

## **UC Merced**

### **UC Merced Previously Published Works**

#### **Title**

Don Herzog. Household Politics: Conflict in Early Modern England. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 224. \$38.00 (cloth).

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1hr6q897>

#### **Journal**

Journal of British Studies, 53(2)

#### **ISSN**

0021-9371

#### **Author**

Amussen, Susan D

#### **Publication Date**

2014-04-01

#### **DOI**

10.1017/jbr.2014.21

Peer reviewed

Don Herzog. *Household Politics: Conflict in Early Modern England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 209.

*Household Politics* is, in spite of the title, not primarily a work designed to shed new light on early modern England, but rather a work of political theory, making an argument about the nature of male authority and household conflict. At its center is the contention that male superiority and power was not taken for granted in early modern England, that the separation of public and private mapped on to women and men did not exist, and that the early modern household was a site of conflict, and therefore a site of politics. To make that argument, Herzog draws from a wide range of printed sources, primarily for the period 1650-1750.

Herzog's argument is built in stages. He begins with a discussion of Jonathan Swift's poem "The Lady's Dressing Room", in which he argues that it should not be considered misogynist because the satirical target of the poem was not Celia, the woman whose foul smells are catalogued, but Strephon, who after sneaking into her room, is disgusted by all women. His next chapter tries to distinguish between what he calls the "blather" about wifely subordination in prescriptive literature, and the ways in which different genres of popular literature – comedies, popular songs, jokes and proverbs – articulated alternative versions of marriage: on the basis of this, he argues that early modern society did not consider women's subordination natural. A further chapter analyzes the different meanings of public and private, to argue against the parallel between men and women on the one hand, and public and private on the other. The following chapter theorizes conflict, and the ways in which conflict can exist: here he distinguishes between conflict – which takes for granted certain sets of rules within which conflict exists – and enmity, which operates outside such shared ground rules: the purpose of this discussion is to affirm that conflict can be a normal feature of the social order. In the following chapter, he develops an argument about the household as political by focusing on

servants. Here what is important is that conflict between servants and masters is often conflict about the nature of a master's legitimate authority over his servants: it is therefore about politics.

This is an odd book for a historian, and perhaps the strongest takeaway is rooted in the challenge of interdisciplinary scholarship. Herzog's argument – as evidenced by lengthy theoretical considerations of the different meanings of public and private, or the different ways authority can be naturalized – is an argument in political theory. In that context, it may be an important intervention. Historians and literary critics will find it more problematic. On the one hand, few of us who work on gender in early modern England would be surprised by Herzog's discussion of conflict in the household, or indeed the popular literature about dominant wives. I argued twenty-five years ago the family needed to be seen as political, and one of the key arguments about whether there was a crisis of order in the early seventeenth century depends on the extent to which patriarchal authority was routinely challenged. On the other hand, Herzog's methods would make most historians and historically minded literary scholars nervous. He argues through accretion of quotations, often without any consideration of the larger framework of the source from which it is taken – and when he cites historians, he rarely engages with their whole argument, but seizes on a statement. There is no discussion of historical change over the period, so examples from 1650 sit alongside those of the 1740s as if nothing has changed in between. Few of us would use Jonathan Swift as the emblematic writer of the early modern period, though Swift is probably the most frequently deployed writer in Herzog's account. Herzog's misreading (or partial reading) of feminist scholars is striking: feminist historians have not sought to argue, as Herzog asserts, that women's lives were always private, but about that public and private is reconfigured in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup>

and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: historians do not actually think that separate spheres were in operation in 1600, if ever. Equally, both historians and literary critics might be surprised at somewhat uncritical reading of texts and genres: what difference does it make, for instance, that criticism of male power is relegated to humor? How does thinking about tropes of inversion contribute to understanding the language of carnival?

While Herzog's book tells specialists little new about the early modern period, it is an important reminder that different academic fields have very different concerns, and may use the same language in very different ways. What it means that male power is naturalized has a very precise meaning in political theory which historians have often not addressed; that Herzog has a full chapter defining the contours of conflict, and the trouble he takes to determine what is private and what is public, puts in questions terms historians use without thinking. Language that we use uncritically becomes the center of discussion for Herzog. The different valences of language in different contexts should remind us to be careful when using words, works and tools from other fields.

Herzog's account also reminds us of the ways in which the popular press in the early modern period provided an ongoing discussion of and critique of dominant values. While historians may be startled by the conclusions Herzog draws from this debate, the significance of that critique is one that deserves ongoing reflection and analysis.

Susan D. Amussen

University of California, Merced