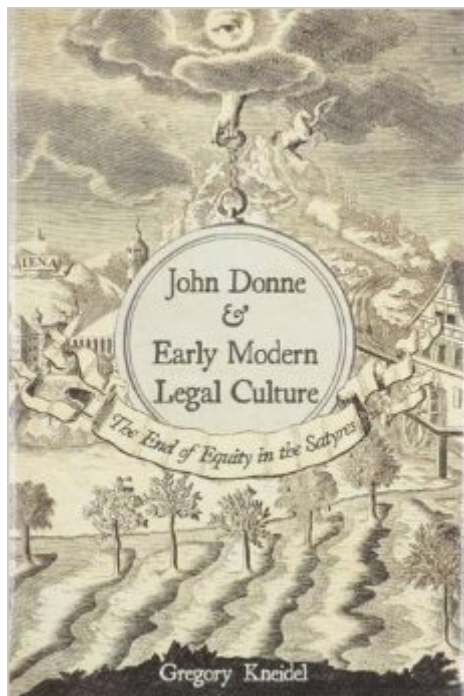


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John Donne And Early Modern Legal Culture: The End Of Equity In The Satyres (Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies)



Synopsis

Though law and satire share essential elements – both aim to correct individual vice, to promote justice, and to claim authority amid competing perspectives – their commonality has gone largely unexplored by both legal theorists and literary critics. Gregory Kneidel, in this thoroughly original work, finds that just such an exploration leads to fascinating new insights for both fields of study. Reversing the more common association of satire with illegality, especially with libel, Kneidel takes as his test case the five formal verse satires written by a young John Donne in the mid-1590s. The *Satyres*, a highly regarded but difficult and little-studied group of poems, appeared just as the legal culture was beginning to emerge in something like its modern, secularized form. By placing the *Satyres* within the broader historical narrative explaining the triumph of the Anglo-American common-law tradition over other legal jurisdictions, Kneidel demonstrates, too, that Donne was clearly informed about and interested in the legal controversies of the time, those that pitted the common-law tradition against ideas of equity as well as Roman civil and canon law, parliamentary legislation, and royal prerogative. In fact, Kneidel argues, Donne clearly conceived of his satires as a supplement to – or even a form of – early modern law. The poems specifically engage with jurisprudential conflicts over the role of equity amid the numerous other forms of law that dominated the English legal landscape, as equity was just then losing its independent status and being absorbed by the common-law tradition. Like satire, equity considers and attempts to bridge the distance between justice and law, taking into account the unique circumstances of individual cases. Thus, by examining this argument about the rivalry of equity and law within Donne's satires, we achieve a much clearer picture of the complexities of that historical moment, together with a fresh and insightful addition to the growing field of literature and early modern legal studies.

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