



The Rise of Prison Literature in the Sixteenth Century

By Ruth Ahnert

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Examining works by some of the most famous prisoners from the early modern period including Thomas More, Lady Jane Grey and Thomas Wyatt, Ruth Ahnert presents the first major study of prison literature dating from this era. She argues that the English Reformation established the prison as an influential literary sphere. In the previous centuries we find only isolated examples of prison writings, but the religious and political instability of the Tudor reigns provided the conditions for the practice to thrive. This book shows the wide variety of genres that prisoners wrote, and it explores the subtle tricks they employed in order to appropriate the site of the prison for their own agendas. Ahnert charts the spreading influence of such works beyond the prison cell, tracing the textual communities they constructed, and the ways in which writings were smuggled out of prison and then disseminated through script and print.

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Review

"... not only important but also engaging ..."

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"Scholars of early modern literature will find much of interest here in the author's sensitive readings of poetry and prose by both canonical and lesser-known writers; and those interested in the development of the carceral system in the early modern period in England will find Ahnert's observations on its evolution both informative thought-provoking."

Patrick J. Murray, Journal of the Northern Renaissance

"[Ahnert's] work is especially valuable to book historians in describing the way in which influences and powers other than the author - editors, publishers, propagandists - shaped the literature of dissent in the sixteenth century."

Larry E. Sullivan, SHARP News

"The inclusion of both Protestants and Catholics is a particular strength of the volume, as is Ahnert's use of various methodologies ranging from book history, network theory, phenomenology and philosophy - drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau - and close reading practices typically deployed by literary scholars ... This is a strong first book and we can no doubt look forward to Ahnert's next project."

Victoria Van Hyning, British Catholic History

About the Author

Ruth Ahnert is a Lecturer in Early Modern Studies in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary, University of London. Her work focuses on the literature and culture of the Tudor period, with a specific emphasis on religious history, prison writing and letter writing. Recent and forthcoming publications examine prison scenes in early modern drama, trial narratives and Protestant letter networks. Dr Ahnert serves on the Council of the Society for Renaissance Studies and is co-editor of the Society's Bulletin.

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