Introduction

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Interpretations of religious meaning have always been central to the criticism of certain sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers who engaged closely with the religious cultures and controversies of their day. One constant in the shifting Tudor-Stuart ecclesiastical environment was the definition of English Protestantism over against the twin demons of popery and nonconformity. What constituted “conformity” in the Church of England — how broadly or narrowly the orthodox middle way was defined — remained in a vexed process of perpetual renegotiation. At various junctures, recusants held out hopes of increased toleration for Catholics, while zealous godly Protestants lobbied for a learned, preaching clergy, for the dismantling of the episcopacy, and for the institution of Genevan-style self-governing congregations.¹ While these two groups waited in the wings, attempting to influence religious policy and placing their hopes on changes in policy towards Catholics and Puritans with every royal succession, divisions developed among them about how to live with the established conformist powers. The starkest examples of this kind of fragmentation over questions of accommodation with the Church of England were the rifts that developed between Jesuits and seminary priests among Catholics on the one hand, and between separatists and moderate Presbyterians on the other.

Through case studies of critical traditions and selected texts, this volume explores early modern English literary engagements with religion.² These essays have been written by specialists on particular authors, who have provided overviews of the history of scholarship and of the dominant interpretive traditions, each presenting a kind of a “state-of-the-question” analysis. They discuss changes in the assessment of authors’ religious temperaments and politics, and suggest what bearing scholarly views and

assumptions about religion in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England have had on the interpretation of authors' major works. Keeping in mind that, as the larger historical paradigms for understanding the English Reformation change, so too should our interpretation of the place of religious authors and texts within it, contributors to this special issue have also considered how and to what extent literary critics have assimilated and engaged with historical research.

In conjunction with a new awareness of the Reformation's dynamic instability, recent critical studies on Edmund Spenser convey a heightened sensitivity to Spenser's own slipperiness. In her analyses of *The Faerie Queene* and *The Shepheardes Calender*, Anne Lake Prescott demonstrates that Spenser's understanding of the dynamics of reform under Elizabeth always involved recognizing the compromises and postponements required.

Spenser's contemporary, William Shakespeare, is the subject of Thomas Luxon's contribution. Building on Debora Shuger's discussions of how religious ideology functions as part of a cultural system within Shakespeare's plays,³ Luxon exposes Shakespeare's experimentations with religious ideologies and with reformed and humanist ideas about marriage and friendship. The new molds in which Shakespeare cast religious issues, Luxon argues, require imaginative rather than argumentative attention.

Historian Peter Lake has shown that tensions within the Elizabethan church resulting from the combination of an exclusive Calvinist doctrine and an inclusive Episcopalian discipline were coming home to roost in the 1590s.⁴ Thomas Nashe, writing as a hired pen against Martin Marprelate, offers one example of the extent to which Elizabethan bishops were willing to go to repudiate and discredit the Presbyterian platform. Focusing on Nashe's *An Almond for a Parrot*, Jennifer L. Andersen argues that Nashe tailored his anti-Puritanism to address the concerns of the Elizabethan bishops. He debunks Martin Marprelate's attempts to co-opt the rhetoric of martyrdom and his claims to higher standards of learning. The backlash against the anti-Martinist campaign, however, suggests the limits to the stigmatization of Puritans.

The lives and texts of the early modern English writers considered here intersect with some of the formative controversies and events of the later Reformation in England: the Marprelate controversy, the Gunpowder Plot, the Synod of Dort, the debate over free grace, the Restoration. Their responses — whether satirical, irenic, devotional, evangelical, skeptical, apologetic, ambivalent or something else again — help to illustrate the way in which religion was not the stereotypical inherited stock of unquestioned customs and beliefs, but rather a creative and dynamic arena of thought with far-reaching implications for social and intellectual change.

The critical traditions in which the writings are analyzed must reflect the complex negotiations that mark the historical contexts in which the texts were generated. Suzanne Trill thus attends to the dynamic between feminist and historical investigations that best illuminates Lanyer's poetry. Jeanne Shami, who discusses John Donne as a major figure at the centre of Jacobean consensus-building, shows the tense relationship between conformity and conscience at work in Donne's life and works; she suggests that recent scholarly debates have expanded the conceived possibilities for early modern English religious identity and allegiance beyond the old crude binaries of Protestant and Catholic, Anglican and Puritan.

This point is echoed by Robert Miola, who observes that "both Catholicism and anti-Catholicism evolved during the long period of Ben Jonson's life, taking many shapes and offering varying capacities for compromise and co-existence." We see in Miola's study of Jonson that the Catholic poet, in spite of a support network of fellow-believers, was at various points accused of popery and treason, summoned before the Privy Council and the consistory court, required to pay recusancy fines, and eventually encouraged to reconvert to Protestantism. Depending upon the latitude offered by shifting definitions of conformity, Jonson was left alone or harassed.

In the course of the seventeenth century, divisions in the Church of England would be exacerbated by domestic political upheaval and by contact with international churches of various confessions through war, diplomacy and colonization. By the mid-seventeenth-century, the hard-won Elizabethan and Jacobean doctrinal consensus and conformity of external worship flew apart, as a variety of arguments for the reconfiguration of the church in relation to the state were canvassed. This climate permitted the expression in print of female prophets and visionaries such as Anna Trapnel. Hilary Hinds shows us a Trapnel grappling with and ably manoeuvring within debates about the pivotal and much-disputed concept of free grace. In order to tread securely on the traditionally male theological turf of educated divines, Trapnel avails herself of a variety of topoi and tropes for scripting the part of the female devotee.

The equally unorthodox Andrew Marvell is the subject of Nigel Smith's essay. Smith explores the broad range of Marvell's works and their engagement with the religious and political climates in which they were produced, including the historical debate on verse's true uses in reformed worship. The works' self-reflexive "double-sided" quality conveys the ambiguities characterizing Marvell's visions of liberty within the context of the political, religious, and literary spheres.

After the Restoration and the attempt to roll back the church to the days of Elizabeth, many hopeful experiments in godly rule were outlawed and

marginalized. In this context, Milton re-tells the Old Testament story of Samson and Dalilah as a myth for the vagaries of a relationship between God and his covenanted people. In a climate that saw the end of experimentation with political liberties, such a narrative provides a way of holding onto the struggle for liberty against tyrants, liberty of conscience, and freedom to divorce even in an environment of growing hostility to such notions. Critics commonly position Milton in lonely eminence and gloss over the tensions that mark his engagement with the heterodox and the heretical. In her contribution, however, Elizabeth Sauer resists the “regenerationist pieties” of Milton Studies by recasting Milton’s last major work, *Samson Agonistes*, as a contest between a masculinist Israelite tradition and a feminized Philistine culture and between “Neo-Christian” and skeptical interpretive practices.

Through the conceptual frameworks offered by religious positions and social institutions, early modern English writers experienced and thought about geopolitical relationships, as well as the proper relationship and division of duties between monarchs and subjects, magistrates and ministers, clergy and laity, husband and wife, and, not least, sinful soul and divine judge. To the extent that the Reformation made possible the reconfiguration and reconceptualization of these relationships, religious notions could potentially change the balance of power at the level of every social and political unit, from the household to the larger world. Religion, while central to the social and conceptual frameworks of early modern English society, is too often regarded as antithetical to, rather than constitutive of, the individualist self that we see expressed in Renaissance literature.⁵ Such a divorce of “literary” texts from religious modes of meaning is artificial and anachronistic for the early modern period, when religion still made fundamental contributions to aesthetic experience, symbolic thinking, and identity formation of nations and individuals.

The spectrum of religious expression that we see in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was made possible, according to Diarmaid MacCulloch, because “[t]he Church of England’s establishment as a Protestant church was extraordinarily confused and full of anomalies and compromises.” Archbishop Cranmer’s Prayer Book, while redirecting remnants of the Catholic liturgy to Protestant ends, remained capable of being adapted in a variety of directions. While the official Articles of Religion enshrined a strict belief in Calvinist predestinarianism, this theology was not matched by a Presbyterian church government. Ambiguities and areas of arrested development remained open to be exploited by clergy and laity.⁶ As Peter Lake and Micheal Questier have argued, the early modern Church of England was not a monolithic, univocal institution. Rather, it was an evolving creation, continually developing out of the possibilities inherent in multiple

texts, practices, and traditions, all of which themselves were the products of compromise and consensus. Since its foundational documents, articles of religion, and public liturgy and canons continued to be glossed by different groups in different senses over the years, “the meaning of such texts is always up for grabs,” and “we can never assume that, certainly over the medium to long term, such texts retained a stable or universal ‘meaning’ for contemporaries. It is the task of historians not to ‘impose’ or ‘discover’ the one correct meaning, but rather to reconstruct the variety of contemporary readings or glosses of such texts, in and through which contemporaries interpreted and shaped their experience of reality.”⁷ If recapturing the multiple glosses of these foundational documents is the task of historians, then we are doing something akin to that here. For in one way or another, the literature being considered here constitutes contemporary glosses on the shape of the English Church. These texts reflect on central tenets and features of English Protestantism and Catholicism, such as notions of sin and salvation, episcopal government, preaching, the sacraments, marriage, and calendrical and liturgical reform.

To the kinds of sources for the study of orthodoxy and conformity enumerated by Lake and Questier (foundation documents, articles of religion, public liturgy, and canons), we might add the “literary” texts considered in this volume. These texts offer examples of how contemporaries explored and exploited ambiguities in English Protestantism to push for further reforms, accentuate continuities with the Catholic past, or defend the idiosyncrasies of the English institution. The instability of the institution and the polemical volatility of its highly charged issues make the ecclesiastical context just as semiotically multivalent as the texts reflecting upon this state of affairs. Anne Lake Prescott’s observation about the challenge for readers of Spenser might well apply to all of the interpretive projects undertaken in the essays in this volume: “To see texts and contexts in their full complexity is to turn the scholar-critic into not a deconstructionist caught in a swarm of flittering signifiers but a Laocöon at a loss to know which serpent to seize next and where.” While the Laocöon analogy is not particularly auspicious, the conceit is felicitous in suggesting that part of such an analytical oscillation between unstable texts and unstable contexts involves limits to what one might plausibly say – rather than complete indeterminacy.

Notes

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1. See David Dean, *Law-making and Society in Late Elizabethan England: The Parliament of England, 1584–1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); ch. 4, “Religion and the Church,” discusses legislative initiatives for religious reform.
2. On the resurgence within Renaissance studies of an interest in religion, see Richard Harp, “An Interview with Donna Hamilton and Anne Lake Prescott,” *The Ben Jonson Journal* 8 (2001): 349–68, esp. p. 351.
3. Debora Shuger, “Subversive Fathers and Suffering Subjects: Shakespeare and Christianity,” in *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 46.
4. Peter Lake, “The ‘Anglican moment’? Richard Hooker and the ideological watershed of the 1590s” (unpublished typescript).
5. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, defines the “self-fashioning” of his study as an experience that takes place apart from religious identity formation (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], pp. 2–3).
6. Diarmaid MacCulloch, “The Myth of the English Reformation,” *Journal of British Studies* 30 (1991): 5. For foundational texts, see *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).
7. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, Introduction, *Conformity and Orthodoxy in The English Church, c.1560–1660* (Woodbridge, CT: Boydell Press, 2000), pp. ix, x.