

2002

***Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England* by Kristen Poole (Review)**

Christopher Oldstone-Moore

Wright State University - Main Campus, christopher.oldstone-moore@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Oldstone-Moore, C. (2002). *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England* by Kristen Poole (Review). *Church History*, 71 (2), 415-416.
<https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

in section 6, titled "Brokers of the World," address various topics related to Jews and New Christians in international trade, most notably in the Atlantic slave trade. The collection concludes with a single essay by Jonathan Sarna on the subject of Jews in colonial British America.

Bryan F. Le Beau
Creighton University

Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England. By **Kristen Poole**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiii + 272 pp. \$59.95 cloth.

In the words of the author, this book seeks to achieve two ends. The first is to correct lingering misconceptions about literary references to puritanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The second is to demonstrate that fictional representations of religious dissent sought to represent the "social and discursive repercussions of radical religious nonconformity" (14). In spite of the title, therefore, this book is not about nonconformity or nonconformists. It is, in Poole's words, "a history of representation rather than social history" (14). More specifically, it is a work of literary criticism analyzing the use of themes and motifs borrowed from anti-dissenting pamphlets in more enduring literary works such as Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, parts I and II, Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, Middleton's *Family of Love*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

In her dual task Poole is largely successful. With respect to her first goal, Poole draws from a close reading of little-known anti-dissenting pamphlet literature to demonstrate convincingly that in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, puritan dissent was not viewed as stiff moral righteousness subject to the folly of hypocrisy. Instead, one finds depictions of puritans and sectarians as gluttonous, lecherous, riotous, monstrous, and otherwise morally and rhetorically depraved. These themes of depravity and confusion took on a literary life of their own utterly irrespective of the social or theological realities of dissent. Indeed, Poole reveals the extensive pamphlet literature devoted to groups that had either disappeared (the Family of Love), or had never existed at all (the Adamites). In the first chapter, Poole offers a fascinating analysis of Shakespeare's Falstaff as a parody of puritan folly which had its thematic and rhetorical origins both in popular histories of the Lollard Sir John Oldcastle and in the polemics of the anti-Marpelate tracts of the 1580s and 1590s. In this and other cases, Poole demonstrates that traditions of discourse determined the representation of dissent. Middleton's play, *The Family of Love*, for example, draws its inspiration from a tradition of polemics that focused on this sect's dissembling speech.

Poole also achieves her second purpose in demonstrating that literary attacks on dissent equated corruption of speech with the corruption of morals and social order. Shakespeare's Falstaff, for example, embodies in his convoluted theological discourses both a moral and a verbal lassitude commonly portrayed in anti-puritan tracts. In Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair*, the ridiculous separatist preacher Zeal-of-the-Land Busy's absurd exegetical and verbal excesses (and absurd name) are tied to his grotesque appetite, also a theme common to many anti-dissenting tracts (and appearing in Shakespeare's characterization of Falstaff). In the case of Middleton's play, *Family of Love*, the Familist Mistress Purge's verbal inversions and prevarications are

associated with, or perhaps even cause, sexual license. Similarly, the depravity of Adamite nudity was intimately linked with the equally depraved presumption of speaking a pure, Edenic language. In Poole's analysis, Milton is a counter-example. In his attacks on episcopal authority, Milton often reversed tropes that had been used to undermine nonconformity.

Though linked by this general anti-dissenting theme of religious and discursive error, each of the six chapters is a discrete study. The reader cannot avoid a certain longing for Poole to integrate the themes and content of these chapters more completely. Even the analysis of the term "puritan," so prominent in the early chapters, is not carried through the book. In the final two chapters, when the only puritan author, Milton, makes his appearance, the term "puritan" has disappeared from the lexicon. Milton is the outsider in the critical scheme of the book as a whole. In this study, he is not a puritan, nor even a religious writer, but rather a literary-critical hero who alone among all authors achieves a true freedom of conscience by transcending discourse itself to become a critic of discourse.

To readers interested in history, this book poses some difficulties. In the course of the book, the nonconformists themselves are usually ignored because representation, not the represented, is the subject of investigation. Poole generally does not claim to say what nonconformists actually believed or said, only what was said about them. This is fair enough. But it is surprising when Poole occasionally permits ambiguity to creep in by suggesting at several points that representation may be actuality, or vice versa. In the case of the Family of Love, for example, Poole discusses at length the Family's "irreverence toward language" in subverting the usual meaning of words. This is the antagonistic representation of the Family. Yet without asserting it directly, Poole also suggests—by using quotes from the founder of the Family of Love as well as modern literary scholars—that this actually was what the Family did. The title of the book itself illustrates the potential for confusion of representation and represented. The title strongly implies that it concerns radical religion, whereas it refers to *representations* of radical religion, or even representations of representations. The term "figures" likewise suggests people, when in fact images or forms of speech are the intended meanings. The relation of signifier to the signified is indeed problematic, though perhaps more than need be.

Christopher Oldstone-Moore
Wright State University

Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England. Edited with an introduction by Daniel Vitkus. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 358 pp. \$49.50 cloth; \$18.50 paper.

Vitkus provides the first edition of three English plays—*Selimus, Emperor of the Turks* (ca. 1588), probably by Robert Greene; *A Christian Turned Turk* (ca. 1609) by Robert Daborne; and *The Renegado* (1624) by Philip Massinger—with modern spellings. Vitkus's introduction contextualizes the three plays within the cross-cultural interchanges of the Mediterranean region in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, focusing especially on piracy, the topic of two of them, and giving historical background to each of the plays. Greene liberally interprets historical events involving Selim the Inexorable, an ambitious and atheistic son who murders father and brothers in a quest for