Treacherous Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature and Culture

Review Number: 1644  
Publish date: Thursday, 28 August, 2014  
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ISBN: 9780199203390  
Date of Publication: 2014  
Price: £65.00  
Pages: 512pp.  
Publisher: Oxford University Press  
Publisher url: http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199203390.do  
Place of Publication: Oxford  
Reviewer: David Manning

Whilst first and foremost a literary scholar who focuses on the work of John Milton (1608–74), David Loewenstein has, in recent years, done much to undertake and encourage interdisciplinary research into the religio-political culture of early modern England. Following a series of probing essays and a co-edited volume, Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture (1), Loewenstein’s most significant interdisciplinary work to date offers a major new study on heresy and the English literary imagination from the early 16th to the late 17th century. The book is divided into two, roughly equal, sections. The first tackles ‘Reformation literary culture’ by developing case studies on the publications of Thomas More (1478–1535), Anne Askew (c.1521–46), and John Foxe (1517–87), amongst others. The second addresses ‘Heresy in Milton’s England’ by considering both the establishment of and reaction to Presbyterian heresiography, concluding with an extended discussion of relevant texts by John Milton.

Working from a dissatisfaction with both historiographical depictions of Thomas More as an ‘implacable heretic hunter’ and the idea that More’s stance on heresy can be understood solely as an expression of ‘a charitable Christian hatred’ (p. 27 and p. 25), Loewenstein characterizes More as a ‘highly complex, contradictory, even unstable and schizophrenic writer whose heated religious imagination became unchecked’ (p. 30). Thus, there was an enduring tension between not only More’s ‘charity’ and ‘hatred’, but also between his literary personas as the ‘playful humanist writer and … the ruthless, obsessive hunter of heretics’, and between his ‘fear’ riddled ‘perceptions’ and the religio-political reality of the age (p. 25, p. 33, and p. 36). Through a close reading of the fictitious A Dialogue Concerning Heresies (1529) and the non-fictional The Conputation of Tyndale’s Answer (1532–3), Loewenstein argues for a mutually formative relationship between ‘More’s demonization of heretics and his literary imagination’ (p. 25). More’s ability to ensure ‘rhetorical control’ over his literary creations was put under increasing pressure by his own religious angst. When faced with the ostensibly non-fictional reality of theological disputation, More’s writing gave way to a ‘terrifying obsession’ with and ‘violent fantasies’ about heretics (p. 34 and p. 54). The Conputation served as a ‘fitting literary monument to the uncontrollable fears and terrors heresy could generate’ (p. 59).

Here, a defender of the English religio-political status quo in the 1520s and early 1530s was actually at the forefront of constructing a view of the ideas, language, and behaviour of English evangelicals that was potentially more cogent, and therefore more threatening, than evangelicals themselves were able to produce.
As the positions of conservatives and evangelicals hardened, the 1540s witnessed a new round of bloody controversy. The ripples from continental Anabaptism and the Sacramentarian controversy were now more urgently felt in England, roughly pressing evangelicals up against the conservative reaction epitomized by the Six Articles Act (1539). There was a crackdown on lay bible reading. Female piety was brought under renewed suspicion. And a reformer’s proximity to institutional power, particularly the royal household, could give cause for exemplary censure. Lowenstein brings these contexts to bear on Anne Askew’s Examinations (1546–7), an ‘auto-biographical testimony’ (p. 76) of the interrogations which led to her execution for heresy. Aiming to go beyond critiques of Askew as a female disputant, as well as counter the ‘revisionist tendency to marginalize reformist discourse’ (p. 77), Loewenstein takes Askew’s authorship at face value to argue that her ‘polemical tactics’ were more ‘subtle’, ‘daring’, and ‘various’ than either her contemporaries or subsequent scholars have appreciated (p. 76). Askew was ‘a scriptural exegete of considerable dexterity and spirited disputatiousness’ (p. 82). She combined the paradoxical rhetorical strategies of ‘equivocation’ and ‘plain speaking’, and undertook ‘a dangerous game of linguistic sparring’ by combating the loaded metaphors of her accusers with ones of her own (p. 82, p. 87 and p. 87). The knowledge, skill, and tenacity of Askew therefore championed the evangelical cause, but also rendered manifest and, hence confirmed, the fearful assumptions of the heresy-making conservative audiences that would go on to condemn her.

John Foxe experienced his evangelical conversion during the Henrician persecutions. By the second English edition of his now famous Acts and Monuments (1570), ideas of heresy had significantly changed, not least because of Foxe’s own intervention. With the fall of English Catholicism, the old heresy hunters were recast as heretics whose diabolism caused the fanatical persecution of many true believers. Loewenstein hones in on Foxe’s association of persecution with fanaticism and how it gave Foxe cause to represent an account of the ‘mylde and constant Martyrs of Christ’ that stayed true to their faith in the face of awesome brutality (p. 118). For Loewenstein this is an under-researched area and one which demonstrates Foxe’s crucial role in ‘fashioning’ Protestant ideals of ‘“mild” martyrdom’ through narratives of ‘resistance’, ‘unity’, and ‘godly restraint’ (p. 104, p. 104, p. 106, p. 106, and p. 120); a design which helped re-define the Church militant and rendered ‘radical Protestantism’ problematic, even subversive, to the reformist cause (p. 106). In a ‘self-conscious work of cultural memory’, Foxe offered an ‘imaginative’ narrative of the depravity of persecutors contrasted with the meekness and mildness of martyrs, who were ‘forced to play parts in a shocking tragedy … subjected to symbolic acts of theatrical degradation and humiliation’ (pp. 123–4). The demise of the ‘hero’ Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) was archetypal (p. 144). The cases of more ‘extreme’ figures like William Flower (d. 1555) and Joan Bocher (d. 1550), the latter unhelpfully despatched during the reforming reign of Edward VI, were painful anomalies for Foxe’s ‘ideal of moderate martyrdom’ (p. 128). The way in which Foxe struggled to mitigate these cases highlighted the uneasy tension between anti-Catholic reform and evangelical heresy. In the heat of the Marprelate controversy (1588–9), Richard Bancroft’s Sermon at Paules Crosse (1589) was a ‘rhetorical tour de force’ which constructed ideas about anti-establishment, separatist heresies of ‘false prophets’ within late Elizabethan England (p. 161 and p. 159). Thomas Nashe’s fictitious The Unfortunate Traveller (1594) satirized radical puritans by raising the spectre of the Münster Rebellion. In the wake of the 1593 executions for seditious separatism, this rhetorically ‘unstable’ work facilitated the ‘demonizing’ of ‘extremism’ whilst offering a ‘divided response’ on the ‘violent efforts to eradicate it’ (p. 172). Similar tensions were presented in the poetic allegories of Book Five of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1596). Anti-Familist writers responded to the mysterious Family of Love by both mocking and demonizing their unconventional ideas, language, and behaviour. Together, these disparate heresy-making writers helped to conflate heretical sectarianism and puritanism in the minds of fearful contemporaries, King James VI and I among them.

During the revolutionary period ‘religious fear-mongering intensified’ (p. 191). Presbyterian heresiographers such as Ephraim Pagitt (1574–1646) and Thomas Edwards (c. 1599–1648) ‘railed against their religious world overrun with heresies … (but) also helped to promote and construct that frightening vision through their books’ (p. 195). Loewenstein makes the case for a ‘literary’ understanding of Edwards’s mighty Gangraena.
(1646) by showing how emotive metaphors of contagion, monstrosity, and madness, amongst others, combined with biblical theology, satire, and the apparently credible precision of taxonomy to construct horrifying, overwhelming narratives of heretical belief and practice. ‘The trope of protean change and malleability’ also conveyed an ‘intense anxiety, lack of control, and fearful astonishment’ (p. 208). Edwards’s ‘demonizing imagination and religious fears’ had a ‘life of their own’ (pp. 212–3), ensuring that the ‘the boundary between “truth” and fabrication’ was far from ‘stable’ (p. 205). Gangraena was not just the scourge of heresy, it sought to ‘de-legitimize toleration’ and ‘reinforce intolerance’ (p. 218). Here, and elsewhere, the ‘godly’ heresy-making writer ‘asserted their will and judgement over others with regard to religious truths’ (p. 224); but not all puritans were convinced, especially anti-authoritarian advocates of free grace and toleration. Posthumous editions of Pagitt’s Heresiography (e.g. 1654 and 1662) were updated to take account of the evil practices of new heretics such as the Quakers. For Loewenstein, this is crucial to explaining the ‘acute crisis that developed over James Nayler’s dramatic and symbolic behaviour in 1656’; for it ‘illustrates vividly how fearful fantasies and the heated religious imagination could interact in the process of heresy making, stimulating the state to respond in savage ways as its most intolerant representatives constructed the crime of blasphemy’ (p. 234).

Faced with ‘the demonizing (of) religious imagination’ a new generation of ‘radical religious writers’, initially from the Independent and Leveller ranks, began to focus their polemical energies on revealing the apparent duplicity of ‘Reformed’ views about toleration and authority (p. 235, p. 236, and p. 240). The results not only challenged the emerging, if short-lived, Presbyterian hegemony but also brought about an innovative critical awareness of the heresy-making process. John Goodwin (c.1594–1665) expressed ‘scepticism over the subjective language of religious labelling exploited and manipulated by the high Presbyterians’ (p. 243). William Walwyn (bap. 1600, d. 1681) was disparaging of ‘artful professional clergy’ and went as far as ironically dramatizing Thomas Edwards’s mock ‘recantation’ (p. 246 and p. 250). Evoking the Marprelate controversy, Richard Overton (fl. 1640–63) paradoxically employed ‘his own theatricalism … to expose the cunning theatricalism of religious tyranny’ and the ‘treachery’ it posed to the ‘common people’ (p. 265). ‘Saturated with metaphors of ideological warfare’, John Milton’s Areopagitica (1644) helped to neutralize the stigma of the word ‘heresy’ by paradoxically suggesting that heresy-making was symptomatic of dogmatic, submissive minds and that one could be ‘a heretick in the truth’ (p. 274 and p. 275); religious ‘truth’ was not lodged in a ‘muddy pool of conformity and tradition’, but was a ‘streaming fountain’ of ‘perpetuall progression’ (p. 277). Milton’s literary imagination had the capacity to conceive of religious truth as ‘both one and disparate, various yet homogeneous’ (p. 279). Yet, in advocating ‘many moderate varieties’, Milton acknowledged some limits and tried to ‘soften the language of religious extremism’ (p. 280). Milton’s Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes (1659) developed these themes, particularly with respect to etymology and sought to assure readers that as a mere ‘choice’ heresy need not lead to discord (p. 284). In short, Milton was unrivalled in his willingness and ability to challenge the ‘received ideas’, ‘polarizing language’ and ‘dark fantasies’ of heresy-makers (p. 293).

Working with the notion of the ‘Apostate’, Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667/1674) did not ‘specifically use the words “heresy” or “heretic”’, but still offered a ‘distinctive engagement with early modern struggles over heresy, schism, and toleration’, causing readers ‘to rethink assumptions about deviant religious behaviour, including the language, concepts and constructions associated with them’ (p. 305, p. 298, and p. 298). The established implications of associating ‘feigned holiness with cunning heretics’ and ‘rebellion and schism’ with dangerous heresy were checked (p. 313 and p. 316). Milton ‘freshly’ re-imagined the distinction between sinful and justified religious separation (p. 321). The ‘orthodox politics of blasphemous behaviour and language’ were reconsidered whilst still giving ‘forceful expression to the sin of blasphemy’ (p. 330): it was ‘the disserter who … defines the apostate angel’s blasphemy as an infectious crime’ (p. 337). Here, there was no straightforward claim for or about toleration, but a ‘defiant alignment with liberty of conscience’ (p. 343).

Treacherous Faith is a useful, but problematic, book. In general terms, there is plenty to get excited about. Approaching a series of key texts from a literary perspective, regardless of whether they have been traditionally viewed as ‘literary’ works or not, allows the reader to dwell upon the formative power of
rhetorical strategies under internal stress. The emotional and mental state of early modern writers gave, witlingly and unwittingly, additional texture to the linguistic contrivances of religious controversy. The results could establish or enforce self-fulfilling, self-perpetuating criteria about the nature, scale, and danger of heresy. Here it might be said that the ‘imagination’ pre-figured ‘reality’ so that ‘reality’ could then affirm and embolden the ‘imagination’. Heresy-making was a fraught business which constantly challenged writer, alleged heretic, and various conflicted audiences to review and recalibrate their ideas about heresy, heretics, and associated contexts. The literary imagination also helped to challenge the claims of heresy-makers. In all, heresy-making and heresy-defying writing was a crucial phenomenon of the early modern literary experience; to a greater or lesser extent it was, arguably, also culture-making, particularly with regards to debates about the boundaries of orthodoxy and the spectrum of heterodoxy. More attention should be given to the idea that heresy-making and heresy-defying together form one of the key interpretative paradigms for scholars of the Reformations. Loewenstein’s investigation not only expands our understanding of the Catholic–anti-Catholic, Puritan–anti-Puritan, toleration–anti-toleration, and moderate–radical dialectics at the heart of the English Reformations, but draws them together in a helpful new synthesis which spans the best part of two centuries. This is not an insignificant achievement.

Delve into the particulars, however, and a number of significant problems can be identified. The introduction is at pains to point out that this book is the work of ‘a literary and cultural historian’ (p. 7); but the sizable bibliography is misdirected. This has implications for both the methodological foundations and the scholarly building of Treacherous Faith. Loewenstein plays fast and loose with theories of ‘perception’, ‘representation’, and ‘construction’. The book is inherently concerned with emotions, but there is little sense that the scholarly field of the history of emotions even exists. The nature of and relationship between ‘imagination’, ‘literary imagination’ and ‘religious imagination’ surely requires some solid exposition; but, apart from a rather brief statement that Treacherous Faith will not follow in the vein of J. C. Davis’s Fear, Myth and History (2), this is not forthcoming. The contrast between Aristotelian and Platonic thought on both the imagination and wider relationship between art and reality is an important, but overlooked, context. Numerous works on the early modern imagination by the likes of Nicholas McDowell and Alison Shell have been ignored. One might also suggest that implicitly supplanting early modern ‘belief’ with ‘imagination’ calls for some reflexive thought, if not a candid defence. Mentioning J. C. Davis raises another problem: there is no engagement with moral panic theory. A lack of candour and precision in these matters is a concern because much of the analysis seems unsure about how to negotiate subjective–objective, fictional–real, true–false dichotomies. For much of the time there is an emphasis on the linguistic and ideological power of imaginative fiction and its unstable, tense relationship with reality; but this arguably speaks more readily to the sociology of moral panic theory than the encompassing cultural idioms of ‘representation’ and ‘construction’. Part of the problem might hinge on the extent to which Loewenstein appears to conflate literary and cultural ‘construction’. Whilst duly referencing Ann Hughes’s Gangreane and the Struggle for the English Revolution (3), Loewenstein struggles to engage with the deeper implications of this work, which proved ground-breaking partly because of its willingness to bridge the mire created by J. C. Davis’s valiant mischief and work with the notion of polemical discourse, rather than getting bogged down in debates about the validity of early modern claims.

The basic outline of the heresy-making thesis is relatively straightforward and convincing. Yet, some scholars, overlooked by Loewenstein, have already acknowledged ways in which religious controversy can ‘make heretics’. (4) So what of the ‘literary imagination’ and the rhetorical skill of the main disputants? Whilst key texts are placed in the context of immediate religio-political events, much less attention is given to contextualizing the literary imagination of the authors and audiences. Furthermore, there is limited engagement with theologico-literary influences with ancient, medieval, or European origins. There is no consideration of the association of heresy with either witchcraft or the Inquisition. More could have been done to define the nature of and relationship between imaginative representations of diabolism and the implementation of ‘demonization’ as a rhetorical strategy; much of the discussion seems to avoid commenting on the problematic tension between belief and imagination, and conveniently overlooks the whole issue of demonology. At times, Loewenstein comes dangerously close to suggesting that most
Reformation angst was mere fantasy. Much attention is given to the power of literary works to dramatize and narrate, as well as paradoxically engender both rhetorical prowess and rhetorical instability; but for the first 250 pages the literary analysis struggles to be as authoritative or as insightful as it could and arguably should be: recourse to ‘theatricality’ is clichéd and, for the most part, vague (and ironically, there is hardly any consideration of relevant themes in early modern plays); one might have expected closer attention to narrative and rhetorical theory, past and present; and, a stronger consideration of the three-way relationship between manuscript, oral, and printed media would not have gone amiss. The crucial question of what was ‘literary’ in early modern England is raised (p. 193), but not really expounded upon. A willingness to offer a rationale for selection of the case studies presented in this book would have been helpful. The absence of sermon literature is puzzling, particularly as it is now recognized as one of the largest and most significant literary genres of the early modern period. Perhaps one could refine Loewenstein’s claims by thinking about either heresy-making within the wider structures of Reformation propaganda, or the ways in which heresy-making and heresy-defying print literature forged relationships between institutional power and both popular and radical religiosities?

When taken individually, most chapters have notable weaknesses. As a case study of More’s anti-heresy writings, with a particular focus on the relationship between literary imagination and rhetorical strategies, chapter one is undermined by a poor engagement with the relevant secondary sources. The crucial work of R. R. McCutcheon is overlooked and that of Craig W. d’Alton underplayed.(5) Furthermore, after discussing the legislative response to the original Lollard crisis, there is no mention of the anti-Lollard persecution of 1510–12, or John Colet’s consideration of heresy in his convocation sermon of 1512: both of which might be viewed as significant contextual factors when considering fears about heresy in Henrician England. Chapter two on Anne Askew also shows a limited engagement with the relevant secondary literature.(6) More worryingly, Loewenstein’s claims about Askew as disputant really fail to engage with Oliver Wort’s very serious point that Askew’s Examinations may well have been ‘an artificial construction based on (John) Bale’s first-hand knowledge of residual hagiographic and martyrological traditions’. (7) One can no longer simply assume, as Loewenstein does, that Askew was the ‘author’ of the rhetorical strategies crafted in the Examinations. The suggestion in chapter five that the prosecution of the Quaker James Nayler highlights the extent to which blasphemy was constructed as a ‘theatrical manifestation of heretical behaviour’ is a distinctly narrow reading of a complex case (p. 233). Here, much greater attention needed to be given to the theology of blasphemy and early Quakerism, as well as the ‘godly’ conviction in the inherent relationship between wicked ideas and wicked behaviour as evidenced in the so-called Blasphemy Act of 1650. (8) John Milton’s interrogation and reformulation of heresy and heresy-making may well have been intellectually innovative and the context of mid-17th-century heresiography is clearly important, but in chapter eight Loewenstein invests much in what the attentive early modern reader was able to discern with scant regard for reception. As Peter Mandler has pointed out in another context, attempting to make claims about cultural history through an examination of the avant-garde is a distinctly questionable strategy.(9)

The problems identified here highlight some of the perils of both cultural history and interdisciplinary scholarship between literary and historical studies. Those of us who see value in both have a serious responsibility to make sure our work is more robust than Treacherous Faith.

Notes

1. David Loewenstein and John Marshall (eds), Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture (Cambridge, 2006).Back to (1)
2. J. C. Davis, Fear, Myth and History: the Ranters and the Historians (Cambridge, 1986).Back to (2)


The author would like to suggest that for a more positive and less narrow review of TREACHEROUS FAITH, the author of the book urges interested readers to consult the review by Christopher Stone in *JOURNAL OF THE NORTHERN RENAISSANCE* (May 2014).

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