might be “wanderers with some illicit or 
economically disruptive motive” (Wallace 1993, 29). The anxieties, fascina-
tion and concern associated with both travellers and social climbers were 
transmitted from medieval to early modern times through law, literature and 
culture. As the printing house became available to a more socially heteroge-
neous range of people, both the social background of published writers and 
the readership of printed matter became more varied.

This chapter follows the example of one larger than life early modern 
traveller—one who tapped into the burgeoning early modern book trade 
in London. John Taylor “the Water-Poet” was born in Gloucester in 1578.3 
Circumstances or his struggles with Latin meant that Taylor gave up his 
grammar school education. He left to seek his fortune in Elizabethan London 
where he became apprenticed to a Thames boatman. He died in 1653 at the 
age of 75 during the third English Civil War. In between, however, Taylor 
used travel, print publication and the public to make his way in the world. 
This chapter thus reads Taylor in relation to ideas of publicity, publication 
and public discourse. As a boatman or werryman, he sculled people across 
the Thames—no doubt sharing gossip and telling stories—but Taylor sought 
to transmit his personality and verse to a larger audience. He did so by going 
on his own pilgrimages and using the press to tell his own tales. In so doing, 
Taylor used his lowly occupation as part of his poetic self-fashioning; he 
highlighted his unique situation while carefully seeking to refashion his social 
transgression as the legitimate result of earnest labour and canny ability.

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3 He was possibly the son of a surgeon, but, as Bernard Capp notes, the surgeon’s position 
was “a less prestigious occupation then, of course, than now” (Capp 1994, 7). I am grateful 
to Bernard Capp for kindly responding to my questions regarding John Taylor’s exploits.
2. The water-poet distinguishing himself

It might be said that John Taylor the Water-Poet had his film debut as the Boatman in Tom Stoppard’s *Shakespeare in Love*. As Taylor’s biographer notes, the early modern Thames werrymen were “the nearest modern equivalents” of “today’s cab-drivers” (Capp 1994, 54). As the boatman sculls Shakespeare in chase after Viola DeLesops, the “Taxi Driver” tries to make conversation with the playwright:

*Will*
Follow that boat!

*Boatman*
Right you are, governor!
*WILL sits in the stern of the boat and the BOATMAN sits facing him, rowing lustily.*

*Boatman (cont’d)*
I know your face. Are you an actor?

*Will*
(Oh God, here we go again)
Yes

*Boatman*
Yes, I’ve seen you in something. That one about a king.

*Will*
Really?

*Boatman*
I had th[at] Christopher Marlowe in my boat once

The relationship between Shakespeare and the Boatman is revisited later in the film:

*WILL gets out of the boat.*

*Boatman (cont’d)*
(reaching under his seat)
Strangely enough, I’m a bit of a writer myself.
*The BOATMAN produces his memoirs in manuscript.*

*Boatman (cont’d)*
It wouldn’t take you long to read it,
I expect you know all the booksellers
[…]
But WILL has gone.
(Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love*, n.p)

The two encounters are played for laughs in the film but they also foreground the issues of celebrity culture, and the writer’s problem of getting known and having his or her work valued by publishers and an audience. It is perhaps unlikely that Taylor did actually have the poet of transgression in his boat because Taylor moved to London only a year or so before Marlowe was killed. But Taylor did seek to emulate Marlowe’s fame as a well-known poet. This might seem surprising given that Marlowe was a Cambridge University

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4 The writers of the screenplay for *Shakespeare and Love* saw the werryman as the early modern equivalent of the London cabby too, calling him a “TAXI DRIVER Boatman” (Norman and Stoppard 1998, n.p.).
graduate, but Taylor obviously found solace in the pastoral tradition of the rustic poet. Pierre Bourdieu theorises that “[s]ocial subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (Bourdieu 2010, xxix). However, Taylor distinguished himself as being a writer who could appeal to the public, to a readership with a wide range of tastes. As Wheale comments, “no other writer bridges such a diverse range of the period’s literary cultures” (Wheale 1999, 104). At the same time, he negotiated “literary forms and available models of self-hood [while being] driven by motives embedded in circumstances as well as choice” (Dragstra, Ottway and Wilcox 2000, 12). Taylor’s writing—and his self-representation—is important, then, because it demonstrates how someone of relatively low social background transgressed social expectations of class, labour and authorship.

Taylor describes the time when he first desired to be a poet by citing Marlowe’s famous river poem. He reports in 1621 that he was happy working simply as a boatman,

> Untill at last a strange Poetique veine,  
> As strange away possest my working braine:  
> It chanc’d one evening, on a Reedy banke,  
> The Muses sat together in a ranke:  
> Whilst in my boat I did by water wander,  
> Repeating lines of Hero and Leander,  
> The Triple three tooke great delight in that,  
> Call’d me ashore, and caus’d me sit and chat,  
> And in the end, when all our talke was done,  
> They gave to me a draught of Helicon,  
> Which prov’d to me a blessing and a curse,  
> To fill my pate with verse, and empt my purse.5

The lines foreground important issues for Taylor: namely, the joy, labour and expense of authorship. Taylor had big plans for his poetry, starting with his first collection in 1612 which he named The Sculler. In the film Shakespeare in Love, the audience is invited to laugh—ultimately in a rather condescending way—at the Boatman’s literary pretensions when he tries to transgress expectations of his social status. Taylor, however, is likely to have known and collaborated with far more booksellers than Shakespeare. In fact, it has been estimated recently that during his lifetime, Taylor published some “150 separate titles and probably over half a million individual copies” (Capp 1994, 67). Several of these publications involved collaboration between the author and the printers. For example, Taylor produced a Workes in 1630 when he was 52 (and only halfway through his publishing career): involving four printers, it runs to 630 pages and contains 63 listed titles. Nigel Wheale explains that “no one could have sustained this career in Britain before the late 16th century, relying as it did on publicity and a concentration of urban

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5 Taylor’s Motto in All the Workes of John Taylor the Water Poet (London: 1630), ii. 43-58, (55). As there is no modern edition of Taylor’s works, I have quoted this edition of Taylor’s Workes (available on EEBO) wherever possible for ease of reference. The pagination of the Workes runs through three series, marked in this essay as “I,” “II,” and “III.”
readers served by a relatively efficient press” (Wheale 1999, 89). His fame is suggested by Ben Jonson’s lament that “if it were put to the question of the water-rhymer’s works against Spenser’s, I doubt not but they would find more suffrages” (Jonson 2012a, ll. 446-48). However disparaging Jonson was trying to be about the social upstart by calling him a mere “rimer,” Taylor had obviously found a readership.

Ian Donaldson describes Ben Jonson telling William Drummond exasperately “that King James regarded [the Water-Poet] as the greatest poet in the kingdom” (Donaldson 2011, 45). According to Jonson, James I said he did not “see ever any verses in England to the Sculler’s”—which is a little ambiguous (Jonson 2012b, ll. 288-89). Nevertheless, the King does seem to have encouraged him, and the sculler was quick to cash in on his new role when he was appointed one of the King’s Watermen in 1613. Henceforth, he would fashion himself as “the King’s Water-Poet.” At the height of his literary ambition, Taylor even took up lodgings at an Oxford college after helping to escort Charles’s wife, Henrietta Maria, there to escape the plague in 1625. He ambitiously signed himself in a publication as “John Taylor, of Oriell Colledge, in Oxford” (The Fearefull Sommer in Works, i. 55-64, [56]). His social success is recorded by John Aubrey in his Brief Lives:

I saw him at Oxon. […] I remember he was of middle stature, he had a good quick looke, a black velvet, a plush-gippe and a silver shoulder-belt; [he] was made much of by the scholars, and was often with Josias Howe at Trinity College. (Aubrey 1898, II, 253)

It is significant, of course, that Taylor’s clothing is meticulously recorded, it being a marker of his new social distinction. In effect, the social acceptance of his clothing signified the cultural legitimation of his career trajectory, even as Taylor fashioned his (safely) transgressive life-journey as exceptional.

3. Publicity stunts

Despite Taylor’s penchant for poetry, it was not in fact his verse that would make him famous, but rather his publicity stunts and his fashioning of himself as a public media figure. Through “spectacular and artistically directed forms of travel” (Sanders, 278), Taylor managed to capture the imagination of his public audience. He took up a number of travelling adventures and then wrote about his escapades, again partly in verse. As Bernard Capp reports, in July 1619 “Taylor and a friend sailed down the Thames forty miles to Queenborough on the Isle of Sheppey in a boat he had fashioned, for a wager,

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6 On Taylor’s court connections, see Capp 1994, 44-49. On his appointment as a King’s Waterman through the influence of a Scottish courtier, Viscount Haddington, see Capp 1994, 15.

7 As Capp notes, this tract on the plague was published “by the University printers with the blessing of the vice-chancellor” (1994, 20).

8 Josias Howe (1612-1701) was an Oxford University clergyman and poet.

9 For antecedents to Taylor’s travel writing, see Chandler, x-xi.
Johann Gregory

out of brown paper kept half a float by inflated animal bladders attached to the sides”; he used dried fish and canes for oars (Capp 2004, n.p.). On his arrival—which was by no means certain—he was greeted by most of the town and invited for dinner by the mayor. A couple of weeks before the premiere of Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair, he filled the Hope Theatre by printing thousands of bills promising a duel of wits between him and “the King’s Rhyming Poet” William Fenner. Fenner did not show up and the actors had to perform something before the audience tore the place down; nevertheless, Taylor was quick to tell everyone about the non-event, publishing Taylor’s Revenge (1615) where he derided Fenner as a “scurvy squint-eyed brazen-fac’d Baboon” (Workes, ii. 142-7, [144]). Taylor was making a name for himself. Paradoxically, though, he made a name for himself as someone who could safely transgress social expectations.

John Taylor undertook a number of journeys, meeting prestigious people along the way. In 1616 he followed Ben Jonson up to Scotland for a wager—beginning a whole series of travels around the British Isles. As Ian Donaldson narrates,

Taylor’s wager was that he could walk to Scotland and back without taking money with him, and without asking anyone for food, drink or lodging. His tactic was to stare very intently at people he encountered along the way, until in embarrassment they would ask the servant with whom he travelled what the problem was, and he would tell them the nature of the bet. (Donaldson 2011, 45)

He caught up with Jonson receiving, as narrated in Taylor’s Pennyles Pilgrimage (1618), “a piece of gold of two and twenty shillings to drink [Jonson’s] health in England” (Workes, i. 121-40 [138]). Jonson presumably did not want Taylor to stay and cramp his style.10 Another time, he undertook to travel to York in a werry boat, taking supper with the Archbishop of York. Taylor told how he had visited the Low Countries, and even held the son of the Bohemian Queen in Prague: he took the child’s shoes as a memento in 1620, before undertaking an “epic boat trip 600 miles down the Elbe to Hamburg” (Capp 2004, n.p.).11

Before becoming a Thames Waterman, Taylor had taken part in the expedition to Cadiz led by Essex and Lord Howard and another time had even been marooned on an island in the Azores for five days. Much later, when Charles I retreated to Oxford in 1642, Taylor followed him, becoming the joint water-bailiff and a Yeoman of the Guard, or “a beekeater.”12 He published Royalist propaganda and was considered “one of the most popular royalist pamphleteers” (Capp 1994, 152). When Charles was exiled to the Isle of Wight in 1648, Taylor went to visit him and published a pamphlet of his journey, his meeting with the King, and the negotiations taking place there.

Taylor’s actions should not simply be read in a tradition of wondrous voyages or carnivalesque entertainments. There was often a political dimension to

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10 Jonson later complained that “Tailor was sent along [to Scotland] to scorn him” (Jonson, Conversations with Drummond, 149), an accusation that Taylor denied.


12 Capp notes that “Taylor’s boast that he had been a ‘beekeater’ is the earliest recorded use of the term” (1994, 151).
his performance art, especially when Taylor came to narrate his adventure. Andrew McRae argues, for example, that

[The journey in the brown-paper boat is most commonly linked to a tradition of bizarre or wondrous voyages, stretching back from Coryate to the likes of William Kemp, who morris-danced from London to Norwich. While these connections are undeniable, there is a danger of removing such texts from their social and economic contexts, in favour of a depoliticized literary tradition. (McRae 2009, 219)]

The political implications of his work involved not simply his own authorial self-fashioning, but also his concern with trade, information technology (broadly defined), religion and social justice. If Taylor is remembered at all now, it is often for his public antics and his dubious rhymes: “Leaves is an ancient Town, as may be seen / In Camden, page three hundred and thirteen” (Taylor, The Certain Travails of an Uncertain Journey, 14).13 Being a lowly werryman, Taylor was perhaps even more of a socially transgressive “upstart Crow” (Greene, F1v) than Shakespeare was accused of being. Taylor certainly had a rival in Thomas Coryate, the richer and better educated travel-writer who petitioned to have Taylor’s tract Laugh and Be Fat (1612) burnt by the public hangman.14 However, the Water-Poet was also a media man. The ways in which he was able to step across his lowly social background and traditional occupation as a werryman were all part of his individual narrative. He was someone who was not only a “paradigm of what Stephen Greenblatt has labelled ‘Renaissance self-fashioning’” as Capp argues (1994, 2), but also someone who used publishing in order to shape a new kind of public audience for his work. He published all kinds of work from satires and sonnets to the first nonsense verse, a life of the Virgin Mary, a thumb-sized Bible, and even verse to accompany needle patterns. Taylor’s enterprise speaks to the growing readership and possibilities of his time, but it transgresses many of the conventional expectations concerning the relationship between poet and reader, or poet and patron.

4. Prophane walking

Taylor’s journey from London around Wales towards the end of his life is representative of the way he shaped a public context for his work while seeking to legitimate his travel and writing. In eight weeks during the summer of 1652, Taylor travelled some 600 miles to and around Wales with his horse called Dun. During the course of the journey, he celebrated his 74th birthday. One episode speaks to concerns about travel and transgression especially: the Water-Poet spent the final weekend of August at the village of

13 This is a reference to the historian William Camden, Ben Jonson’s Westminster tutor. Taylor often refers to Camden’s Britannia, translated from the Latin by Philemon Holland who Taylor was on friendly terms with.

14 For more on Thomas Coryate, see Strachan. For Coryate’s concern with his own reputation, see Gregory 2010, 195-98.
Johann Gregory

Barnsley, about sixteen miles from Gloucester, his hometown. Taylor writes in his published travelogue that “[o]f all the places in England and Wales that I have travelled to, this Village of Barnsley doth most strictly observe the Lords day, or Sunday, for little children are not suffered to walke or play” (A Short Relation of a Long Journey, 26). Taylor spent two nights in Barnsley, witnessing a village incident. He reports the transgressive actions of two inhabitants:

[... ] two Women who had beene at Church both before and after Noone, did but walke into the fields for their recreation, and they were put to their choice, either to pay sixpence apiece (for prophane walking,) or to be laid one hour in the stocks; and the pievish willfull women (though they were able enough to pay) to save their money and jest out the matter, lay both by the heeles merrily one hour. (A Short Relation, 26-27)

Taylor was almost certainly staying in the village and probably an eye-witness; nevertheless, his transmission of the events is not as straightforward as it might first appear.

For a start, it is not clear who Taylor judges to have transgressed. Simply, the women transgress by having pleasure on a Sunday, apparently transgressing the rules of recreation for the Sabbath. They then go on to transgress expectations by being “peevish” and “willful,” deciding to lie in the stocks, rather than pay the fine. However, the story obviously shares something with Richard Brathwaite’s anecdote about the Puritan who hanged “his Cat on Monday / For killing of a Mouse on Sunday” (Brathwaite 1638, B4r). 15

In describing the village people as being such strict observers of Sunday, he was representing the village elders as zealous Puritans. They are ridiculed by coming up with transgressions such as “profane walking.” In this reading the women become the heroes of the story who outwit the elders by “jest[ing] out the matter, [i]eing both by the heeles merrily one hour.” However funny the story may sound, it must have been quite traumatic for the women to grow up in this vigilant patriarchal regime, and their actions suggest something of a protest. But this is not the central focus of Taylor’s narrative: the story is obviously meant to be entertaining for his readers. And it is worth pointing out that this is the last episode in Taylor’s journey before he reaches home, so in a sense the story represents something of a highlight. In transmitting his travels, however, Taylor was not just trying to be entertaining. Writing towards the end of his life, Taylor had been deeply concerned and relatively outspoken about religion. Although he was a royalist propagandist for a time, he usually encouraged his readers to seek the middle ground, and reconciliation. His narration of the Church elders and the wilful women during the time of the Rump Parliament after the execution of Charles I, speaks to Taylor’s—and his readers’—concern with religious practices and especially with religious sectarianism.

This concern for spiritual welfare can be seen when Taylor contrasts the village of Barnsley with those in Wales. In doing so he propagated a national public

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15 I am grateful to John Chandler for bringing this verse to my attention.
awareness, writing (mostly) to those in London about people in Barnsley and Wales. Taylor reports that

[...] here is such zeale in many places and Parishes in Wales; for they have neither Service, Prayer, Sermon, Minister, or Preacher, nor any Church door opened at all, so that people do exercise and edifie in the Church-Yard, at the lawfull and laudable Games of Trap, Catt, Stool-ball, Racket &c. on Sundayes.

(A Short Relation, 27)

Although Taylor is again making fun of the village people, during his time in Wales he does seem to have been genuinely concerned about their spiritual welfare and troubled, as Capp narrates, “that so many clergy had been expelled as ‘malignants’ that many churches were left with no religious provision at all” (Capp 1994, 188). As well as being entertaining, Taylor’s travel writing is, therefore, also telling the London public about the state of the nation. Much has been made of the way that poets such as Spenser and Jonson sought to become national poets, but Taylor seems to have gone about this task by a very different route, by becoming something of a celebrity and a national adventurer, reporter and writer—that is, a public person.

5. Public person

Taylor would continue to be known for his royalist leanings (he first named his public house The Mourning Crown before changing it to the Poet’s Head); he was also careful to avoid his enemies. Nevertheless, what is perhaps surprising is the way that Taylor was often welcomed on his travels by Puritans and royalists alike. As Capp describes in relation to Taylor’s Welsh journey,

Taylor seems to have enjoyed a fund of goodwill that transcended party loyalties, despite his wartime role as a propagandist. Two parliamentary officers had earlier befriended him at Chester, while at Carmarthen he was kindly received by the Governor, Rowland Dawkins, one of the leading political figures in South Wales during the interregnum. He had become a national institution.

(Capp 1994, 161)

Capp’s idea of Taylor as a national institution fits in with the notion of Taylor shaping himself as a public figure: a man of the public who speaks to the public. His travel writing and his performances suggest that the public sphere he generated was linked not only to the press but also to his journeys along the “ever-expanding road network in England, Scotland and Wales [which brought] along an emergent sense of national identity” (Sanders 2010, 278). Taylor’s celebrity is perhaps confirmed by a portrait of two poets by William Dobson (1611-1646) made around 1643: Taylor was only discovered to be one of the sitters last year, painted with the royalist poet Sir John Denham (1614/15-1669).16

16 See William Dobson: A Portrait Revealed. Available at the following Internet site: http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/exhibitions/2011/dobson/index.shtml (Date accessed: 27 December 2013). See too William Dobson, Portrait of an Old and a Younger Man (John Taylor and John Denham), 1643. Oil on canvas. 110.2 x 118.6 cm. The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London.
Johann Gregory

Despite encouragement from James I and his son, and despite what Dobson’s portrait might suggest, Taylor never did really make it in the competitive and status-conscious poet-patronage game. Taylor’s first published verses included a dedication to his employer at the Tower of London, but Taylor was obviously conscious of his lowly social background. His prologue to the reader of The Sculler begins by addressing his transgression of social expectations:

Good gentle Reader, if I doe transgresse,  
I know you know, that I did ne’re professe,  
Until this time in Print to be a Poet:  
And now to exercise my wits I show it.  
(The Sculler in Workes iii. 15-31 [15])

Around halfway through his career, Shakespeare seems to have stopped writing poetry dedicated to wealthy patrons, relying on his public audience instead. The Water-Poet made a similar move. The prologue to the reader shows Taylor’s polite defiance—his willingness to “transgress” social mores concerning poetic authorship—but he would soon stop addressing the “gentle reader” and publish his works to “everybody” and “nobody.” It shortly became apparent to Taylor that traditional routes of patronage would not work and “[a]fter 1630 he largely abandoned the quest for patronage” (Capp 1994, 63). In his pamphlet A Very Merrie Wherrie-Ferry Voyage (1622) telling of his journey to York, he claimed that

Twixt the Boat and Pen, I make no doubt,  
But I shall shift to picke a living out,  
Without base flatterie, or false coyned words,  
To mowldy Madams, or unworthy Lords  
[...]  
But what I see and know, I dare to write.  
(Workes, ii. 6-15, [13])

Like Shakespeare, Taylor realised that, for most writers, the patronage system was something of a false economy; instead, the Water-Poet relied on the public and sought to legitimate his role as a public poet. Taylor was one of the first writers to publish his work by means of subscription. This involved a bill outlining a bond where subscribers would promise to pay Taylor for his labours on receipt of his travel writing. His bill for his journey to Wales is (unsurprisingly) in verse:

Now in the seventy fourth year of mine Age,  
I take an English and Welsh pilgrimage:  
From London first I bend my course to Chester,  
And humbly I to all men am Requester;  
That when I have past over Hills and Dales  
And compast with my Travels famous Wales,  
That when to you that I a Book do give,  
Relating how I did subsist and live,  
With all my Passages both here and there,

17 See for example his prefaces, “To Nobody” for Sir Gregory Nonsense in Workes, ii. (1-5) and “Dedicated to Every Body” for Taylor’s Motto in Workes, ii. 43-58.
And of my Entertainment every where.
Write but your Names and Dwellings in this Bill,
I'le finde you, for the Book give what you will.
Twelve Voyages and Journies I have past,
And now my Age says this may be my last.
My Travels Story shall most pleasant be
To you that read, though painfull unto me.
(A Short Relation, 3)

His bill suggests that Taylor will meet the subscribers personally, and that he has already been in contact with other future readers. The subscription method creates the impression of a direct relationship between writer and reader, with experiences transmitted through the book. However, the potential readers were not always easy to get hold of as Taylor often laments in the introductions to his travel writing. The way that Taylor shaped his audience and represented his own work shows the author’s concern with the commodification of his writing.

After reporting the bill itself, Taylor describes his traveling and writing enterprise in prose:

In this Bill I did promise to give to my friends (Subscribers) a true Relation of my Journey, and Entertainment, (which I have done) and I do give to them more than I promised, which is a briefe Chronicle of Wales, (which I did not mention in my Bill) [...] I know there are foure or five sorts of Adventurers with me in this wearesome Journey, some of them have payd me already (before I went) and their paine is past: If all the rest do pay me (being near 3000) I am deceived; If none doe pay me I am miserably cousened: For those that have payd, or can and will pay, I thanke them; for such as would if they could, or will when they can, I wish them ability to PERFORME their wills for their owne sakes, and mine both: But for those that are able to reward me and will not, I will not curse them, though I feare they are almost past praying for. (A Short Relation, 3-4)

Taylor’s exuberant and defiant personality is well represented here, but he also outlines the “wearesome” work that he has done; this foregrounding of his industry is a key element of Taylor’s self-fashioning. Recent critics have noted the way that he emphasised his labour and his “paine,” as a writer and a traveller. Katharine Craik maintains that “[l]ike other English artisans, [Taylor] argues, working-class workers laboured industriously and thriftily for the benefit of the nation” (Craik 2011, 199). When foregrounding his labour as a traveller and writer, Taylor made much of the fact that his subscribers often defaulted. According to Alexandra Halasz, the value of Taylor’s subscriptions seems to be predicated on failure because that showed that the public owed him something.

Halasz considers Taylor in relation to the notion of a public sphere. She argues that

[both the mix of discourses Taylor’s pamphlets contain and their frequent triviality offend the rationality and civic highmindedness associated with the notion of a public sphere. But [she argues] that Taylor gets it right, that a
public sphere—then or now—cannot be separated from the economic interests invested in the production of discourse as a commodity. (Halausz 2000, 99)

As a writer who shared news through print, he can be considered as a “protojournalistic figure and as such might be said singularly to anticipate a public sphere identified with journalism proper” (Halausz 2000, 99). Taylor would have hated to have been considered as merely a journalist, but his work affirms a sense that every man could have an opinion on the state of the nation, the King, parliament and the public’s role within that. As Christopher Hill appreciated, “Taylor did much to educate public opinion” (Hill 1995, 669). Jürgen Habermas comments in his work on the public sphere that terms such as public opinion “were still completely lacking in Shakespeare” (Habermas 1989, 90). Nevertheless, the OED attests that by 1615 the notion of public opinion entered the English language: Taylor sought to cultivate and affect it. In “dar[ing] to write” and to be the person that he was, Taylor was not just a transgressive upstart crow seeking social advancement. He seems to have made a name for himself, partly by showing how incongruous his situation was. In so doing, he raised concerns about all manner of public issues including travel, printing and public discourse itself. With the help of print and the public, he managed to gain a certain level of autonomy and cultural legitimation. This would be in keeping with his public persona as one who could say “I Have, I Want, I Care” and “Happy in Misery” (Taylor’s Motto in Works, ii. 44) while he published a title page showing himself as the King’s Water-Poet straddling a model Globe.

6. Coda: moistening clay

Taylor was never as transgressive as a poet like Marlowe was made out to be, but he was enterprising, negotiating his own agency and legitimacy as a writer. Taylor traded on his readers’ good will and a sense of adventure in order to become a public personality. A man of print, paper and water, books did not simply transmit his personality; he used print publication to legitimate his role as a very public persona. This performance deserves further investigation in terms of the early modern understanding of a theatrum mundi, cultural modes of production, a writer’s social position, and a growing sense of a public sphere. Wallace Notestein suggested that at times “Taylor was making fun of himself, of a humble man behaving like a great man, and he was perhaps poking a little fun at the way the great exhibited themselves to

18 The OED dates the first printed use of “public opinion” to 1615 (“Public”, adj. and n., Special Uses, S2.).
19 For both mottos together and this representation, see the title page to the original 1621 publication of Taylor’s Motto, also reproduced on the front cover of Capp 1994.
20 Robert Southey produced a biographical account of John Taylor. He ends by reflecting on Taylor’s social position and his agency within his society: “if the Water Poet had been in a higher grade of society, and bred to some regular profession, he would probably have been a much less distinguished person in his generation. [...] The next of our uneducated poets was composed of very different clay—and did not moisten it so well” (Southey 1836, 86-87).
the public” (Notestein 1956, 206). The notion of a man who increased public consciousness by his publicity and performance art suggests that Taylor was not just fortunate to be born “into a world at the right time, and live [...] in an age when Kings and Queens condescended to notice him, nobles and archbishops admitted him to their table, and mayors and corporations received him with civic honours” as Robert Southey commented of him (Southey 1836, 86-87). Although Taylor enjoyed hobnobbing with the elite when he could, he used the cultural and social capital of these encounters to legitimate the writing he published, always aware of the “public” in publishing.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that for Taylor’s contemporary, Ben Jonson, “[i]n so far as the author still inhabited the fair, it was increasingly either as an aloof spectator or as a spectacle and freak” (1986, 75). Although Taylor’s model of authorship was manifestly different from that of Jonson’s, this insight speaks to Taylor’s active sanctification of his own social transgression: that is, Taylor’s exploits suggest that in order to legitimate his new cultural position he had to make a spectacle of himself. By publishing himself through print, however, Taylor protected himself from the physical exposure that the “willful women” faced for their transgressive walking in Barnsley. Through his published writing, Taylor became an “aloof spectator” of his own “spectacles” and the actions of others. Limited to an extent by his social background and occupation, Taylor found some acceptance for his transgression. Besides his many insights and stories, he provided a valuable contribution to transitioning expectations of what it meant to be a writer in the early modern period.
Johann Gregory

Abstract
As the printing house became available to a more socially heterogeneous range of people, both the social background of published writers and the readership of printed matter became more varied. This essay follows the example of one larger than life early modern traveller—someone who tapped into the burgeoning early modern book trade in London. John Taylor “the Water-Poet” (1578-1653) used travel, print publication and the public to make his way in the world. The essay reads Taylor in relation to ideas of publicity, publication and public discourse. As a boatman or worryman, he sculled people across the Thames—no doubt sharing gossip and telling stories—but Taylor sought to transmit his personality and verse to a larger audience. His work demonstrates how someone of relatively low social background transgressed social expectations while seeking to legitimate his vocation.

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