

Reading Humility in Early Modern England. Jennifer Clement.
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We live in a culture of pride. In self-help books and on talk shows, in political debates and public protests, self-esteem is praised as practically the only virtue. Jennifer Clement shows that the early modern period, on the contrary, valued humility as the correct path to self-knowledge, self-realization, piety to God, and community with others. As she writes, “My work here engages with the turn to religion that has developed since the late 1990s in reaction to the tendencies of many New Historicist and materialist critics to view religion as merely a mask for repressive power structures and oppressive ideologies” (13). This monograph should therefore be welcomed by those interested in the history of ideas and early modern religion, as well as those with a particular interest in any of the authors Clement examines in her chapters.

There are five chapters, bracketed by an introduction and conclusion. The first bears the witty title “Breeches Part” and concerns a little-known pamphlet by Robert Greene,

A Quip for an Vpstart Courtier, Or, A quaint dispute between Veluet breeches and Cloth-breeches. As its title would suggest, Greene's text stages a debate between Italianate fashion and English simplicity. The paradox, as Clement recognizes, is that "Cloth-breeches" expresses his own humility aggressively. Clement notes that "humility's paradoxical nature appealed to early modern England's near-obsession with paradox" (25). This chapter is one of those startling studies of an obscure text that make one want to hunt down a copy. (It can be found in a Broadview anthology.) The second chapter addresses a different paradox, that "even false humility can be a social good" (47), which Clement illustrates by reference to Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston's *Eastward Ho!*. Clement argues that Quicksilver's humility in the play may be more authentic than it has appeared to most critics; moreover, "Touchstone's reading of Quicksilver's humility as sincere triggers a small orgy of confession and forgiveness all round" (54). Humility may be capable of performance, in hypocrisy, but performance can lead to reality.

Clement ends her study of *Eastward Ho!* with a discussion of the benefit of humiliation, which leads her to John Donne's sermons and devotions, where "the wound, the affliction, becomes a representation of God at work in the self, or even itself a part of God, and hence to be loved for its own sake" (57). Clement's more or less biographical treatment of Donne's sermons reveals the central importance of the body to early modern understandings of humiliation, and hence of humility and ultimately the self in its relationship to God.

Probably the strongest chapter is the fourth, on Katherine Parr's and Elizabeth I's performances of humility. Whereas Katherine performed a female role as humble in order to avoid prosecution, Elizabeth presents herself as the servant of God in order to claim authority. Once again, this shows humility as paradoxical, because it justifies power. The final chapter concerns a husbandry manual by one Thomas Tryon, which ends with a "complaint" written in the collective voice of birds who critique human evil. Clement reads Tryon as arguing for a human attitude of "dominion tempered by humility" (111) toward creation. In the conclusion, especially, she ties this with the biblical ecology of contemporary American evangelicals.

Across the chapters, Clement shows a strong engagement with critical theory and recent scholarship — her chapter on Donne invokes Judith Butler and Michel Foucault on confession, and that on Tryon engages with Paul de Man on prosopopeia, for example. The chapter on Elizabeth and Katherine will interest feminist scholars, that on Tryon will interest ecocritics, and the chapter on Greene's pamphlet will interest scholars of consumerism. At times, however, it seems that Clement fails to appreciate the radicalism of her own insights. She spends two pages discussing the relationship between "mortification" and "humiliation" in Donne, only to conclude that they mean the same thing for him (60–62), and she hedges most of her statements with caveats and respectful references to critics. Clement seems overcautious in presenting her central thesis, that humility really is a virtue to be appreciated, rather than a mere ideology cultivated as social control.

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