

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

8-2018

Review of *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* by Abraham Stoll

John E. Curran Jr.

Marquette University, john.curran@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curran, John E. Jr., "Review of *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* by Abraham Stoll" (2018).
English Faculty Research and Publications. 512.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/512

BOOK REVIEW

Conscience in Early Modern English Literature. *Abraham Stoll*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. ix+216.

Illuminating in a number of specific ways, and well worth the reader's time for them, Abraham Stoll's *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* is disappointing in a number of more general respects. The title promises the magisterial, as does the identity of the author, whose impressive record of scholarship eminently qualifies him to offer a perspective both unique and authoritative on this massively important topic. In its overall design and argument, however, it strikes me as thin, having many of the quirks of a first book: obligatory chapters on Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, as though to cover the bases desirable for academic job candidacy; large portions already published as articles, including in *Modern Philology*; the theme rather loosely tying together the various discrete sections, with connecting ideas here and there superimposed repetitively; claims beating the old dead horse of subjectivity that are at once overreaching, referencing sweeping generalizations about phenomenological history, and bland, guarding against saying anything contrary to conventional wisdom (as: "The early modern conscience does not create early modern subjectivity, but it does provide a uniquely detailed way to observe how subjectivity works" [17]; or, "Lady Macbeth does not become a saint or an ascetic. Rather, she becomes a subject in Butler's sense" [103]).

To the extent there is a thesis, it involves tracing the ways in which the "destructuring" of the conscience, in the wake of the Reformation, affected England's religious and political psychology through the Civil War. Reliance on this notion of "destructuring" as a unifying principle is one of the book's main flaws, for it is highly questionable—or, more precisely, it is highly oversimplified, capturing only half of the dynamic. Certainly,

Modern Philology, volume 116, number 1. Published online March 23, 2018
For permission to reuse, please contact journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu.

there would have been a huge impact on paradigms of conscience from the dismantling of the legalistic, externalized, systematized apparatus of Catholic tradition, an impact describable as a “destructuring” effect; but too, much evidence points to a counteracting force in boilerplate Protestant doctrines of assurance and regeneration. Though he consults such authorities as Kendall and Slights who navigate this complexity, Stoll posits a Protestant conscience generative of only “inchoate,” nebulous, solipsistic thought. Discussing Perkins, Stoll has it that “without *synderesis*, the ability to think of conscience functioning as a structured process becomes impossible” (41). But what writer of this period thinks, and models thinking, in more structured a way than Perkins? Leaving out or marginalizing foundational concepts such as the “practical syllogism,” and frameworks such as Ramist logic, Stoll greatly underestimates how a Protestant-styled conscience could reinforce certainty and clarity. This oversight leads to a number of peculiar, and quite disputable, suggestions, among the most serious of which, for its ligatures to the book’s story arc, is that Perkins was an anticasuist casuist, an antecedent for antinomianism (121). But some of the more self-contained readings are similarly vulnerable, an example being the take on *Macbeth*. Stoll would locate something akin to the Freudian “uncanny” in the experience of the Macbeths, the “destructured,” protomodern conscience encountering aftershocks of the obsolete “animist” world; but couldn’t it rather be that the invisible truth they try, and fail, to live with or ignore strikes them as it does because of its terrifying simplicity and starkness? That would explain readily the dagger speech that so puzzles Stoll (86): conscience rings out so emphatically and unmistakably that Macbeth already feels like Tarquin, already feels punished and destroyed by the crime even before committing it.

With these problems noted, however, the book more than compensates for them with its wealth of incisive, persuasive, thought-provoking points, which appear more frequently the deeper into the seventeenth century it ventures. In the early going, St. German is well handled, and the account of the Cave of Despaire in *The Faerie Queene* contains many fine insights, particularly those applying the figure of catachresis to the representation of Redcrosse’s affliction (56). The book gains momentum as Stoll relates his distinction between casuistical and antinomian concepts of conscience to matters of politics and toleration. He is very strong on the Levellers and then on Hobbes, with the latter’s ambiguities of public and private conscience and will sorted out clearly and crisply. Then we move on to Milton, and to some truly excellent analysis. On the *De doctrina*, Stoll deftly observes the antinomian overtones of Milton’s suspicions about the reliability of the biblical text: “In a remarkable example of Milton’s eclectic theology, scholarship itself becomes proof of an antinomian Spirit” (175). Thereafter, as Miltonists of all stripes should recognize, Stoll’s examination of A

Treatise of Civil Power makes an invaluable contribution, surely being one of the most nuanced and suggestive ever. For Stoll, in this work Milton's antinomianism turns back on itself, though not to undermine, but to bolster the case for toleration: "Humans have a hard time knowing when they are inspired. No one can rely on the Spirit to be consistently present, authorizing every biblical interpretation. . . . Then, precisely from this space of uncertainty, follows Milton's claim for liberty of conscience. . . . What prevents forcing, in Milton's argument, is this limit to the communicability of inspired knowledge" (180). As the author proceeds to point out, such a view would seem to have negative consequences for Milton's Samson and his notorious rousing motions; but as he also points out, such is the means by which Milton's drama poses a challenge to us to reaffirm *Civil Power's* premises: "Precisely because we cannot fully understand Samson's experience of conscience, his inward persuasion and final action must be admitted into public toleration" (195). In all, Stoll lays out economically and helpfully how a focus on Milton's concepts of conscience can shed light on, though not resolve, the heart of the matter for Milton studies, the tension between reason and inspiration (182).

While they are most heavily concentrated in the Milton chapter, bright moments can be found throughout the book. I recommend it happily, though with the caveat that the reader should keep expectations low for a fresh address to broader issues.

John E. Curran Jr.
Marquette University