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0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in
Early Modern England

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

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In these preposterous times many vices are predominant, but amongst all the whole brood of vices, there is none so great, there is none grown to that height, ther's none so leprous as this of Puritanisme, the errorrs of which Sect . . . I will plainly Anatomize and lay open to the view of all men.

David Owen, *The Puritanes Impvritie: or the Anatomie of a Puritane or Separatist* (1641), 1

In 1646 John Benbrigge delivered a sermon entitled *Gods Fury, Englands Fire. Or A Plaine Discovery of those Spirituall Incendiaries, which have set Church and State on Fire*. With rhetorical zest, Benbrigge vents his anguish over what he perceives as the dissolution of society, and hurls accusations at the religious sectarians whom he considers to be the source of this disruption: “Such was their hypocrisie in all they did . . . [that] their *Reformation* was but a greater *Deformation*, and that opened yet wider the Floud-gates of their *Desolation*” (sig. A2^v). Benbrigge was far from alone in his assertion that religious radicalism had perverted the English Reformation – a movement which in the previous century had fostered a sense of national unity¹ – into a source of ecclesiastical and civil destruction. In the same year as Benbrigge’s sermon, the presbyterian Thomas Edwards chides Parliament for their failure to quell the disruptive force of schism:

You have, most Noble Senatours, done worthily against Papists, Prelates and scandalous Ministers, in casting down Images, Altars, Crucifixes, throwing out Ceremonies, & c. but what have You done against other kindes of growing evils, Heresie, Schisme, Disorder, against Seekers, Anabaptists, Antinomians, Brownists, Libertines and other Sects? . . . You have made a Reformation, and blessed be God who put it into your hearts to do such things, but with the Reformation have we not a Deformation, and worse things come in upon us then ever we had before? were any of those monsters heard of heretofore, which are now common among us?²

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

On the very brink of victory, a century-long process of ecclesiastical struggle was seemingly being undermined by a rabble of misguided zealots. Where Edwards longs to see a gloriously unified national church, he finds division and monstrosity.³

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century orthodoxies stressed unity and universality: one nation was dependent upon one church. The body politic and the body of Christ were to be coterminous, integral, entire. One reformist tract, called *The Fortresse of fathers, earnestlie defending the puritie of religion* (1566), emphatically proclaims the centrality of the church: “There is *one* word, *one* Scripture, *one* Baptisme, and *one* death of Christ, *one* Father, *one* Religion, & *one* Charitie, *one* Sacrament of tha[n]kes giuing, *one* laing onne of handes, and *one* discipline, & *one* consent of the Ministers . . . To conclude, all thinges that are ordained, to the buylding or profit of the Chirch, we must haue all those as *one* thinge” (sig. A4^{r-v}; my emphasis). Throughout the subsequent century, this call to unity was taken up by writers of strikingly diverse ecclesiastical perspectives; while those arguing for episcopacy and those advocating presbyterianism, for example, may have differed in their conception of church government, there was no question but that there could be only one church.⁴ Sermons and pamphlets repeat, mantra-like, variations on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “There is one body, and one Spirit, . . . One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God, and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (4: 4–6).⁵

But lurking behind these repeated and insistent articulations of religious hegemony is the specter of religious difference. “*A perfect union in the same minde and judgement?*” asks an incredulous John Brinsley in his tract on religious schism. “Alas! nothing lesse. What multiplicity of divisions are here to be found? *Tongues* divided: *Hearts* divided: *Heads* divided: *Hands* divided: *States* divided: *Church* divided: *Cities* divided: *Towns* divided: *Families* divided: the neerest *Relations* divided.”⁶ Religious sectarianism shattered the ideal of Protestant unity. At the end of the sixteenth century, as ecclesiastical reform became the subject of national debate – and as Scripture became increasingly accessible to an increasingly literate public – new ideas about spiritual community challenged the primacy of the established church. Separatists such as the Brownists formed their own congregations, arguing the need for segregation of the godly and the ungodly; the mystical Family of Love practiced outward conformity while secretly belonging to their own alternative spiritual

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: deforming Reformation*

3

community; semi-separatist Baptists claimed a dual loyalty to their parochial church and to their own private, voluntary congregations. Conceptions of religious community became numerous and complex, contradictory and fluid.

This multiplication and confusion of religious identities destabilized systems of order and confounded traditional social and ecclesiastical categories. In early modern literature, this confusion was frequently given the label “puritan.” As contemporaries recognized, the term “puritan” was used as “an Epithite of reproach” and a “scornefull Nick-name.”⁷ While modern historians have tended to apply “puritan” to those advocating reform from within the boundaries of the established church, in the first half of the seventeenth century the term most often designated those who sought to separate themselves (in varying degrees) from the dominant ecclesiastical community. Contemporaries most often employed the term as a derisive synonym for “schismatic.” Oliver Ormerod, in his pamphlet *The Picture of a Puritane* (1605), defines “Puritanes” as “a Schismaticall and vndiscreete companie,” “peeuish and peruerse Schismatickes,” and “factious leaders.”⁸ This common stereotype is succinctly expressed in the title of Giles Widdowes’s *The schysmatical puritan* (Oxford, 1630), and even in the title of John Gere’s sympathetic *The Character of an old English Puritane, or Non-Conformist* (1646).

As early as the 1590s, when the term “puritan” was gaining common currency, authors began to question its exact definition, and debates over the word’s significance continued throughout the seventeenth century. One author writes in 1642, “if any man shall propound that old Quære, *What is a Puritan?* We may resolve the Question, and describe him . . . after this manner: A Puritan, is one of the pestilent party, the very plague of the Church and Commonwealth, . . . one that breathes nothing but sedition and calumnies.”⁹ Other definitions appear more specific; Widdowes contends that “A Puritan is a Protestant Non-Conformist.”¹⁰ With nonconformity itself covering such a range of beliefs and practices, however, even this seemingly pointed definition is far from clear. “Puritan” described all those who were divided from the central church body. The expansion of the term finds a parallel in that of its correlate “round-head”; one seventeenth-century author writes, “There hath beene a great noyse and rumour about the appellation and name of Round-heads, such that this riddle was never dissolved, nor none by him ever named, who or what particular sect was the intended Round-head, therefore

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

it must, shall, and can be not otherwise intended and meant, but that [it applies to] all sects, as Papists, Brownists, Anabaptists, Separatists, Cavalliers, and whatsoever else are not with, or [are] any way against the true protestant Religion maintained by the King, Parliament and State of this Kingdome.”¹¹ “Puritan” was equally capacious, unsettled, and indicative of subversive impulses.

In recent years, “puritan” – “the P word,” as Patrick Collinson calls it¹² – has once again sparked heated discussion among historians; scholars have proffered almost antithetical definitions for the term and lamented its classificatory impotence. The word is so fraught that an introductory definition of “puritan” has become a standard generic feature of early modern historiography.¹³ The difficulties with the term arise from the conflicting purposes of modern historians and early modern authors. The aim of the historian, to speak broadly, is to give shape and narrative to a synchronic and diachronic field of events. Historians thus require a terminology for expressing the period’s diverse devotional practices, reformist impulses, ecclesiastical agendas, and spiritual desires; “puritan” has been stretched and contracted to serve as a useful label for categorizing various individuals and ideologies. By contrast, the aim of many early modern authors was to express a profound sense of shapelessness, to convey the chaos of transforming and disintegrating communal categories, to paint a muddled world picture. The historian’s need for “puritan” as a useful category jars, therefore, with the seventeenth-century author’s need to represent taxonomic crisis. Widdowes observes, “Concerning the name (*Puritan*), it is ambiguous.”¹⁴ To the historian, such ambiguity seems to demand clarification; to the early modern author, however, this very ambiguity becomes the word’s value, and its significance.¹⁵

“Puritan,” as it was used in pamphlets, poems, and plays, did not label a particular type of person; rather, in its early modern literary usage the term most often signified social elements that *resisted* categorization. In a culture loudly proclaiming the need for religious uniformity, “puritans” were the mutable, the indeterminable, the unlocatable; they seemingly incorporated pluralities, oppositions, and binaries. They were at once Protestant, Papist, and Jew; repressive killjoys and wanton libertines; offstage and dangerously, subterraneously domestic; the sacred and the obscene. Ormerod begins his *Pictvre of a Puritane*, paradoxically, by declaring the very impossibility of drawing such a picture:

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: deforming Reformation*

5

the painting of a *Puritane* is so hard and difficult, as that the ioynt skill of *Apelles*, *Pyrgoteles*, *Praxiteles*, and of al the cunning Painters in Saint *Chrysostoms* time, will scarce reach this object.

For as *Proteus* changed himselfe into diuers shapes, & appeared sometimes like a flame of fire, sometimes like a Bull, and sometimes like a terrible Serpent: so the Puritane changeth himselfe likewise into diuers shapes, & appeareth sometimes like a Protestant, sometimes like a Papist, & sometimes like an Anabaptist. (sig. A2^v)

The word “puritan” invokes compromised and sliding categories, is metamorphic and inherently contradictory. From the late sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth century, English literature exhibits an uneasy fascination with certain cultural figures that indicate the disorder of things: cross-dressed women, masterless men, “noble” savages, and hermaphrodites, among others. The puritan is one of these figures. As a representational category, the puritan registers the anxieties surrounding socio-ecclesiastical structures in flux.

Throughout early modern discourse, from *Coriolanus* to *Leviathan*, ideals of civil order were expressed through the common and even hackneyed trope of the body, with the monarch as the acknowledged head and subjects serving as various limbs and organs. So too ideas of ecclesiastical order were given physical form, as the church was depicted through explicitly corporeal descriptions. In one such example, church “members have [Christ] for their Head, from whom by their joynts and synewes, they take their growing . . . for these members are so thorowly joyned as they are called *Flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone*, Ephes. 5.30.”¹⁶ To survive, conservative authors argued, this body must function organically. The author of *An Alarum: . . . Discovering the Danger of Sectaries suffered: and the necessity of Order, and Vniformity to bee Established* (1646) writes:

consider in nature; is there any disorder or disunion in the Members of one body? They are many members, but all make one perfect body . . . much more should the Members of the spirituall body be one, that there should bee no schisme in the Church; Christ is the head of the Church, every Christian is a Member, the Church the body, the head hath not many bodyes, but the body hath many Members and by many Members, the body is made perfect. (6)

Although composed of many individuals, the larger ecclesiastical corpus ideally presented a model of integration, as the many bodies merge into one.

This vision of corporate perfection was corrupted by sectarians, who, in the eyes of orthodox authors, transform the body of Christ

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

into a grotesque figure. “And those make Christ yet more monstrous, that setting up so many Independent Churches . . . which they call each, severally the mysticall Body of Christ, [they] do make Christ a head that hath so many bodies,” declares one author.¹⁷ These numerous separate congregations do not join together to form a larger, coherent ecclesiastical body, but, like an inverse hydra, share Christ as their head. Another author reverses this image, warning that radical claims of spiritual individualism, and the dissolution of proper hierarchical order, lead to a body of Christ whose trunk is covered with organs and extremities:

as in the body the most usefull members thereof, the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the hands, the feet would not onely be uselesse, but make a confused deformity, if they were every one annexed immediately to the grosse of the body, and not joyned by the mediation of some noble limb: the eyes, the ears, and tongue, by the head; the hands, by the arms, and the feet, by the legs: so would it be in the Church Catholique, if every particular Member should hold it self immediately to depend on it, and not on the noble and mediating limb of his particular Church.¹⁸

Proper ecclesiastical organization, like the skeletal framework of the human form, maintains the structure of the church body; once removed, this body collapses upon itself in “confused deformity.”

In early modern literature, these concerns about the corruption of the larger body of Christ were frequently channeled into representations of individual sectarians: the puritan body itself became a site of deformation. George Spinola observes, “I have not found such strange, exotick, forrain, ridiculous deformities, and non-conformities of parts in the Faces and Limbs of any kinde of Men, as in those which at this day are familiarly called the Sectaries and Separatists.”¹⁹ Spinola envisions a body whose confused and contradictory origins result in an indeterminate form: “From his dislike of Episcopacy results his love of Presbitery, and from those two together, such a miscellaneous Impression is made in the blood, that any thing begot of that is very likely to look monstrous scurvily . . . Certainly, it must needs prove a thing of doubtfull Interpretation, of a Priest-and-Minister Face, of a Secular and Ecclesiastick Head and Shoulders” (sig. A3^r). Elsewhere, the puritan body is presented not so much as a hybrid, a melding of antitheses, as a composite of sectarian divisions. Thomas Edwards blazons the body of an Independent, demonstrating how it is “made up and compounded” of diverse sectarians, as a variety of errors “[meet] in the same persons,

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: deforming Reformation*

7

strange monsters, having their heads of Enthusiasme, their bodies of Antinomianisme, their thighs of Familisme, their legges and feet of Anabaptisme, their hands of Arminianisme, and Libertinisme as the great vein going thorow the whole.”²⁰

This emphasis on physical monstrosity led to a vogue for literary anatomies of the puritan body.²¹ The pamphlet from which I have taken my epigraph, *The Puritanes Impvritie: or the Anatomie of a Puritane or Separatist*, indicates the tenor of these tracts; when puritans were not being portrayed as physically monstrous, they often appear with bodily margins that are impure, compromised, and porous. In *The Anatomy of the Separatists, alias, Brownists, the factious Brethren in these Times: wherein this seditious Sect is fairely dissected, and perspicuously discovered to the view of the World* (1642), John Taylor initially caricatures the Brownists thus:

ye may know them by their frequent and far fetcht sighes, the continuall elevation of their eyes, their meager physiognomies, solitary countenances, sharp noses, by the cut of their hayre, made ever with the top of their prick-ears . . . yee may further discern them by their broad hats and narrow rufs, which they usually weare, the putting of their gloves under their girdles, and the folding of their hands one within another. Indeed they are painted Sepulchres, whited walls, whose Religion consists in frequent fasting, and longer prayers. (2–3)

Such is the image of the puritan which has descended into our day. Eyes upturned, hands piously folded, denying bodily appetites in favor of extended prayer: these are the makings of a Malvolio, a Jonathan Edwards, an Arthur Dimmesdale. But Taylor continues:

They are much addicted to prayer and fasting; for they frame a long Babel-like prayer, made up with hums and hawes; and though they affect fasting well, yet they love their flesh better. They much delight in private conventicles, and secret and obscure places, in which voluptuous wantonnesse has her meeting, where the Spirit enlightens the understanding to see a sister in the darke: though they are superciliously rigid and censorious, yet they seem very charitable, for rather then their sisters shall want food, they will fill their bellies, and rather then they shall be naked, they will cover their bodies. Brothers they are, but not of the blade; for they cannot endure our Cavaleers; yet they are lovers of the sisters of the scaberd. (2–3)

The puritans’ purity is thus revealed as a sanctimonious façade, as the fast is replaced by the flesh, conventicles become wanton, and acts of charity such as feeding and clothing the poor become transformed into bawdy puns on sexual intercourse. The rigid exterior belies a libidinous interior, and charity becomes code for fornication.

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Within the context of early modern literature, the figure of the puritan is thus frequently represented through the lens of the grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin's classic description of the grotesque body – "It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body which are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world . . . the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose"²² – typifies the puritan body as it is portrayed in drama and pamphlet literature of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jonson's *Zeal-of-the-Land Busy* is continuously eating; the puritan women in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* gorge themselves on sweetmeats and become drunk; a "zealous brother" in the pamphlet *The Anatomy of Et cætera* (1641) can barely speak through his drunkenness: "Nay, *said Roger*, hic-up, if you go to that, hic-up, you are as arrant a knave, hic-up, as my self" (5). Mistress Purge from *The Family of Love* is unabashedly sexually promiscuous, and has a purgative effect on the bowels of those around her; Falstaff and Hudibras have excessive, protruding bellies; and the sharp nose is a regular feature of puritan physiognomy.

If the puritan body is portrayed as grotesque, puritan gatherings are often cast in terms of the carnivalesque. Such representations emerge from the self-enclosed, often clandestine nature of sectarianism. For mid-sixteenth-century reform-minded Protestants such as John Foxe, the one, true church consisted of the small cells of believers who were forced underground by a corrupt ecclesiastical structure. By the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, mainstream Protestants viewed private enclaves of the self-declared elect with a wary eye; the secret gatherings which preserved true religion during the Marian period of papist oppression were one thing – the separatist impulses which destabilized a peaceful Protestant church were another. Such communities became transformed in the minds of many into a dangerous (or tantalizing) underground of sects engaging in a bewildering array of often bizarre religious and social practices. In literary portrayals, sectarian communities are "hot, private, lusty, and promiscuous meetings,"²³ where the "time was spent in drunkenness, uncleanness, blasphemous words, filthy songs, and mixt dances of men and women stark naked."²⁴ Schismatics are depicted gathering in the tavern, the field, and the

Cambridge University Press

0521025443 - Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: deforming Reformation*

9

fair,²⁵ and their activities revolve around drinking, eating, and orgies as much as preaching and praying. They “delight . . . in gluttony and drunkenness, chambering and wantonness.”²⁶ Thus in *Bartholomew Fair* Dame Purecraft, Busy, and Win Littlewit enter the fair of the title; in *The Family of Love* Mistress Purge meets her co-Familists in a secret, darkened den of iniquity; and in *1 and 2 Henry IV* Falstaff – who, as I discuss in chapter 1, was readily identified by his audience as a proto-Protestant martyr – finds his home in the tavern. In the 1640s, these accusations were illustrated through numerous woodcuts depicting the sectarians’ alehouse conventicles, as well as some of their other deviant pastimes (see Figures 1 and 2).²⁷

As is evident from Taylor’s description, inherent to satiric portraits of the puritan is a binary structure: impurity is most sensational when juxtaposed with purity. This dualism is a fundamental aspect of most religious satire. Martin Luther was portrayed as a grotesque body in sixteenth-century woodcuts; ascetic monks are displayed as overindulgent in Rabelais’s Gargantuan world; moralizing televangelists are uncovered as sexually voracious in today’s yellow press. In current literary criticism, however, this duality of the puritan’s image has largely been lost, as the carnal aspects of this representation have been stripped away. Pared into a one-sided figure of repression, The Puritan plays a crucial thematic role in readings of early modern literature and culture. In modern scholarship, Malvolio has long stood as the puritan posterboy; his strict adherence to regulations, his concern with social borders, and his condemnation of festivity place him in direct opposition to the irreverent and riotous world of Sir Toby Belch.

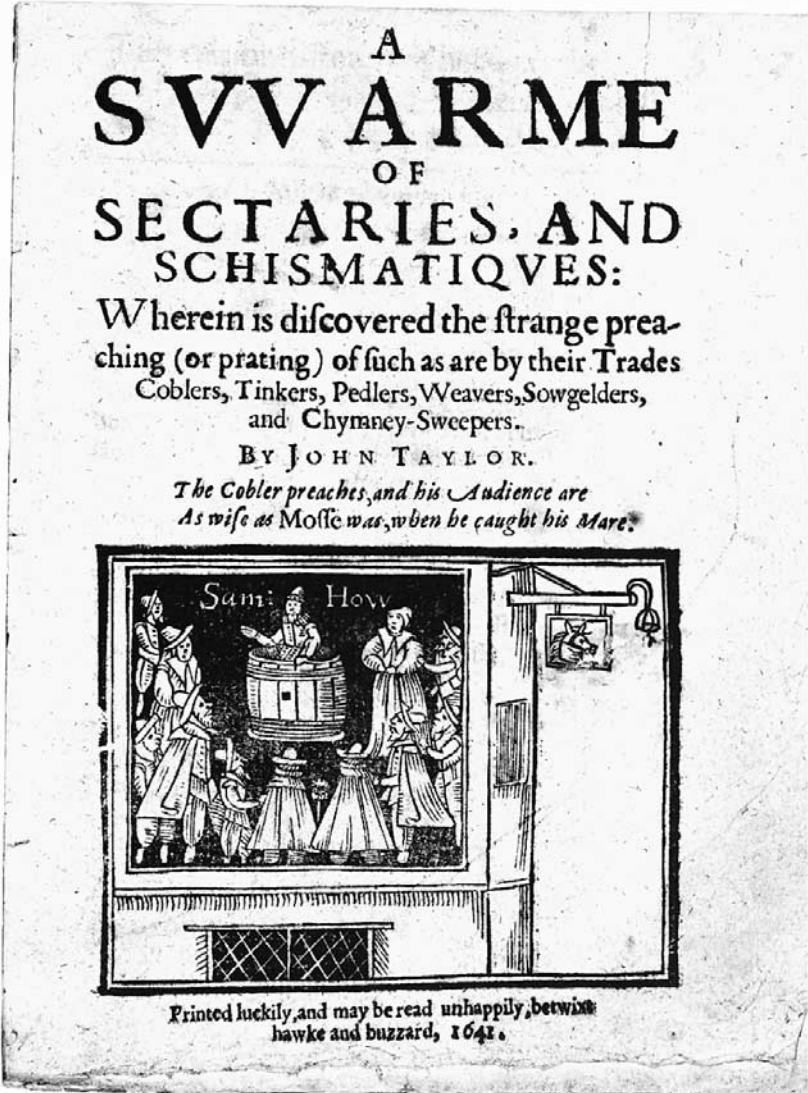
This somber, ascetic persona is required to maintain an interlocking series of binarisms which has long been inscribed in historical and literary accounts of the period. “Puritan” (and its more common adjectival form “puritanical”) has been posited as the antithesis to that which is generally valued by literary critics: puritan v. wit, puritan v. theatre, puritan v. cavalier, puritan v. festivity – perhaps underlying all of these, puritan v. erotic desire. In sum, scholars have employed “puritan” as part of a dichotomous construct which has conceptually organized early modern literature, politics, and society. While postmodern theories of language have destabilized many conceptual and linguistic relations which were once thought to be the most fundamental (male/female, for example), in critical discourse “puritan” often continues to serve as a

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Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)Figure 1 Title page of John Taylor's *A Swarme of Sectaries, and Schismatiques* (1641)