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978-0-521-82076-9 - Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture

Edited by David Loewenstein and John Marshall

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## *Introduction*

*David Loewenstein and John Marshall*

In 1694 the Quaker Benjamin Furly declared in a letter to John Locke that the word “heretic” was one of “the most pernicious words that have for 1000 years obtained amongst mankind,” as it was used to “render odious . . . all honest . . . generous spirited men, that dare be so bold as to profess, and practise what they Judge to be their duty . . . how contrary . . . it be to . . . church slaves and all their enslaved followers, who would make free men . . . bow their necks to their doctrines, decrees, orders, injunctions, and constitutions.” For Furly, “The Bugbear of authority, Tradition, and the name of the Church is so sacred . . . That few people dare call in question the Doctrines which the holy church has taught for so many hundred years, or which their Learned and godly ministers have all along taught since the Reformation.” Furly called for people instead to examine theological doctrines for themselves with eyes which “should be opened to see,” declaring that the Reformation had thrown off “the Intollerable yoake of Romish slavery” because the “first reformers” had been willing to be “counted Hereticks” and had made “no bones of Trampling all under foot . . . [doctrines] which they found to be unreasonable and unscripturall.”<sup>1</sup> Our volume of essays analyzes the complex and crucial relationship of Protestantism to “heresy” in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England by examining the central issues briefly encapsulated in Furly’s letter: bitter contention over the definitions of “heresy” and “heretics” in a deeply religious society in which nothing was more important to many English men and women than identifying, maintaining, and propagating the true beliefs required for salvation; the repeated anathematizing of “heretics” as “odious” and by means of punishments inherited from the past millennium of Christianity by Protestants who often defined and defended “orthodoxy” against “heresy” by supporting long-established doctrines, such as the Athanasian Trinity, and by supporting the teachings of their “godly ministers,” since the Reformation; and the challenges to “unreasonable and unscripturall” doctrines by many “heretics” who saw themselves as the true heirs of the Reformation in their

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critical, individual examination of scripture and in their consequent repudiation of those “doctrines, decrees, orders, injunctions, and constitutions” which encouraged religious conformity or servility.

*Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture* is an interdisciplinary volume of essays that brings together twelve scholars – seven historians and five literary scholars – in order to examine the changing conceptions, character, and condemnation of “heresy” in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, thereby illuminating many elements of the evolving character of English Protestantism itself. The essays in this volume employ a wide range of historical and critical methods to examine the complex issue of heresy and its redefinitions from multifaceted perspectives. If some historians here write primarily as historians as they engage with early modern controversies over heresy in relation to “orthodoxy,” others (notably Christopher Marsh and Ann Hughes) write across disciplines, drawing upon literary materials and analysis to scrutinize representations of heretics and heresy. Moreover, the contributions by literary scholars – David Loewenstein, Nigel Smith, Thomas N. Corns, John Rogers, and N. H. Keeble – are historically informed essays which draw extensively upon the work of historians or historians of religion, in addition to analyzing carefully the kinds of primary materials (e.g. royal proclamations concerning heresy, polemical writings about the eucharist, anti-Trinitarian pamphlets, debates over Socinianism, credal definitions of orthodoxy, and so on) regularly employed and analyzed by historians of religion and theology.

As we shall see, heresy was a central and highly contentious issue – and the subject of keen debates about its definition – during these two centuries which saw the flowering and spread of Protestantism in England. The essays in this volume thus address such issues as the impact of divergent continental reformist beliefs, from those of Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin to those of Nicolaus, Arminius, Socinus, and Amyraut; the growth of “Puritanism” (and its complex relation to heterodoxy) both before and during the English Revolution; the high-water mark of “orthodox” Calvinism in the 1640s and the anxious responses of the mainstream godly to religious schism; debates over the definition of heresy and of “liberty of conscience” during the English Revolution, when heterodox beliefs challenged the central doctrines of Christianity, including the Trinity, original sin, physical resurrection, immortality of the soul, and heaven and hell; and the Restoration rejection of “over-orthodox” Calvinism by many Anglicans and by many dissenters in a period which saw continued demands for the punishment of heresy, increased demands for religious toleration, and

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increased “Latitudinarian” stress on the limited number of “fundamental articles” of Christianity.

The essays in this volume are interconnected by their concern with the complex and often unstable understanding of “heresy” during periods of religious change and upheaval in early modern England, when, as Christopher Marsh observes, “orthodoxy and its opposites were very much in the eye of the beholder.” As the essays by David Loewenstein, Carrie Euler, and Christopher Marsh show, the processes of defining “orthodoxy” by attacking “heresy” and “heretical” evangelical commitments helped both to limit and to foster the progress of the Reformation and were shaped by diverse continental influences in sixteenth-century England. During the reign of Henry VIII, sacramentarian heresy was punished by interrogating and sometimes executing evangelicals influenced by Zwinglian and Lutheran ideas; during the evangelical reign of Edward VI, a variety of Reformed views – as a result of the impact of Zwinglian and Bullingerian works from Zurich and Calvin’s works from Geneva – helped to define “orthodoxy” in the anathematizing of Anabaptism; and during the Elizabethan period, the Family of Love was influenced by the “heretical” perfectionist thought of its Dutch founder Hendrik Niclaes. We will see in the essays by Peter Lake, Ann Hughes, and John Coffey how the development and apotheosis of “Puritanism” from the late sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century was animated by the widespread desire of orthodox Calvinists to punish “heresy,” and simultaneously by doctrinal dissension and controversies among those labeled “Puritans,” which in turn generated “heresies” in what Lake calls the “Puritan underground.” The essays by Nigel Smith, Thomas Corns, and John Rogers examine the development and character of a series of “heresies” of the English Revolution and Restoration in the works of anti-Trinitarians, such as Milton and Biddle, and the agrarian communist Gerrard Winstanley. Meanwhile, the “orthodox” godly struggle to contain the explosion of heresies during the middle of the seventeenth century is the subject of other essays in this volume. The chapters by Coffey, Hughes, and Marshall analyze the fierce, intemperate defense of Calvinist orthodoxy by such leading Presbyterian heresiographers as Thomas Edwards, Ephraim Pagitt, Robert Baillie, and Samuel Rutherford, who were horrified by the “infectious” spread of sectarian errors and heresies. And the essays by Coffey, Champion, Marshall, and Keeble examine how debates over heresy stimulated the increasing articulation of tolerationist arguments in seventeenth-century England by, among others, John Milton, John Goodwin, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Barlow, John Locke, Edward Fowler, and Richard Baxter.

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A number of essays in this book also illuminate the significant literary issues involved in both defending and demonizing “heretical” beliefs. They examine the contested hermeneutic strategies applied to the interpretation of the single most important work in early modern England – the Bible – and the motivations and literary techniques involved in unorthodox religious commitments as varied as Askew’s agile defenses of sacramentarianism, analyzed by Loewenstein; Biddle’s logical anti-Trinitarianism, analyzed by Smith; Milton’s poetic anti-Trinitarianism, analyzed by Smith and Rogers; and Winstanley’s heterodox exegesis of scripture in his theological writings, analyzed by Corns. As we see in the essay by Loewenstein, Askew’s sacramentarianism was based on a figurative reading of scripture which made particularly contentious and urgent issues of representation and signification. As we see in the essay by Smith, some unorthodox readers of the Bible, including John Biddle, emphasized instead a logical reading of scripture and supported the “heresy” of anti-Trinitarianism on that basis, while John Owen replied to Biddle by stressing as “orthodox” a figurative reading of scripture. Yet as Thomas Corns shows, Gerrard Winstanley in contrast articulated his heresies – including the denial of the physical resurrection, his argument against a literal heaven and hell, and his support for communion with Christ through cultivation of the common treasury of the earth – on the basis of highly distinctive metaphoric, figurative, and mystical readings of scripture. Moreover, as Ann Hughes shows, even the mid-seventeenth-century heresiography should be viewed in terms of its contribution to the literary culture of the revolutionary years; because it attempted to provide a compendium of dangerous heresies and heretics as they rapidly appeared to spread, the heresiography became its own distinctive kind of writing, often including a carefully defined structure, series of chapters, and systematic lists of heretics. The massive heresiography by Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena*, is a striking variation on the form in the sense that this alarmist book cataloguing the growth of contemporary heresies loses control of its structure, so that its sprawling, chaotic organization becomes a mirror of its unruly subject – the religious turmoil of its age.

Heresy, however, was not only of vital religious importance and literary significance. Its containment and suppression was also understood in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England to be of vital importance to the maintenance of power and authority, and many essays in this volume explicate the central relationships between “heresy” and religious or political authority. As we will see, anti-heretical works poured from English presses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, identifying heresy as diabolically inspired and arguing that, since it caused the murder of the soul, it was

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worse than murder of the body and needed to be punished severely by the magistrate. In this widespread vision, toleration was a vice and not a virtue. As the seventeenth-century heresiographer Thomas Edwards was to declare, toleration was “the grand designe of the Devil, his Masterpeece . . . it is the most compendious, ready, sure way to destroy all Religion . . . it is a most transcendent, catholique, and fundamentall evill”; as “original sin” was the “most fundamentall sin, all sin; having the seed and spawn of all in it: So a *Toleration* hath all errors in it, and all evils.”<sup>2</sup> Anti-heretical works regularly identified heresy as the fount of all disorder and therefore as a source of sedition and treason in the commonwealth, as a source of anarchy and communist commitments, and as associated with “libertine” attacks on patriarchal authority in the family. But “heresy” was not merely alleged to involve sedition, communism, and a challenge to familial hierarchies; in some cases in early modern Europe – most notoriously in the Anabaptist Münster of 1534–5 – it did indeed involve such challenges. Thus essays by Loewenstein, Euler, Marsh, Coffey, Hughes, and Marshall in this volume examine the significance of fears about “heresy” in early modern England as seditious, anarchic, communist, or “libertine.” In Corns’s essay, moreover, we see that Winstanley’s emerging communist commitments were in fact closely connected to his heterodox beliefs, while in Loewenstein’s essay we see that Askew’s “heretical” readings of scripture were involved in her claim of authority to interpret the Bible for herself and to divorce her “unworthy” – spiritually unregenerate – husband.

The essays in this volume fall into roughly three main parts as they move chronologically from the Henrician Reformation to the English Revolution and then from the Restoration to the end of the seventeenth century. Our book opens with a study of the evangelical writing of Anne Askew and the struggle over sacramentarianism in the 1540s, a central heresy in the eyes of conservative theologians and ecclesiastical authorities wishing to restrict the impact of the reformist ideas of Luther and Zwingli coming to England from the continent. Loewenstein shows how issues of reading and signification were central to the defense of “orthodoxy” and to the polemical challenges issued by Anne Askew to her high-level interrogators, and simultaneously how Askew’s varied responses under the pressure of examination involved questions about the status and authority of women as interpreters of scripture. In the midst of the treacherous and volatile political and religious world of Henrician England, Askew saw herself as a female knight and evangelical warrior; her formidable accusers, however, saw her as a woman who should not have had the “courage and libertie” to challenge their religious authority. Carrie Euler then shows how, during the evangelical reign of

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Edward VI, the ideas and writings of Zwingli and Bullinger, as well as Calvin, helped to influence the expansion of reformed thought in England, as English authors and continental Protestant immigrants reiterated Zurich's arguments against Anabaptism and thereby defined significant parts of the character of the Church of England and of its doctrines against Catholicism on the one hand and against Anabaptist heresy on the other. Euler's essay thereby suggests (as does Loewenstein's discussion of sacramentarianism) that the influence of Zurich on England was greater than alleged by many scholars. The following essay, by Christopher Marsh, deepens our understanding of the significance of foreign influences on the English Reformation as it explores the character of the Dutch-Familist-influenced Family of Love, a group which allegedly supported "perfectibilist heresies." Like Loewenstein, Marsh illuminates issues of the alleged and actual relationships of "heresy" to gender roles in early modern England by paying careful attention both to the actual experiences and roles of women within the Family of Love, and to the literary representation of "heresy" as involving sexual depravity and "lewd" challenges to gender hierarchy.

Taking us from the early seventeenth century to the English Revolution, Peter Lake's essay in some sense serves as a crucial transitional chapter in our volume. It revisits the case of the boxmaker John Etherington and his opponent, the minister Stephen Denison, the subject of Lake's separate book-length study,<sup>3</sup> in order to offer a rigorous and extended examination of the complicated relationships between "Puritanism" and "Familism," and more generally between "Puritanism" and "heresy." Lake illuminates both the drive for discipline and control within Puritanism in early seventeenth-century England *and* the development of diverse "heresies" and doctrinal controversies within the "Puritan underground." The remarkably rich and vital world of that underground (which Etherington encountered during his long career) included a large variety of religious opinions and movements – Anabaptist, Separatist, Presbyterian, moderate conforming Puritan, and Familist – whose members interacted and mingled, albeit often uneasily.<sup>4</sup> As Lake also stresses briefly but illuminatingly, Puritanism failed to establish in early Stuart England the disciplinary structures to maintain orthodoxy, which "orthodox" Calvinism established elsewhere, including in Scotland; his analysis of the importance of the Puritan underground and of local issues influencing the character of Puritan discipline in England helps to explain why.

A cluster of four essays then examines "heresy" in relation to "orthodoxy" during the upheavals of the English civil wars and Interregnum. John Coffey's wide-ranging essay on the English Revolution appears first in this

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group of essays, since he continues the discussion of tensions within Puritan culture initiated by Lake. Coffey examines the complex and unstable relationship between “Puritanism” and “heresy,” showing, like Lake, that Puritanism contained conflicting impulses (i.e., the authoritarian impulse to reinforce a code of uniformity and the impulse to call orthodox authorities into question) and documenting both the extent and limits of support for “liberty of conscience” during the revolutionary years. Coffey focuses on godly worries about heresy during those years when Protestant unity – already shaky at best – was splintering into sects and radical religious movements. He illuminates the theological and ecclesiological diversity of Puritanism, considers the significance of fierce divisions in the 1640s and 1650s (especially between the Presbyterians and Independents), and examines the importance of the ecumenical strain of moderate Puritanism. Indeed, Coffey’s analysis (like N. H. Keeble’s) reveals that Presbyterian divines during this period were by no means uniform or consistent in their responses to the dangers of heresy and schism, and that some Presbyterians, including Richard Vines and Richard Baxter, were more moderate, nuanced, and discriminating in their reactions, even going so far as to observe with the Anglican John Hales “that *heresie* and *schisme* are two theological scarecrows, many times set up to scare people and affright them.”<sup>5</sup>

After Coffey examines the significant debates among the mainstream godly over the definition of orthodoxy and heresy, Ann Hughes offers a sustained analysis of the intensely anti-heretical commitments of the single most important and sensationalist heresiographical work of the English Revolution: Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena*, a sprawling work published in three substantial parts in 1646. Hughes carefully explicates the heresiographical models and methods on which Edwards self-consciously drew for his analysis of contemporary sectarian “heresies,” relating Edwards’s diffuse and expansive account of sectarian errors, as well as his shrill rhetoric, to the overwhelming contemporary explosion of heretical inquiry and commitment. Like Coffey, moreover, she examines the uneasy position of Presbyterians – former critics of the Laudian establishment, now in a position of precarious power – as they attacked and demonized fellow-Protestants as heretics.

Two subsequent essays illuminate the ideas of several of the most significant “heretics” in this explosion of “heresies” during the English Revolution. Nigel Smith incisively reconsiders the controversy over anti-Trinitarian heresy by looking freshly at the writings of Paul Best, John Biddle, and John Milton; he provides a fresh account of Biddle’s application of logical analysis to scriptural interpretation and consequent declaration that the Trinity was

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illogical, and he examines the fierce contention Biddle's case aroused during Cromwell's Protectorate. Smith also compares Biddle's anti-Trinitarian perspective to that of John Milton, licenser of the Socinian *Racovian Catechism*, and then briefly illuminates some of the anti-Trinitarian inflections of Milton's *Paradise Regained*. In the final essay devoted primarily to the English Revolution, Thomas Corns analyzes the development of Winstanley's communist commitments in relation to his heretical interpretations of scripture in his early works, five substantial tracts neglected by scholars who have shown more interest in Winstanley's mature political thought and Digger activities, or who have subordinated his religious convictions to his political activism. As Corns makes clear, much more work needs to be done on these early heterodox writings in relation to Winstanley's later works;<sup>6</sup> in the process of discussing these texts, Corns illuminates the multiplicity of Winstanley's heretical challenges to contemporary orthodoxy. Here in the tumultuous years of the English Revolution we meet the heretical commitment to communism long alleged by anti-heretical writers, but in Winstanley's case it was not combined with seditious claspings of the sword.

A group of four essays focusing on the later seventeenth century then completes this volume by further examining Milton's anti-Trinitarianism and by addressing the discussions of "heresy" in works composed primarily in the last decades of the century, when heresy remained a central issue and when legislation was frequently proposed to punish it severely in England. John Rogers carefully analyzes both the character and potential sources of Milton's anti-Trinitarianism in *Paradise Lost*, illuminating particularly the importance of Socinian influence on Milton's depiction of the Son of God's exaltation and Milton's departure from contemporary understandings of the centrality of the crucifixion and satisfaction, the doctrine which the anti-Socinian John Owen called "the principal foundation of the faith." Just as other scholars have recently suggested the importance of combinations of Arian and Socinian elements in the thought of Isaac Newton and John Locke,<sup>7</sup> so Rogers (who also rightly eschews applying reductive or rigid theological labels to Milton) shows that a creative combination of Socinian and quasi-Arian elements is crucial to Milton's distinctive representation of the Son of God in the most important and ambitious heretical poem of early modern England. Justin Champion then provides an insightful perspective on Restoration controversies over heresy by reconsidering the positions of Thomas Hobbes during this period; he analyzes in detail Hobbes's probing anticlerical views on heresy, especially as he developed them in a lengthy history of heresy (*An Historical Narration Concerning*



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*Heresie*), which constructed “a genealogy of structures of power that had defined heresy” and “an account of the skewed processes which had defined orthodoxy.” Champion’s essay explores Hobbes’s understanding of heresy in relation to his complex positions on state authority, ecclesiastical power, and religious freedom; and he illuminates as well the lengthy but neglected critical response to Hobbes’s *Historical Narration* written by the learned Anglican bishop Thomas Barlow, a leading Restoration cleric who displayed a more or less tolerant disposition toward Protestant dissenters, while also believing that the blasphemous Hobbes deserved death for his “wild & monstrous” writings.

In the penultimate essay, John Marshall focuses on definitions of heresy and issues of toleration; he illuminates Locke’s discussion of heresy in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* by analyzing Locke’s redefinitions of heresy in the contexts of patristic, medieval, and especially of early modern English anathematizations of heresy and in relation to some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century redefinitions of the concept and word. In particular, Locke challenged the long-term and powerful associations of heresy with rebellion, communism, disease, and “libertinism.” Linking Locke’s discussion of heresy in the *Letter* to his other tolerationist publications and manuscripts, Marshall underlines Locke’s emphasis on the “express words” of scripture against credal imposition. In the final essay, N. H. Keeble similarly analyzes the Puritan Richard Baxter’s opposition to credal imposition and regulation in his many ecumenical redefinitions of “heresy” and of the “fundamental articles” of Christianity; exploring Baxter’s responses to the challenge of heresy, Keeble ranges widely over Baxter’s prolific career, from his sharp debates with John Owen in mid-century to his irenic final works. Keeble, moreover, compares Baxter’s ecumenical positions with those of such Anglican Latitudinarians as Edward Fowler and John Tillotson and with the moderate dissenter John Howe.

The bitter controversies over heresy in early modern England often aroused fierce passions and visceral responses resulting in the execution, imprisonment, or vicious demonizing of “heretics” as “odious” (to recall Benjamin Furly’s word), as well as the suppression or burning of “heretical” works. Some of the authors discussed at length in this volume were interrogated or imprisoned for their “heresy” amidst calls for their execution, including the sacramentarian Askew and the anti-Trinitarians Paul Best and John Biddle; indeed, even in the later seventeenth century, Hobbes’s execution was advocated by Thomas Barlow. Milton and Locke had good reason to keep some of the most explicit articulations of their “heretical” views unprinted. This book is dedicated to those “heretics” in early modern

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England who dared to question received theological doctrines and to express a healthy suspicion (to recall Furlly's words) of that sacred "Bugbear of authority, Tradition."

## NOTES

1. *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. De Beer, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–89), vol. v, letter 1745. See also the discussion of this letter in W. Barber, "Pierre Bayle, Benjamin Furly and Quakerism," in *De l'humanisme aux Lumières, Bayle et le Protestantisme*, ed. Michelle Magdelaine et al. (Paris: Universitatis; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996), 626.
2. Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646), 1:121–2. See also the discussion of this passage in J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth, and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103.
3. See Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge: "Orthodoxy," "Heterodoxy," and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
4. Lake's argument here is likewise supported by the recent work of David Como: see *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
5. Richard Vines, *The Authors, Nature, and Danger of Haeresie* (1647), 49.
6. G. E. Aylmer offers a brief, useful survey of the religious heterodoxies in these tracts: "The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley," in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, ed. J. F. McGregor and B. Reay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 95–8. Corns, however, provides a more thorough analysis of their heretical and hermeneutic qualities.
7. The character of Newton's anti-Trinitarianism is currently being analyzed, *inter alia*, by Stephen Snobelen and Robert Iliffe. See for instance Snobelen, "Isaac Newton, Heretic: The Strategies of a Nicodemite," *British Journal for the History of Science* 32 (1999), 381–419; on Locke, see especially John Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism, 'Socinianism,' and Unitarianism," in *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 111–82; see also Snobelen's review article, "Socinianism, Heresy, and John Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 20 (2001), 88–125.