

Treacherous Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature and Culture. David Loewenstein.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiii + 498 pp. \$99.

In this learned, erudite, and comprehensive study, David Loewenstein shows how fears of heresy haunted early modern England, a specter aroused by the Reformation's seismic upheavals. Heresy provoked both terror and savage persecution. *Treacherous Faith's* dust jacket shows figures from Hieronymous Bosch at the Last Judgment, and authorities seemed determined to inflict the tortures of the damned here and in the afterlife. Yet recurrent regime changes in England made the persecutors of one reign victims in the next since definitions of heresy and orthodoxy "remained in a state of flux" (10). Loewenstein also argues that heresy hunting not only led to a vicious cycle of horrors, but also inspired ingenious and intense imaginative energy. He ascribes "ferocious creativity" (25) to Thomas More's attacks on Tyndale and others but offers little textual evidence that these screeds represent an advance in "literary powers" (29). Anne Askew's testament provides more convincing proof of literary skill and sophistication in its evasion, circumspection, and strategic ambiguity.

If victims and persecutors could become interchangeable, then incorrigible heretics could be seen as holy martyrs. Loewenstein shows how John Foxe was keenly aware of this unsettling discrepancy. In his massive *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe laments that

“Truth [is] taken many tymes for heresie, and heresy for truth” (109). Repulsed by what he deemed the “violence of mens affections” (114), Foxe opposed execution for heresy (103), and “extreme zeale” made him uneasy (129). He sought instead to promote “mylde and constant” martyrdom (118). Loewenstein says violent persecution abated during Elizabeth’s reign, noting that the last heretic was burned in 1612 (157). Nevertheless, religious antagonisms increased and panic persisted.

Fears of heresy and schism exploded during the Civil War and Interregnum. These fears inspired compendious efforts to catalogue and contain a proliferation of radical ideas. Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena* (1646) and Ephraim Pagitt’s *Heresiography* represent a “new, frenetic form of anti-sectarian writing” (201). Of all the new sects, the Quakers provoked the most hysteria, and James Nayler attained the greatest notoriety by reenacting Christ’s Palm Sunday entry. Spared crucifixion, he was branded with a *B* for blasphemer, thrown into solitary confinement, and released only to die shortly afterward. Asked to rule on his punishment, Parliament split its vote, and one member acknowledged that blasphemy, like heresy, was in flux: “One parliament may count one thing horrid blasphemy, another parliament another thing” (232).

John Milton rejects “fantastic terrors of sect and schism” (278) in *Areopagitica*, and Loewenstein discusses that work’s relation to more open-minded treatises by Levellers and others. But he concedes that even among religious radicals, “tolerance and intolerance were often closely interconnected” (226). Tolerance was often equated with toleration of error and accordingly condemned as the “grand designe of the Devil” (301). Those who feared that religious separatism would lead to schism still excused their own. In the wonderfully titled *Toleration Intolerable* (1670), the anonymous author writes that “Ours from *Rome* is no Schism; the Fanaticks from us is” (319). *Areopagitica* assures its readers that “many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes” pose no threat to Christianity (279), but Milton still anathematizes Catholics (287).

Milton still shared his age’s fears of religious division. Milton “dramatizes the mythic story of Satan’s original great schism in *Paradise Lost*”; the key question, then, is how the poem enables its readers “to reconsider schism as a great evil in relation to warranted separation” (320). The angel Abdiel provides the answer: “I alone / Seem’d in thy World erroneous to dissent / From all: my Sect thou seest, now learn too late / How few sometimes may know, when thousands err” (*PL* 6.145–48); the sole voice of “the dissenting godly” (305), Abdiel belongs, like Milton, to a sect of one. Satan tries to bully him by invoking a “Synod” (*PL* 6.156), but Loewenstein points out that Samuel Rutherford, one of Milton’s “New Forcers of Conscience,” wrote that “the end of Synods is to . . . remove controversies and silence Hereticks” (334). Thus he concludes that Milton’s epic is a “poem of toleration” and liberty of conscience (342–43). Nevertheless, fear of heresy still makes the Restoration an age of persecution for a writer like Bunyan. And this excellent book shows how the dangers of “treacherous faith” persist even today.

RICHARD C. MCCOY, *CUNY, Queens College and The Graduate Center*