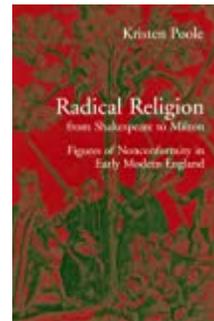


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kristen Poole. *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiv + 272 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64104-3.



Reviewed by Anne Dunan (Department of English, Universite de Montpellier)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2001)

Kristen Poole's book is a contribution to our understanding of Puritan and anti-Puritan literature in the seventeenth century (her study ranges roughly from the late 1580s to the 1660s) that challenges the current critical focus on the strict, sombre and grave figure of the Puritan in early modern literature. For Poole, this is a "literary anachronism" (p. 12) that ignores the dominant representation of the Puritan as a licentious, promiscuous, carnivalesque character. Her study, which is arranged chronologically, re-reads familiar fictional characters, from Shakespeare's Falstaff to Milton's Adam and Eve, and questions the familiar stereotype of the Puritan.

Chapter 1 is a Bakhtinian discussion of Shakespeare's *Henriad* in the light of the Martinist and anti-Martinist pamphlet literature of the late 1580s. Focusing on Falstaff, Poole convincingly argues that Shakespeare's depiction of the well-known Lollard martyr John Oldcastle should be read in parallel with stage representations of the Puritan as a carnivalesque figure in the wake of the Marprelate controversy. Poole then turns to the equally well-known Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, the puritan "bellygod" of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. After examining contemporary accounts of the seeming antithesis between fasting and feasting, she finds in the bellygod a coexistence of contradictory impulses towards food that "incorporates the battle of Carnival and Lent" (p. 53).

This is in turn linked to the paradoxical status of religious "semi-separatism," a compromise between separation and conformity.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with representations of radical sects, mainly in the 1640s, through a study of the Family of Love and the work of the heresiographer Thomas Edwards. Edwards's *Gangraena* (1646) is compared to the work of an entomologist, with close attention to the "swarming" insect metaphor that pervades the text and his rhetorical strategy to contain the chaos deriving from the multiplication of sects during the Civil War.

The last two chapters concentrate on Milton's antiprelatical tracts and on *Paradise Lost*, respectively. The former places the tracts in the context of the search for origins that loom large in writings by advocates and detractors of episcopacy; the latter deals with Milton's treatment of nudity and the question of Adamic language. The author examines the fictional accounts of the Adamites and the connection between literal and discursive stripping at the same time suggesting a possible link between the writings of the Quaker George Fox and that of John Webster, whose own work on edenic language derives from Jacob Boehme's theory of signatures. She then turns to *Paradise Lost*, suggesting that the fictional Adamites and the actual Quakers provide an appropriate background for reading Milton's poem. However, Poole

suggests that *Paradise Lost* never endorses a straightforward assimilation of nudity and linguistic perfection: "Nakedness in Milton's prelapsarian Eden is 'troubling' because it refuses to yield to a postlapsarian binary system of signification in which nakedness and clothing are allied with conditions or qualities of human language" (p. 178). The study concludes with a short epilogue on Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* and the changing fate of the Puritan in Restoration literature, in which the bellygod is now "expulsed by the carnival crowd" (p. 184).

In her introduction, Poole abundantly justifies her use of the word "Puritan," which she chooses to equate with such terms as "separatist" and "sectarian," a choice that is not wholly undisputable but one that she claims reflects contemporary usage (note to Introduction, p. 190) in the pamphlets she studies. However, the term "nonconformist" that she also uses to describe sectarians goes almost without explanation. Surely there is ground for thinking that the non-separatist puritan movement is "nonconformist" from a very early date.

Similarly, Poole's foray into Restoration literature could have been more eloquent by making greater reference to the particular situation arising in the 1660s when legislation blurs the distinction between Presbyterians (many of whom never wished to separate from the national church) and Independents, Baptists or Quakers, a topic only briefly touched in her introduction and epilogue. In this context, a short discussion of the term "nonconformist" and "dissenter" (the latter being used sporadically) would have been welcome, especially in the light of work by scholars like Richard Greaves or Neil Keeble. Similarly, the broad "radical religion" of the title raises many more questions than the author is prepared to discuss, particularly since the idea of what constitutes a "radical" act shifts so much according to his-

torical circumstances. Once again, one would have expected a clarification on that particular point. As it is, Poole's terminology constantly alternates between "radicals," "nonconformists," "puritans," "sectarians," "separatists," and "dissenters," inside the same chronological period, which can be confusing at times.

Despite this qualification, one of the many original and provocative aspects of this study is the extensive use of pamphlet literature which is often largely ignored in modern literary criticism. Poole combines the skills of the literary critic and historian, contextualising the works she studies thanks to a very broad knowledge of the tracts, sermons, and religious writings of the period. She makes clear distinctions between "historical" sectarians and their fictional counterparts before turning to literary texts, thus achieving her aim to provide a "history of representation" (p. 14). Poole is not afraid of tackling some of the best-known characters of seventeenth-century literature, bringing a fresh eye to sources and fictional texts that have been extensively studied elsewhere. Her study perfectly reflects the necessity of bringing together a wide range of texts (her reading of *Paradise Lost* and the seventeenth-century scurrilous tracts on the alleged sexual promiscuity of the Adamites is a case in point), in a successful attempt to draw close thematic and structural parallels between popular literature and some of the greater texts of the century.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Anne Dunan. Review of Poole, Kristen, *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5116>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.