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Forms of Dissent

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J E N N I F E R R I C H A R D S

Forms of Dissent

Literature, Satire, and the Early Stuart State by Andrew McRae. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 250. \$65.00 cloth.

The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630–1660 by Nicholas McDowell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Pp. xi + 219. \$72.00 cloth.

Since the heyday of revisionism, historians and literary critics alike have sought to identify those neglected traditions of radical political thought that preceded the revolutionary events of the 1640s. Literary analysis has proved important here, not least because it reveals the different discursive forms that political consciousness might take. This in turn has helped to extend understanding of the “public sphere” that developed outside parliament. Both of the books under consideration contribute to this endeavor by broadening our sense of political discourse, its key concerns and its influences. Andrew McRae explores how satire in the early seventeenth century helped to create positions of political “opposition”; Nicholas McDowell considers how the humanist curriculum of the 1630s shaped radical belief in the next decade, redefining our understanding of elite and popular religious cultures. Both books offer lively, subtle readings of complex texts; they reach well beyond the traditional literary canon to remind us of the ways in which the production and circulation of texts in manuscript and print were so integral in this period to the formation of political identities.

Andrew McRae’s *Literature, Satire, and the Early Stuart State* sets out to understand how “an orthodox Tudor commitment to consensus and harmony gave way by the 1640s to some of the most devastating political ruptures of English history” (1). Its interest is the libels and verse satires that circulated in the 1620s and 1630s, during a period when there was widespread disaffection with humanist models of political counsel. McRae begins by clarifying the differences between libel and satire. Libel stems from popular tradition, whereas the models for early modern satire are classical; libel attacks individuals rather than moral types; libel circulates in manuscript rather than print. Yet, McRae also complicates this dichotomy. Of the two modes, for example, it is libel that

attracted a mostly elite readership. The main concern of this book, however, is to explore how these two modes fashioned new political identities and alliances and, in the process, how they shaped new discourses of discord and dissent. McRae aims to uncover the source of the polemical writing released by the breakdown of censorship in the 1640s.

It is not hard to see how libels and satires might foster conflict, for they offer mostly vitriolic attacks on individuals or vices. Nonetheless, the insight of this thorough, carefully written and original book is that Stuart satires are not simply polarizing; rather, their significance rests on a “commitment to stretching the bounds of commentary and reflection” (49). McRae adapts Habermas’s model of the public sphere to the early seventeenth century; this helps to explain and to accommodate the political aspirations of a body of writing that is not always lucid or reasonable. Satires helped to sustain a new spirit and style of contestation, he argues, increasing awareness of individual freedom. Adapting Patrick Collinson’s memorable depiction of the Elizabethans as citizens concealed within subjects, McRae explores how satire helped early modern subjects to become more articulate citizens. One way he establishes the emergence of this is by contrasting George Wither’s *A Satyre: Dedicated to His Most Excellent Majestie*, written from prison in 1614, with the more forthright satires of the 1620s. Wither’s early poem understands satire as a vehicle for loyal counsel that avoids the constraints of courtly discourse. By the 1620s, however, *Wither’s Motto*, like other satires of this decade, gives expression to the limits of the people’s patience with both king and courtiers.

This book works hard to show us how personal invective can be meaningful, rather than opportunistic, and that it can contribute to a discourse of liberty. For example, attacks on individuals helped to shape the development of a powerful critique of government. The Duke of Buckingham is not just a corrupt counselor who stands between the people and their king; he also stands between the people and their ancient liberties. Attacks on him contribute to a burgeoning ideal of parliament as outside courtly and monarchical influence. This may not be an explicit objective. Satirists do not represent a coherent position, and their writings are not always “radical” per se. But they make radicalism—understood to include the extension of political involvement—“thinkable.” Furthermore, satires helped to politicize religious identities. In the 1630s the writings of the Royalist Richard Corbett, for example, made “puritan,” a once orthodox label, a term of abuse; this, in turn, helped to construct and consolidate opposition. The libelers John Bastwick, Henry Burton, and William Prynne show an awareness of this; in their writings they question the meaning of this label but also embrace it for themselves. Their trial in the Star Chamber in 1637 clarified the link between religious and political confrontations.

Literature, Satire, and the Early Stuart State is part of a larger project. It has grown out of an exhaustive survey of little-known manuscript libels; these are

now accessible in an electronic edition (coedited with Alastair Bellany). Some of these receive their first publication and sustained discussion in this study. Its great achievement is to recover the complexity of a literary mode that could easily be dismissed as vindictive, petty, and obscure. McRae challenges our way of thinking about political language, questioning, for example, the ways in which we apply the labels “conservative” or “radical.” He wants to avoid endorsing a binary model for a mode that is not owned by a particular “party” but which rather helps to construct oppositional identities over the course of two decades. Nonetheless, McRae produces a view of early modern political history whose own polarizations provoke further question: Tudor versus Jacobean; authorized versus unauthorized writing; consensus versus dissent. It is one merit of this study that it inspires reflection upon these foundational categories. I suspect that for readers who (like me) are interested in the varied political discourses produced by the Reformation, McRae’s contrast between Stuart and Tudor culture requires modification. Similarly, at the heart of this project is a conception of early modern history as progressive: the steady emergence of an ethic of “citizenship” in the 1620s and 1630s. But it is important to remember that Collinson’s understanding of the Elizabethans as citizens *within* subjects is as subtle and many-layered as his conception of the Tudor “commonwealth” as a series of interconnecting communities that encouraged vertical as well as horizontal relations. Is radical political speech always to be conceived as forceful and polemical? At what point does “oppositional” writing become “sectarian”? Moreover, is “consensus” really the opposite of “dissent”? And is the former the right term to apply (however loosely) to a “Royalist” orthodoxy? More investigation of the cultures of consensus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their strategies of opposition might undermine the straightforwardness of these distinctions. Finally, this book left me wondering how the satiric mode might coexist alongside more civil forms of writing in the work of someone like John Milton, the author noted in the conclusion for urging satirists in the 1640s “to deploy a full range of invective” (208). Where would this leave the opposition between radical and conservative modes? This is a well-crafted, stimulating book of wide interest to all students of early modern culture.

Nicholas McDowell’s *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630–1660* shares and extends some of McRae’s preoccupations. This book is also concerned with continuity as well as change. It is interested in how the legacy of Tudor humanism shaped the intellectual and political print culture of the seventeenth century, including the adaptation of satirical techniques. In so doing, McDowell greatly extends our understanding of the intellectual roots of the Levelers, the Quakers, and the Ranters. He challenges Christopher Hill’s influential argument, in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), that the radical beliefs of this period belong to the common people

rather than to those with a formal education. He argues that this ignores the complex interaction between orthodox intellectual culture and heterodox expression. Integral to this argument is the fact that many of the key radicals were university educated. Richard Overton was a sizar at Cambridge, while William Dell, another Cambridge graduate, may well have held a fellowship at the university before becoming an Independent minister; he later served as Master of Gonville and Caius College. The recently discovered diary of Thomas Dugard, meanwhile, provides McDowell with a crucial insight into the humanist education of the “Ranter” Abiezer Coppe, and his excellent knowledge of Greek and Latin. McDowell’s book begins in the 1630s not the 1640s because, as he argues, most of the radicals were at university during this decade. It is in this decade that their beliefs were formed.

McDowell explores how these writers used their humanist education to undermine the division between the university-educated clergy and the laypeople; they challenged the idea that the true interpretation of the Bible belongs to those who had received a formal education in logic, rhetoric, and the ancient languages. One of the real strengths of this book is the careful and often surprising close textual readings McDowell provides, which show how formal education is used and satirized in a variety of ways. Of particular interest is his exploration of William Walwyn’s debts to French skepticism, and of Richard Overton’s references to a university drama first performed in Cambridge in 1581, *Pedantius*, in his pre-Leveler treatise, *Mans Mortalitie* (1643/44). This allusion, McDowell explains, supports his universalism—his belief that all can be saved. Overton understands the humanist curriculum as socially divisive; it sets up a false opposition between a literate (or Latinate) clergy and the illiterate laypeople. The power of the Puritan clergy is maintained by this learning as well as by their terrifying hellfire sermons. *Mans Mortalitie* counters Calvinist belief in the depravity of the flesh and the scholarly argument that underpin this. Overton’s allusion to *Pedantius* supports this intention by sending up rarefied academic debate about the location of Christ and the nature of the soul; it makes such debate seem obsessive and illogical.

I particularly enjoyed McDowell’s exploration of Abiezer Coppe’s *Some Sweet Sips, of Some Spiritual Wine* (1649), a treatise that defends the sufficiency of the innate knowledge of the spirit. This treatise is a parody of the authorized grammar of the Elizabethan William Lily. Coppe imitates its typographical design and remodels its declension of verbs as “stages of sanctification,” offering a different path to perfection (103). Spiritual authority is located in the inspired individual rather than with the well educated. Similarly ingenious is his study of Samuel Fisher, who displayed his learning so as to establish his status as an educated man, aiming to defeat those who dismissed the Quakers as uneducated, irrational, and in error. In particular, he used the linguistic resources that his humanist education had given him to counter Puri-

tan confidence in the Bible as the Word of God. Through reasoned argument, moreover, he defended the rationality of the internal workings of the Spirit.

This book opens up new ways of thinking about radical belief in the seventeenth century because it is sensitive to the ongoing engagement with the intellectual revolution of the Reformation. McDowell's incisive and well-informed reading of unusual writings helps us to understand how humanism was rejected and adapted in the 1640s. His writers seek to undermine a curriculum that produced "arrogance, intolerance, and corrupt elitism" (62). At the same time, however, they adapted its satirical strategies, imitating in particular the pose of madness adopted in Erasmus's antischolastic *Encomium Morae*. McDowell considers, for example, the appropriation of the figure of Folly by the Fifth Monarchist John Rogers. Radical writers like Rogers discover in *Encomium Morae* both a "celebration" of "supra-rational insight" and "a polemical language of inversion" (135). Likewise, Fisher is influenced by the style of the late Elizabethan Marprelate pamphlets; these in turn are indebted to popular village libel and *Encomium Morae*.

McDowell might have given a fuller sense of the humanist legacy, if only to explain whether his radical writers are responding to the degeneration of a varied intellectual tradition or to the ongoing influence of an oppressive pedagogy. Is Erasmian humanism different from or the same as the humanistic learning embodied in Lily's authorized grammar? Richard Halpern, whom McDowell cites, has a relentlessly negative view of humanist pedagogy even when it takes on the "gentler" form of rhetorical persuasion. So where does this leave McDowell's depiction of Overton as the "true heir of the humanist ideal"? Must we read ironically his claim that Overton is committed to "the pedagogical efficacy of persuasion and argument and on the democratizing role of education in enabling human beings to understand themselves and their God-given freedoms" (72)? Even so, this is an exemplary book in its attempt to look backward as well as forward. Like McRae, McDowell explores his subject in a probing and thought-provoking way and offers astute rhetorical analysis. Both of these impressive studies should inspire further and equally fruitful research.

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