

*Conscience in Early Modern English Literature*. Abraham Stoll.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xiv + 216 pp. \$99.99.

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At one of the most inventive moments in the compelling story he tells, Abraham Stoll finds a parallel between Talus, Spenser's seemingly mindless action man, and Hamlet, Shakespeare's reflective and hesitant prince. Talus, the iron engine of justice, unexpectedly discovers a conscience—and it makes him a coward. In addition, both cases exemplify a slippage between the two meanings of *conscience* available at the time: the moral arbiter, on the one hand, and, on the other, a more generalized consciousness or thought. In the movements back and forth between the first and the second, the book traces the emergence of a secular modern subjectivity.

Acting as a monitor that inhibits such native impulses as “resolution,” conscience is perceived as another voice within the self. When Protestantism releases it from both good works and the divine reason within us, conscience becomes diffuse, “destructured.” Seeking evidence of election, the mind turns into an object of its own knowledge, communes with itself, and, in due course repressing as supernatural any intimations of divinity, emerges as the sovereign subject of modern liberalism.

*Conscience in Early Modern Literature* traces this process, more complex and less linear than a summary can indicate, in a succession of fictional works from Spenser to Milton. Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* is compared and contrasted with book 5, which puts on display the limitations of conscience when it comes to questions of justice and mercy. In *Macbeth*, the suppressed conscience returns in dreams and the imagery of the supernatural. George Herbert calls conscience a prattler—and beside the point, which is faith. But even while Herbert relegated it to the margins, the sects were seeing conscience as guaranteed by the Spirit—and, therefore, absolute. An authoritative conscience is entitled to resist human laws; private inspiration goes public, asserting the rights and liberties of the people. Hobbes, meanwhile, scenting anarchy, confines political authority to the conscience of the sovereign, while, paradoxically, defending the liberty of private religious convictions.

Enter John Milton, in whose work theology and politics join forces with poetry and rhetoric to bring some of these strands together. *Paradise Lost* gives shape to Eve's prelapsarian conscience, continuous with an innocent consciousness, as well as to Satan's despairing conscience, indistinguishable from hell itself, while affirming the “umpire conscience” of the elect as a guide to right action. *Areopagitica* envisages a nation all the stronger for a public sphere, where a range of inspired consciences engage in rational debate. No one has the right to force another's conscience, since we cannot always count on divine illumination. And if inspiration cannot always be trusted, where should we place Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple? In one interpretation, he is roused from despair by an inspired conscience to overthrow idolatry; in another, he abandons conscience for a vengeful suicide mission. Arguably, no one has the right to enforce one reading of *Samson Agonistes* at the expense of the other.

Stoll's book gives rise to some incidental doubts. For one, I would place less reliance on Judith Butler. For another, Macbeth's air-drawn dagger surely extends its handle not to prick his conscience but to invite the act of murder, even if this imagined deed also fills him with horror. And third, the isolation of theology from popular culture tends to give undue weight to the Reformation. True, salvation by faith makes no space for the role Aquinas allots to the few sparks of reason that survived the Fall. In his Catholic account, these remain incorruptible, while in general the Protestant mind is entirely fallible. But the fifteenth-century moral play *Mind, Will and Understanding*, for example, while it does not name conscience, already shows Mind, as the higher part of reason, to be capable of falling into sin. The consciousness that takes subjectivity as an object of knowledge is implicit in Anima's self-contempt when the choices of her own mind have defiled her. Perhaps theology is more a symptom of cultural change than a cause.

These are quibbles, however, topics for a discussion provoked by the strength and scope of an important, balanced, and textually based case.

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*Stage and Picture in the English Renaissance: The Mirror up to Nature.*

John Astington.

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This is a beautifully illustrated monograph that brings together theater and art history, offering nuanced yet accessible analyses of both dramatic works and works of art. The argument is that the visual arts, especially decorative art, had a "profound influence" on Shakespeare and his contemporaries. John Astington contends that iconography made familiar by visual art influenced how playwrights depicted and described familiar subjects on stage, and shaped audiences' interpretations of and responses to dramatic presentations. Astington attempts to support these assertions through a "comparative aesthetics" of performing versus fine arts. However, what this book demonstrates is that visual art could have influenced English Renaissance playwrights, not that it did.

The themes and works covered in this book are decidedly eclectic. There are chapters that explore Roman and scriptural stories told through tapestry series, torches and the association of light with morality, and title pages and other illustrations that may portray theatrical stagings. One chapter discusses portraits, statues, and other visual representations of monarchs that might have influenced audiences' expectations of royalty and royal ceremonials on the stage. Another examines groupings of three that include representations of death, sex, or folly.

Astington presents correlations and possibilities rather than certainties, but the material examined is intrinsically interesting. The illustrations in this volume include dozens of black-and-white etchings, engravings, and woodcuts, as well as a handful of lush