

## **“Every man may ghesse what a woman she was”: John Foxe and the Problem of Female Martyrdom**

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In 1534, the English Parliament declared Henry VIII the Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England. This Act of Supremacy officially separated the Church in England from the Roman Catholic Church under the jurisdiction of the Pope in Rome. Over the next twenty years, England underwent an agonizing process of religious reform. Due to the state-sponsored nature of official English reform, many historians have characterized the English Reformation as religious reform imposed on the populace from above. The exact nature of this reform, however, varied according to the religious preferences of Henry VIII and his successors. While Henry VIII's religious policies remained essentially conservative, the government of his son Edward VI pursued much more strident policies of Protestant reform. However, in 1553 Edward died at the tender age of fifteen and was succeeded by his deeply Catholic sister, Mary. During her reign, Mary I renounced the royal supremacy and attempted to return the English Church to Rome.

In order to root out Protestantism, Mary I revived three medieval statutes against heresy in order to punish Protestants as heretics. While English Catholics welcomed Mary's policies and others conformed to them, those who had embraced Protestantism were faced with difficult choices: risk their immortal souls by conforming to Catholic rituals, face persecution and execution, or flee into exile in continental Europe. Indeed, during Mary's five-year reign, nearly 300 Protestants were burned at the stake in England. Although committed Protestants were not necessarily the majority in the 1550s, English Protestants used the stories of the martyrs and other victims of Marian persecution to craft a powerful, Protestant English identity. The Marian martyrs immortalized in English Protestant martyrology were meant to function as role models for contemporary English Protestants. Significantly, many of these martyrs were women. However, the behavior of English Protestant women faced particular gendered scrutiny from contemporary sixteenth-century polemicists concerned with the disobedience and assertiveness displayed by female martyrs in particular. Scholars too have been concerned with how martyrologists represented this female deviance and how these representations potentially offered examples of empowered womanhood to early modern audiences. However, based on the work of the most famous martyrologist of the period John Foxe, I contend that both Foxe and his readers situated the apparent deviance of female martyrs within a specific historical context that justified otherwise undesirable female behavior.

In 1563, John Foxe published the first English edition of *Actes and Monuments*, a history of the English church and, most importantly, its martyrs. Met with nearly instant acclaim and popularity, Foxe published three more editions of the *Actes and Monuments* in his lifetime in response to both criticisms and new influxes of information from those who had known Marian martyrs and wanted them to be included. In this work, Foxe constructed a narrative of two churches: the true church to which Protestants subscribed and the false Roman Catholic Church. It was a life's work meant to prove that the English church was the legitimate descendant of the apostolic church. The persecution and witness of martyrs from antiquity to the Tudor period was a central rhetorical pillar of this project since the deaths of these martyrs confirmed both the legitimacy of the true church and the barbarism of the false church.

These martyrs, particularly those executed during the Tudor period, became the most lasting legacy of Foxe's work in English religious culture. In 1571, the Privy Council and Convocation ordered every church in England to purchase a copy of Foxe's *Actes and*

*Monuments* to be displayed alongside the English Bible in every parish church. The clergy were also instructed to make copies of the book available in their homes.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, authors of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conduct literature often recommended the *Book of Martyrs*, as the *Actes and Monuments* became popularly known, as a source of instructive examples for women and children.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by the end of the sixteenth century, the *Book of Martyrs* had become required reading for English Protestants.

Significantly, women play a variety of roles in the *Book of Martyrs*—as wives, mothers, victims, persecutors, thieves, fugitives, survivors, and, most importantly, as martyrs. Foxe's female martyrs vocally assert their Protestant faith by challenging, even mocking, the religious and political authorities who condemn them and by acting disruptively. For example, a woman identified only as Bosome's wife, "beyng in the church, and sitting with her mother in the pue, contrary in al things to the doings of the Papistes shee behaved her selfe: to wit, when they kneeled, she stood, when they turned forward, shee turned backward."<sup>3</sup> While, Bosome's wife disrupted service with her contrary behavior, Elizabeth Cooper verbally interrupted the mass and commanded the attention of her conforming neighbors when she "came into... Saynt Andrewes Church, the people beyng at theyr popish service, and there standing in the same, sayde she revoked her recantation before made in that place, and was hartely sorye that ever she did it, willing the people not to bee deceived, neither to take her doynge before for an example."<sup>4</sup> Not only did Foxe's female martyrs demonstrate assertive behavior by publicly and dramatically refusing to conform to the Catholic Church in life, he often depicted them showing fortitude and determination at the stake. For instance, although Foxe claimed Anne Askew could not walk or stand on her own at her execution in 1546 due to the extent of the torture she was subjected to by the authorities, Askew nevertheless provided a role model for her fellow male martyrs who "followyng the constancie of the woman, denied not onely to receyve [royal pardons], but also to looke upon them."<sup>5</sup> By giving their lives for their faith, these women provided models of strength and constancy for English Protestants.

However, the behavior of female martyrs could also be controversial. Indeed, Catholic critics and polemicists specifically targeted female martyrs, claiming that they were representative of the social dangers posed by Protestantism. For example, in 1556 Miles Hoggarde rhetorically addressed female martyrs:

O wicked daughters of heresie, and dames of the devil himselfe. Is this your profession at your marriage daye, to be at commandment to your husbandes? And manye of you contrarye to their wylles maintayne your obstinacie by death. You ought, beyng Christians, and traded up in Christes fayth, rather to spend your lives for the defence of your chastitie, and the lives of your deare husbandes, then in the cause of heresie.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Megan L. Hickerson, *Making Women Martyrs in Tudor England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5; Carole Levin, "Women in *The Book of Martyrs* as Models of Behavior in Tudor England," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4, no. 2 (1981): 196.

<sup>2</sup> Hickerson, *Making Women Martyrs*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> John Foxe, *The Actes and Monuments* (London: 1583), 2096.

<sup>4</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2029.

<sup>5</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1258.

<sup>6</sup> Miles Hoggarde, *The displaying of the Protestantes* (London: Robert Caly, 1556), 78.

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In other words, female martyrdom itself was inherently deviant because Protestant women willing to burn for their beliefs were unnaturally abandoning their earthly husbands and responsibilities.

Catholic polemicists also routinely questioned the sexual purity of female martyrs. According to Hoggarde, Protestant women “whose talke is nothing but of religion, of Peter and Paule, and other places of Scripture... are ready to allure their husbandes to dye in the lordes veritie, because they would fayne have newe.”<sup>7</sup> Catholic polemicists thus portrayed Protestant women as manipulative and sexually inconstant. In the case of martyrs, polemicists insinuated that these women did not wait for their husbands to die for the gospel to break their marriage vows. For example, in his criticism of Foxe, the Jesuit Robert Parsons pointed out that Anne Askew, one of the most famous English martyrs whose examinations were recounted by both John Bale and Foxe, was commended by Bale for “her bewty and youth,” and that given “that was but 25 yeares of age, when she was putt to death: yt is easily seene, what may be suspected of her lyfe.”<sup>8</sup> While Bale and Foxe had likely emphasized Askew’s youth and beauty in order to increase the dramatic impact of her martyrdom, Parsons used these characteristics to impugn her chastity. He further characterized her as “a coy dame, and of very evill fame for wantonnesse: in that she left the company of her husband Maister Kyme, to gad up and downe the countrey a ghospelling and ghossipinge where she might, and ought not.”<sup>9</sup> For Parsons, the martyred Askew was not a model of Christian virtue—she was a model of dangerous femininity: a woman who left her husband in order to live an unrestrained life that allowed her, via the interesting equation of gospelling and the negative feminine activity of gossiping, to infect other women with her socially deviant faith. Indeed, Parsons argued that “K[ing] Henry being informed that...she did in secrett seeke to corrupt divers people, but especially women, with whome she had conversed...he caused her to be apprehended and putt to the racke, to know the truth thereof.”<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Askew’s gospelling had the potential to corrupt women and this danger to other English women necessitated her torture and execution.

Parsons also used this interrelated concept of sexual impurity and religious contagion to discredit another female Foxian martyr, Alice Driver. Driver was arrested in 1558 while fleeing with another Protestant, Alexander Gouch, who had been hiding from the authorities in her house. According to Parsons, since “they two being taken together in a Haygulfe (as [Foxe] saith) by a Iustice of peace (no fitt place for such a couple to be conversant together),” meant that “a man may easily ghesse, how light a ghospellinge sister she was.”<sup>11</sup> Parsons also insisted that “the woman was the doctor of the man,” and that Gouch “was instructed by her in the new ghospell.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Driver had not only seduced Gouch sexually but spiritually, demonstrating that the behavior of Protestant women was threatening to men as well as other women.

Female martyrs thus posed a potential problem for Foxe and the interpretation of his work by both his confessional opponents and his Protestant readers. If Foxe intended female martyrs to function as examples of appropriate female behavior then that interpretive problem would have to be addressed. Were these women virtuous examples of steadfast Protestant

<sup>7</sup> Hoggarde, *The displaying of Protestantes*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Parsons, *A treatise of the three conversions of England from paganisme to Christian religion* (Saint-Omer: Francois Bellet, 1603), 495.

<sup>9</sup> Parsons, *A treatise on the three conversions of England*, 495.

<sup>10</sup> Parsons, *A treatise on the three conversions of England*, 493.

<sup>11</sup> Parsons, *A treatise on the three conversions of England*, 254.

<sup>12</sup> Parsons, *A treatise on the three conversions of England*, 254.

womanhood or the socially dangerous whores of confessional polemics? The question of female deviance has occupied the interpretive powers of both Foxe's confessional enemies and historians since the *Actes and Monuments* was first published. Although Foxe clearly employed gendered concepts throughout his work for a variety of persuasive and polemical purposes, his presentation of female behavior was at times inconsistent. Indeed, according to Susannah Brietz Monta this inconsistency "suggests that gender is not an all-encompassing, over-ruling category of analysis for him."<sup>13</sup> While gender and gendered expectations do impact Foxe's depiction of women in the *Book of Martyrs*, a close reading of the martyrology does not reveal significant authorial anxiety over the potentially deviant behavior of female martyrs. The importance of Foxe's historical context explains, in part, this lack of anxiety. Despite the insinuations levied by Catholic polemicists, Foxe and his Protestant readers could perceive female martyrs as heroines because their understanding of the deviant behavior of female martyrs was rooted in the context of their persecution—a time in which the true church was disrupted and under threat. Foxe intended these women to be role models, albeit models of the kind of behavior they should have exhibited in times of danger and persecution, which most women were unlikely to experience following the Elizabethan Settlement in 1559. However, much of the historiography of Foxe's female martyrs has focused on questions of female deviance and exemplarity without scholars fully incorporating this context of persecution and disruption into their analyses.

In 1973, Roland Bainton claimed that "John Foxe tells us more about the women of the Reformation in England than does any other source."<sup>14</sup> However, even though Foxe saw himself as a historian, he was more accurately a martyrologist and his work was shaped by the demands of martyrology. At best, the women in the *Book of Martyrs* can illustrate how Foxe believed women should behave. I. Ross Bartlett has therefore argued that the *Book of Martyrs* should be primarily understood as a hagiography and that Foxe intended to provide "exemplars of actions and attitudes he wished to take root in the reader's life."<sup>15</sup> However, since his portrayal of women in particular was often inconsistent, historians have wrestled with the issue of defining exactly what sort of message Foxe intended to provide readers regarding the appropriate behavior of godly women. In 1981, Carole Levin provided the prevailing interpretation of women in the *Book of Martyrs*. She argued that Foxe did in fact intend the women he included to serve as models for Protestant female conduct that demonstrated the traditional virtues of modesty, humility, and piety. According to Levin, Foxe's intentions were evident in the fates of his subjects: women who played traditionally submissive roles survived while those who were more assertive and sexually questionable, such as Anne Askew, died.<sup>16</sup> However, Levin retained a degree of ambivalence in her conclusions, warning against "the difficulty of too neatly categorizing the way Foxe presents women, and the message he is giving his women readers about appropriate women's roles."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Levin did not question the assumption that Foxe intended to provide Protestant women with role models of godly, feminine conduct.

Ellen Macek, on the other hand, argued that readers of the *Book of Martyrs* can perceive a model of maturing, independent feminine spirituality. According to Macek, "Foxe's female

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<sup>13</sup> Susannah Brietz Monta, "Foxe's Female Martyrs and the Sanctity of Transgression," *Renaissance and Reformation* 25, no. 1 (2001): 18.

<sup>14</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), 211.

<sup>15</sup> I. Ross Bartlett, "John Foxe as Hagiographer: The Question Revisited," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 4 (1995): 771.

<sup>16</sup> Levin, "Women in *The Book of Martyrs* as Models of Behavior," 201.

<sup>17</sup> Levin, "Women in *The Book of Martyrs* as Models of Behavior," 205.

confessors of the faith undergo a dual process of spiritual growth and moral liberation from the restraints of Tudor society and the Roman church.”<sup>18</sup> She argued that even though Foxe himself did not fully recognize or appreciate the subjectivity of his female martyrs, he still managed to present a message of empowered femininity through descriptions of their acts.<sup>19</sup> However, Macek’s interpretation fails to account for the fact that the women who appear in the *Book of Martyrs* are not speaking with their own voices. Information about them was crafted into narratives by the editorial and authorial hands of men, famously Foxe, but also other martyrologists and polemicists. The words they speak are not theirs—they are largely the inventions of male authors.

These assumptions in the scholarship have been challenged by the work of Thomas Freeman. Freeman emphasizes the constructed nature of the *Book of Martyrs* by examining Foxe’s papers and their provenance as well as analyzing the editorial changes made to those papers and to the *Actes and Monuments* as a whole as subsequent editions were compiled and published.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on tracking the editorial changes of male martyrologists has heavily impacted studies of female martyrs, particularly Anne Askew, by both historians and literary scholars.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Levin and Macek see the *Book of Martyrs* as an intentional or unintentional source for models of feminine behavior, Freeman and Sarah Elizabeth Wall argue that Foxe ultimately avoided the problem of providing deviant female role models by refusing to include information about the martyrs that could be damning. For example, Freeman and Wall argue that it is significant that Foxe removed a biographical preface to Askew’s examinations that praised her character after he likely learned about her marital history because “Foxe now thought that, in some respect, Askew was not an appropriate model for the godly to imitate.”<sup>22</sup> However, this argument is unsatisfying as it does not take into account other forms of potentially deviant behavior that Foxe readily described.

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<sup>18</sup> Ellen Macek, “The Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality in the Book of Martyrs,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 1 (1988): 64.

<sup>19</sup> However, Macek was pessimistic about the actual impact this empowered femininity had on later English women. According to Macek, “Foxe’s martyrs’ stories were edifying but served no effective role in the formation of Anglican spirituality for women.” In Macek, “Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality,” 79.

<sup>20</sup> For examples of this approach see: Thomas Freeman, “Texts, Lies, and Microfilm: Reading and Misreading Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs,’” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 1 (1999): 23-46; Freeman, “Research, Rumour and Propaganda: Anne Boleyn in Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs,’” *The Historical Journal* 38, no. 4 (1995): 797-819; Freeman, “Fate, Faction and Fiction in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs,” *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2000): 601-623; Freeman, “Print, Profit and Propaganda: The Elizabethan Privy Council and the 1570 Edition of Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs,’” *The English Historical Review* 119, no. 484 (2004): 1288-1307; Freeman and Sarah Elizabeth Wall, “Racking the Body, Shaping the Text: The Account of Anne Askew in Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs,’” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2001): 1165-1196.

<sup>21</sup> See Kimberly Anne Coles, “Death of the Author (And the Appropriation of Her Text): The Case of Anne Askew’s ‘Examinations,’” *Modern Philology* 99, no. 4 (2002): 515-539; Freeman and Wall, “Racking the Body, Shaping the Text,” 1165-1196; Theresa D. Kemp, “Translating (Anne) Askew: The Textual Remains of a Sixteenth-Century Heretic and Saint,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 1021-1045; Krista Kesselring, “Representations of Women in Tudor Historiography: John Bale and the Rhetoric of Exemplarity,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 22, no. 2 (1998): 41-61; Patricia Pender, “Reading Bale Reading Askew: Contested Collaboration in *The Examinations*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2010): 507-522. A notable exception to this trend in the scholarship is literary scholar Genelle Gertz, who argues that trial records constitute a genre of women’s writing that accurately reflect their authorial intentions. See: Genelle Gertz, *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Freeman and Wall, “Racking the Body, Shaping the Text,” 1180.

Most recently, Megan Hickerson has specifically focused on female English martyrs in her research. Hickerson argues, contrary to Levin and Freeman, that the behavior of female martyrs is in fact socially deviant and potentially disruptive. However, Hickerson argues that Foxe attempted to confine and dissipate the revolutionary nature of this deviance by utilizing the overarching historical model of the two churches—the true and the false. According to Hickerson, Foxe, following in the footsteps of his friend John Bale, “described individual women and used feminine imagery to express concepts: of good and evil, true and false, elect and reprobate, spiritual and carnal.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, Hickerson sees Foxe’s depictions of women as ways to express the dichotomies central to his construction of the true Protestant and false Catholic churches. According to Hickerson, Foxe constructed a model of the Catholic church as a false church that was specifically gendered as a whore of Babylon marked by the sexual indiscretions associated with the failure of its members to live up to the false ideal of celibacy. In contrast, the reformed Protestant church represented the true and persecuted church and was gendered as the virtuous bride of Christ. Death for a female martyr represented “a microcosmic ceremony reflecting Christ’s relationship with the collective body of his elect, the church.”<sup>24</sup> In this model, the deviance of female martyrs who defied earthly social norms was contained and dissipated because of their association with the true, chaste church. Nevertheless, Hickerson maintains that there was most likely a gap between intention and reception in the long-term impact of Foxe’s female martyrs on English women. According to Hickerson, female martyrs and other gospelling Protestant women featured in the *Book of Martyrs* remained threatening models of subversion of traditional gender norms.<sup>25</sup>

While Hickerson’s analysis of the ways in which ideas about gender and appropriate female behavior influenced Foxe’s work is valuable, it does not fully address Foxe’s attitude towards female martyrdom and its potentially deviant characteristics. Firstly, while Hickerson’s analysis of the role Foxe’s wider historical vision played in reconstructing appropriate gender boundaries is convincing, it does not adequately account for the experiences of the average reader of the *Book of Martyrs*. While the *Actes and Monuments* was an important work in the development of English Protestant identity, most readers (and especially later purchasers) of Foxe’s work did not encounter the *Actes and Monuments* so much as they encountered the *Book of Martyrs*, which was increasingly produced in shorter, edited volumes including only the last two sections recounting the experiences of the Marian martyrs.<sup>26</sup> The general reader wanted to cut to the gory and inspiring chase. As a result, Foxe’s larger historical narrative of the development of the two churches likely did not penetrate the general consciousness as much as the stories of individual martyrs and victims of the Marian persecutions did. General readers, therefore, would not have had access to the theological-historical narrative that, according to Hickerson, was essential to minimizing threats of female deviance.

In order to fully understand Foxe and his readers’ perception of female martyrdom, John Foxe and his martyrs must be placed back in their historical context of persecution—a time in which the proper authority of the true church was absent and traditional structures of family and community were disrupted. While it is important to remember the authorship of this text and the

<sup>23</sup> Hickerson, *Making Women Martyrs*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Megan L. Hickerson, “Gospelling Sisters ‘Goinge up and Downe’: John Foxe and Disorderly Women,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 4 (2004): 1044.

<sup>25</sup> Hickerson, “John Foxe and Disorderly Women,” 1050.

<sup>26</sup> John N. King, “Guides to Reading Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1-2 (2005): 149.

unsuitability of the *Book of Martyrs* as a source for learning about the real experiences and responses of the persecuted martyrs, the depictions of female martyrs do provide insight into Foxe's conception of gender-appropriate behaviors for godly women within a context of persecution. Previous historians have overemphasized the degree to which Foxe felt compelled to mitigate female deviance in his martyrology. The actions of female martyrs, no less than male martyrs, must be seen in the context of persecution. During the reign of Mary I, Foxe perceived true religion as under threat from political and religious authorities, intent on re-establishing a false church. In this context, resistance to these unjust earthly authorities constituted obedience to the higher authority of the true church. In this situation, the actions of female martyrs were forms of appropriate resistance rather than inappropriate feminine deviance.

Foxe's perception of the horror and degree of disruption caused by the Marian persecutions is illustrated by the story of the Guernsey martyrs. According to Foxe, "among all and singular Historyes touched in this Booke...so is there none almost either in cruelty to be

**A Lamentable Spectacle of three women, with a fely infant brasting  
out of the Mothers Wombe, being first taken out of the fire, and cast in agayne,  
and so all burned together in the Isle of Garnesey,  
1556. July. 18.**



Woodcut of the Guernsey martyrs. In John Foxe, *The Actes and Monuments* (London: 1583), 1944.

before the authorities on suspicion of heresy. Under examination, all three women admitted that they had conformed to the Protestant church during Edward VI's reign and had not attended since his death. However, they also agreed to obey the ordinances of Queen Mary and attend Catholic services in future.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the three women were condemned as heretics. On July 18, 1556, the three women were burned at the stake. Perotine Massey, heavily pregnant at the time, perhaps out of shock, went into labor during her execution and gave birth to a baby boy

compared or so farre off from all compassion and sense of humanity,<sup>27</sup> as the execution of three women in Guernsey in 1556. On May 27, three women, the widow Katherine Cawches and her two daughters Guillemine Gilbert and Perotine Massey, were framed for theft. Local authorities examined the women's neighbors, who claimed that the women "had lived always as honest women among them: saving onely that to the commaundementes of holy church, they had not been obedient."<sup>28</sup> Although this testimony cleared the three women of the charges of theft, they were brought

<sup>27</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1967.

<sup>29</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1967.

who was rescued from the flames by a local man. However, the magistrate insisted that the heretic child be thrown back into the flames, and so, according to Foxe, “the infant Baptised in his own blood, to fill up the number of Gods innocent Sayntes, was both borne, and dyed a Martyr.”<sup>30</sup>

As one of the most salacious and fantastic stories included in the *Book of Martyrs*, the Guernsey story was incredibly controversial among both Catholic and Protestant readers. However, Foxe insisted on the story’s inclusion and, by the final 1583 edition of the *Book of Martyrs*, had included pages of copied letters and records in the text in order to prove the story’s veracity. Foxe even included a lengthy defense of the virtue of the three women in response to Catholic polemicist Thomas Harding’s claim that the three women, and Perotine in particular, were most likely prostitutes. From a strictly martyrological standpoint, Foxe’s inclusion of the Guernsey story is bizarre. Since the women made no confession of faith and, according to Foxe, were perfectly willing to conform to the Catholic Church, they were not technically martyrs. However, the story did completely vilify the Catholic Church and Marian authorities and therein lay its value to Foxe’s martyrology. In Foxe’s words, it was “a spectacle wherein the whole world may see the Herodian cruelty of this graceless generation of catholicke Tormentors.”<sup>31</sup> In the story of the Guernsey martyrs, Catholic clergy and authorities acted brutally and completely outside the bounds of both law and humanity by insisting on the execution of three innocent women and a newborn baby.

In Foxe’s worldview, the false Catholic Church and the political authorities upholding it have no regard for law or true religion and therefore were not legitimate authorities owed respect and obedience. Foxe’s disdain for the illegitimate Marian authorities was exemplified by the dramatic and assertive behavior of female martyrs. For instance, before her examinations, Alice Driver had her ears cut off for comparing “Queene Mary in her persecution, to Iezabell, and so in that sense calling her Iezabel.”<sup>32</sup> By comparing Mary I to the biblical murderer of Hebrew prophets, Driver stripped the queen’s reign of spiritual legitimacy and thus justified her resistance. In the text, Driver also refuted representatives of Marian spiritual and civic authority with her insolent, principled responses to their questions. For instance, when Driver was admonished by a priest for refusing to answer her interrogators she “looked upon him austerely, and sayde: Why Priest, I come not to talke with thee.”<sup>33</sup> Under Driver’s gaze, “the Priest put his nose in hys cappe, and spake never a worde more.”<sup>34</sup> In effect, Driver’s refusal to obey the priest robbed him of both authority and voice within the narrative since he remained silent throughout the rest of the account. During her second interrogation, Driver demanded that Chancellor Gascoine show her where the word “Church” appears in the Scriptures. However, he was unable to produce a copy of the Bible.<sup>35</sup> Since Gascoine lacked the ability to reference the Scriptures, Driver questioned his authority to try her, asking “You say you sit here to iudge according to the law, and howe can you geve iudgement, and have not the booke of the law with you?”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the only law Foxe claimed Driver was required to recognize was scriptural. Similarly, Anne Albright declared at her trial that, “You Priests...are the children of perdition, and can doe no good by your Confession. And likewise speaking unto the Judge and his assistants, shee tolde

<sup>30</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2072.

<sup>33</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2072.

<sup>34</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2072.

<sup>35</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.

<sup>36</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.



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them that they were subverters of Christes truth.”<sup>37</sup> Once again, priests and the legal authorities supporting them were cast as illegitimate and powerless. In this context, Driver and Albright functioned as examples of commendable resistance rather than as examples of inappropriately assertive women.

In the *Book of Martyrs*, not only did traditional political and ecclesiastical authorities lose their spiritual legitimacy, so, in many cases, had the family. Foxe included many examples of families disrupted by Marian persecution. For example, Agnes Wardall was forced to live in England “among the tentes of the ungodly” while her husband Robert fled the country and was “driven by persecution to serve in a shippe,” despite the fact that he was not “a man nimble for that trade, because God had geven hym an impediment by reason of a stumped foote.”<sup>38</sup> Eventually, Agnes herself was forced to leave their child in the care of a maidservant in order to escape the authorities. William Dangerfield was arrested while his wife Joan was in labor.<sup>39</sup> Shortly afterwards, Joan herself was also arrested for her Protestantism and “was taken with her younge borne childe, being but 14 dayes olde...out of her childbed, and caryed into the common layle, and there placed amongst theves and murderers.”<sup>40</sup> While Joan was breastfeeding her baby in prison, “the Bishop beginneth to practise not with the woman first, as the serpent did with Eve, but with the man... falsely perswading him that his wife had recanted.”<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, in the story of the Dangerfields, Foxe played with the gendered image of the serpent deceiving Eve. Instead he cast the husband as the weaker of the two spouses. When the Dangerfields were reunited, Joan “hearyng what her husband had done, her hart clave a sunder,” and she chastised her husband, saying “Alacke, thus long have we continued one, and hath Satan so prevayled, to cause you to breake your first vow made to Christ in Baptisme?”<sup>42</sup> In this case, by showing spiritual weakness and recanting, William had broken not only his marriage vows to Joan but his “first vow” to Christ. Significantly, through the mouth of Joan Dangerfield, Foxe was claiming that Protestants owed their fidelity and obedience first to Christ and secondly, it was implied, to their earthly spouse. Unlike her husband, Joan refused to recant in order to escape prison and reunite with her family. Consequently, both Joan and her infant child died of exposure in prison since “shee and her poore innocent found so small charitie amongst the catholicke men, that she never could come to any fire.”<sup>43</sup> In the story of the Dangerfields, the comparison of the wife’s steadfastness and the husband’s weakness added further shame to her husband’s recantation. Foxe’s depiction of Joan Dangerfield also illustrates a core argument of the *Book of Martyrs*: loyalty and obedience to the heavenly authority of Christ trumped the loyalty and obedience owed to an earthly spouse.

This hierarchy of loyalties is particularly significant for understanding the decisions made by women within the *Book of Martyrs*. A common obstacle faced by Foxe’s female martyrs was a husband who conformed to the Catholic Church and insisted that they did as well—forcing Protestant women to choose between obedience to the traditional earthly authority of their husband or the heavenly authority of true religion. Although scholars such as Thomas Freeman have argued that Foxe was sensitive to the social implications of this dilemma and thus edited out references to Anne Askew’s life in order to conceal her abandonment of her husband and

<sup>37</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1983.

<sup>38</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1964.

<sup>39</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1977.

<sup>40</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1977.

<sup>41</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1977.

<sup>42</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1977.

<sup>43</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1977.

escape charges of promoting female deviance, this conclusion is untenable in the larger context of the *Book of Martyrs*. While Foxe did not deal with Askew's marital troubles, he did depict many female martyrs as sympathetically and righteously disobedient to their Catholic husbands. For example, Joyce Lewes refused to attend mass even though her husband conformed to the Catholic Church. Faced with his wife's intransigence, Lewes' husband declared that "hee woulde not loose or forfeit anye thinge for her sake: and so lyke a murtherer of his owne wife, caryed her to the bloudye B[ishop] where she was examined, and found more stout then shee was before death was threatened."<sup>44</sup> In the case of the Lewes family, Foxe invited his readers to applaud the disobedient, steadfast Joyce and vilify her conforming husband as the murderer of his wife. Likewise, when Alice Benden's husband insisted she attend mass with him and she refused, it was to "his owne shame, the said her husbände tooke money of the Constable to carry her to prisone, the price of his wives bloud, meaning in deede to carry her to prison him selfe."<sup>45</sup> Knowing her husband's intentions, "she having mucche more care of his honest and good report, the he had regard...of his owne infamie, and no less ashamed of his so rude and unnatural doings, chose rather to commit her selfe willingly into the hands of her enemies."<sup>46</sup> In this case, therefore, Benden was actually behaving appropriately as both a heavenly and earthly wife by turning herself in order to protect her husband's reputation. In these situations, even though the wives were disobedient, it was actually the husbands' behavior that Foxe condemned as deviant and unnatural.

Indeed, when torn between allegiance to the earthly family and the true church, Foxe supported the principal of a woman abandoning her ungodly family. The clearest example of this was a woman from Essex identified only as Prest's wife. According to Foxe, this woman "having a husbände and children" in Cornwall "much addicted to the superstitious sect of popery: was many times rebuked...and driven to go to the church, to their Idols and ceremonies... Which when her spirit could not abide to do, she made her prayer unto God, calling for helpe and mercy."<sup>47</sup> After praying for guidance, Prest's wife "in short space...beganne to grow in contempt of her husband and children, and so taking nothing from them...departed from them, seeking her lyving by labor and spinning as well as she could."<sup>48</sup> Significantly, Foxe implied that God moved Prest's wife to abandon her Catholic family and attempt to make her living independently. After Prest's wife was eventually apprehended as a Protestant by the authorities, she was questioned about her family and shamed for abandoning her husband and her wifely duties. She responded to these aspersions on her character and challenged her persecutors' definitions of appropriate wifely behavior by declaring that, "where I must either forsake Christ, or my husband, I am contented to sticke onely to Christ my heavenly spouse, and renounce the other."<sup>49</sup> Prest's wife's abandonment of her earthly family was thereby justified because it was necessary in order to obey the dictates of true religion. In other words, in cases where true religion is at stake, Foxe approved of women choosing to follow the mandates of legitimate heavenly rather than compromised earthly authority. Indeed, despite the fact that Prest's wife's abandonment of her husband and children exemplified the feminine deviance Miles Hoggarde claimed was inherent in female martyrdom, Foxe declares that Prest's wife was, "a rare example of constancy to all

<sup>44</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2036.

<sup>45</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.

<sup>48</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.

<sup>49</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.

professors of Christes holy Gospell.”<sup>50</sup> Since Prest’s wife’s circumstances completely justify her otherwise deviant behavior, Foxe betrayed no compunctions about depicting her as an example of religious virtue.

However, despite the exigencies of persecution, Marian Protestants were deeply concerned with the issue of wifely disobedience. Thomas Freeman’s work on the letters exchanged between imprisoned Marian martyrs and leading Marian exiles and their female co-religionists has demonstrated that male Protestants struggled over how to advise Protestant women with conforming husbands. Most male Protestant leaders advised Protestant women to shun the Mass, but to obey their husbands in every other respect. A woman could only leave her husband if she was certain he was going to denounce her to the authorities and place her life in danger and, in these cases, martyrdom was still preferable to flight. If a woman did successfully leave her husband, she was advised to maintain her chastity at all costs and to pray daily for her husband to embrace the true faith.<sup>51</sup> Part of the rationale for this stringent advice was a Protestant awareness of possible Catholic critiques that would associate Protestantism with sexual immorality in women. Like his contemporaries, Foxe was aware of the potential for a gendered critique of Protestantism and the association of Protestant women’s spiritual disobedience with sexual promiscuity. For instance, in one of the most memorable stories from the *Book of Martyrs*, Edmund Tyrrel interrogated the young Protestant Rose Allin about her beliefs while holding a “burning candell under her hande, burning crosse wise over the backe thereof, so long till the very sinowes crackt a sunder.”<sup>52</sup> As he tortured her, Tyrrel called Allin “thou noughty houswife,” claimed, “I perceive you will burne, gossip,”<sup>53</sup> and demanded, “why whore wilt thou not cry?”<sup>54</sup> Tyrrel’s repeated use of derogatory feminine terms such as “noughty houswife,” “gossip,” and “whore” illustrate not only his personal cruelty but the common accusations of the martyrs’ Catholic enemies.

Similarly, in his account of the martyrdom of Edmund and Katherine Allin in Maidstone, Foxe both highlighted and undercuts the common Catholic deprecation of Protestant women as whores. According to Foxe, Edmund Allin and his wife Katherine were arrested on suspicion of heresy in 1557. During their interrogations, the two were kept separated in prison until Edmund agreed to attend Mass. As a reward, their jailer Sir John Baker allowed Edmund to spend a night with his wife on the condition that Edmund would attempt to persuade her to attend Mass as well. However, during their reunion, “he told her what he had promised, and she with tears sayd, hee shoulde go alone for her. Then he likewise lamenting the same, sayd, he would go with her to death.”<sup>55</sup> In this case, Katherine Allin refused to obey her husband and fulfill his promise. Instead, her steadfastness and refusal to do so ultimately inspired him to choose martyrdom with his wife over recantation. The reunion of the Allins thus backfired on Catholic authorities. The next morning, when Edmund reneged on his promise to attend Mass, Baker identified Katherine as the cause and “he called out his wife, and sayd, thou old whore, thy husband would be a Christian but for thee. Then he beate her very sore with his staffe in his hand.”<sup>56</sup> Although the Catholic Baker thus labeled Katherine a whore, in the context of Foxe’s work the

<sup>50</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2073.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas S. Freeman, “‘The Good Ministrye of Godlye and Vertuose Women’: The Elizabethan Martyrologists and the Female Supporters of the Marian Martyrs,” *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 13-17.

<sup>52</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2031.

<sup>53</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2030.

<sup>54</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2031.

<sup>55</sup> John Foxe, *The Actes and Monuments* (London: 1576), 1896.

<sup>56</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1576), 1896.

inappropriateness of the slur is obvious. Not only did Katherine Allin not commit any form of sexual inconstancy to her husband, her resistance to her husband's initial wishes ultimately saved them both from the sin of spiritual inconstancy.

While the stories of both Tyrrel and Rose Allin and Edmund and Katherine Allin demonstrate Foxe's awareness of the sexual slanders of his Catholic opponents, only rarely did Foxe explicitly defend the reputations of his female martyrs from criticism. For instance, Foxe's lengthy defense of Perotine Massey's reputation is unprecedented in both its length and specificity as he refuted Thomas Harding's argument that she was an unwed mother, and therefore both a whore and a murderer, since she had failed to disclose her pregnancy out of shame. If she had alerted the authorities to her condition, Harding argued, her execution would have been postponed until after she had given birth. Therefore, Perotine Massey, not her Catholic executioners, was responsible for the grisly death of her son.<sup>57</sup> Foxe replied to Harding's accusations with spirit and disdain in the 1583 edition of the *Actes and Monuments*. As for the charge of murder, Foxe reminded Harding that "beinge big with childe at her condemnation... she did not conceale her turpitude."<sup>58</sup> In other words, Massey's pregnancy was so apparent that a verbal declaration was unnecessary.<sup>59</sup> In response to the question of the father of the newborn Guernsey martyr, Foxe replied, "to satisfy [Harding's] dainty desire here in, and partly to help the innocency of the woman... who should be the infantes father, who, say I, but his owne mothers husband? The name of which husband was David Iores," a schoolmaster who fled to Normandy under Mary I.<sup>60</sup> Since he had proof Massey was married, Foxe hoped Harding "shall well perceive, that whoredome, wheresoever I may knowe it, shall finde no bolstering by me, I wish it might finde as little amongst the chaste Catholickes of [Master Harding's] Church."<sup>61</sup> In this way, Foxe turned Harding's insinuations back against his confessional opponent. Significantly, Foxe also categorically denied that he would include women with loose sexual morals in his martyrology.

Nevertheless, Foxe seldom provided such conventional proof of sexual morality. Usually he simply relocated the issue of adultery from the temporal to the spiritual realm. For example, when Peter Moone was arrested on suspicion of Protestantism, the local man who turned him in told the bishop, "I have a good hope in the man, and that he will be conformable: but my Lord, he hath a perillous woman to his wife."<sup>62</sup> Moone's accuser thus suspected that Moone would likely recant but his wife would prove more stubborn. The bishop demanded to meet with Anne Moone. When they met, the bishop declared, "O good Lord...how a man may be deceived in a woman. I promise you a man would take her for as honest a woman, by all outward appearance, as can be."<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, reports of Anne Moone's staunch Protestantism had encouraged the bishop to expect her to also be an immodest woman. In the text, Anne Moone replied to the

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<sup>57</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1970.

<sup>58</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1971.

<sup>59</sup> This is not the only time Foxe claimed that Catholic authorities ignored the pregnancies of female martyrs. According to Foxe, Elizabeth Pepper, the widow of the martyr Thomas Pepper, was eleven weeks pregnant when she was burned at the stake in 1556. According to Foxe, when she told another woman about her condition and the other woman urged her to tell the authorities, Pepper responded, "why...they know it well enough. Oh suche is the bloody hartes of this cruell generation, that no occasion can stay them from their mischievous murdering of the saintes of the Lord." In Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 2145.

<sup>60</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1971.

<sup>61</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1971.

<sup>62</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1966.

<sup>63</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1966.

bishop's insinuation: "Why my Lorde, sayde Moones wife, I trust there is none that can charge me with any dishonesty, as concerning my body, I defy all the worlde in that respect."<sup>64</sup> Significantly, Anne Moone asserted her sexual honesty and obedience within her marriage but made no promises regarding her spiritual obedience to her husband. Likewise, Prest's wife defended herself against insinuations of sexual immorality by insisting that "I fled not for whoredom, nor for theft, but because I would be no partaker with [my husband] and his, of that foule Idoll the Mass."<sup>65</sup> According to Foxe, Prest's wife has only fled her husband in order to avoid committing the spiritually adulterous act of participating in the Mass. Both Anne Moone and Prest's wife were justified in their disobedience to their earthly husbands because they had to be in order to be spiritually obedient to God. In Foxe, Protestant women were subject to a hierarchy of obedience: first to God, second to their husbands. When the demands of the two came into conflict, women first had to be spiritually obedient. However, Foxe claimed that Protestant women could be spiritually disobedient to their husbands without compromising their sexual morality.

Furthermore, Foxe even suggested that obeying the earthly authority of Catholic magistrates could be a form of sexual immorality for Protestant women. During her examination for heresy, Cicely Ormes continually cast the stakes of her interrogation in terms of the flesh and sin. For example, when the Chancellor promised Ormes that, "if she would goe to the Church and keep her tongue, shee should be at lybertie, and beleve as shee would," Ormes responded to his proposal that she become a Nicodemite by declaring, "shee would not consent to his wicked desire therein, doe wyth her what he would."<sup>66</sup> Frustrated, the Chancellor told Ormes that, "he had shewd more favour to her, then ever he did to any, and that he was loth to condeme her, considering that she was an ignoraunt, unlearned, and foolish woman."<sup>67</sup> In response, Ormes once again twisted his alleged favoritism and desire for her religious conformity into an almost sexual threat that she had to resist, claiming that "he should not be so desirous of her sinfull flesh, as she would (by Gods grace) be content to geve it in so good a quarell."<sup>68</sup> In this exchange, Ormes represented the Chancellor's attempts to convince her to outwardly conform by attending Mass as a seduction she, as a Protestant, had to resist. Ultimately, Ormes did successfully resist this sexual-spiritual seduction and instead offered her "sinfull flesh" to God in her willingness to be a martyr for the true faith.

Significantly, Foxe's female martyrs only defied certain kinds of authority: the representatives of the false church and illegitimate government of Mary I and husbands who show spiritual weakness by practicing Catholicism. Both Foxe and readers of the *Book of Martyrs* considered the behavior of female martyrs in light of the exigencies created by Marian persecution. Foxe therefore did not bother to mitigate specifically feminine deviance because that deviance was a perfectly justified form of resistance under the harsh and unnatural conditions inflicted by the unjust authority wielded by the church, political authorities, and spiritually compromised husbands in Marian England. In Foxe's opinion, women not only could have but should have defied these spiritually compromised authorities without necessarily endangering their sexual reputations, despite the slanders of their Catholic opponents and

<sup>64</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 1966.

<sup>65</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 2073.

<sup>66</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 2047.

<sup>67</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 2047.

<sup>68</sup> Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1583), 2047.

persecutors. Foxe's female martyrs were good Protestant women acting under extraordinary circumstances.

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