

MEGHAN NIEMAN

## Foxe's Female Martyrs and the Utility of Interiority

THE POPULARITY OF JOHN FOXE'S *Acts and Monuments* has been well established. It became the Protestant equivalent of Jacob de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, a handbook of the Roman Catholic church, celebrating the lives of the saints. Like de Voragine's book, *Acts and Monuments*, which became popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*, was phenomenally successful, as reflected in its record of publication. Helen White tells us that although the legend that a copy of *Acts and Monuments* was kept in every parish church together with the Bible is probably apocryphal, a copy was certainly kept in every cathedral church, and every church authority would have had a copy in the hall or dining room of his house for the use of all who visited. Foxe's book, she argues, was second only to the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* for its influence upon Protestant England.<sup>1</sup> This paper will attempt to resurrect the female martyrs of *Acts and Monuments*, and examine the little-studied preface entitled "The Utility of This Story" in which Foxe first defends his work and then explains its intended function. Two imperatives seem to be at work in *Acts and Monuments*: firstly (and the one which is concentrated upon in the "Utility" section), the burden of self-surveillance or rather the necessity of interiority, but then secondly, the need for testimony of one's faith, or rather, an externalizing of that belief. And while each of the martyrs I look at experiences an intense period of introspection and sublimation, this paper will move beyond the spiritual plight of these women to a consideration of the socio-political liberation Protestant activism afforded them.

Foxe was a believer in the power of print in the Protestant crusade. With the Reformation, the locus of authority, or at least an important part

---

<sup>1</sup> Helen White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1963) 167-68.

of that authority, moved from a hierarchy and a community which joined together in pilgrimages and feast-day parades, to readers and authors. As priests no longer had the power in the confessional to absolve the penitent of sins, the responsibility of one's soul became a personal matter. Now, instead of exterior or institutional checks, salvation became dependent upon self-surveillance—hence the importance of the written word.<sup>2</sup> And while Foxe, at the start of his "Utility" preface, laments the explosion of works being published—implying that he is modestly begging our pardon for his own participation in this *zeitgeist*—it is also clear that he feels this "Pentecost of printing," as Susan Felch refers to it, will help to fell the Papacy.<sup>3</sup> Foxe writes: "As nothyng made the Pope strong in time past, but lacke of knowledge, and ignoraunce of simple Christians, so contrarywise, now nothyng doth debilitate and shake the hie spire of his Papacie so much as reading, preaching, knowledge and iudgment, that is to saye, the fruite of printyng."<sup>4</sup> What follows is Foxe's anxiety over the potential diffuseness of interpretation, which is registered in the plethora of "scholia" or "helps," as he calls them (woodcuts, cartoon-like ribbons emanating from people's mouths, margin directions and editorials). These are so instructive that Warren Wooden argues Foxe was partially directing the 1570 edition to children.<sup>5</sup> What we see, then, is each edition of *Acts and Monuments* increasingly resembling a manual on how to read, and an author intent on shaping his readers.

So if the first part of Foxe's programme of salvation is constancy and steadfastness (an interior purity and strength), and the second part is the external performance of those beliefs in order to inspire others, this book is Foxe's testimony of his faith. The inspiration for the stoutheartedness of the martyrs we read about, and the pious reflection that inspires it, comes from an interiority—and this is what Foxe concentrates on in the "Utility" preface, as we shall see shortly. However, it is not always appropriate to remain silent and obedient, we learn, and the exemplars he marches before us are almost all forced to turn this interior resistance outward in an act of "*martyria*," the Greek root of which means "to witness." This, of course,

---

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the Protestant duty of self-examination, see Effie Botonaki, "Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen's Spiritual Diaries: Self-Examination, Covenanting, and Account Keeping," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30.1 (1999): 3–21.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Felch, "Shaping the Reader in *Acts and Monuments*," in *John Foxe and the English Reformation*, ed. David Loades (Aldershot: Scolar, 1997) 52–65.

<sup>4</sup> John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1570) 838.

<sup>5</sup> Warren W. Wooden, "John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the Child Reader," *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference of the Children's Literature Association, University of Florida, March 1982* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1983) 147–56.

becomes difficult to deal with, particularly for a writer so intent on controlling the reactions of his readers, when the subject of his commentary is a woman.

Unlike de Voragine's female saints, Foxe's heroes do not tend to be from the upper class. Except for a handful of women martyrs, including that most famous of martyrs, Anne Askew, Foxe's women are firmly fixed in the middle and working classes. These, then, were not people removed from the average early modern reader or listener by class and time. They were homegrown heroes, people from one's country or a neighbouring town, men and women who were, perhaps, remembered by this reader's grandfather, and that reader's mother's friend. Small domestic details, the courtesy of a guard to a certain prisoner or the description of someone giving away items of clothing at the stake, help to shut down any "odor of sanctity."<sup>6</sup> And Foxe's occasional hints at emotional turbulence give us at least intermittent evidence of spiritual struggles. These people are strong. These people are courageous, one feels when reading these stories. But they are just regular people.

Foxe's desire to shape his readers and guide their responses to these stories is particularly evident in his prefatory sub-section entitled "The Utility of This Story." After lamenting what he calls the "infinite multitude" of books, most of which are "superfluous and needless" and far outstrip the number of readers, Foxe explains his reasons for setting down this Protestant martyrology. Firstly, he believes these "memorable acts and famous doings" must be preserved from falling into the "darkness of oblivion," and appears to feel that if they are not it is through some default of his own. In other words, Foxe appears to feel a personal responsibility to record these stories. The second reason he states as follows:

But above all other things, nothing did so much stir me forward hereunto, as the diligent consideration and special regard of the common utility which every man plentifully may receive by the reading of these our "Monuments" or Martyrology; which history as I have taken in hand chiefly for the use of the English church, so have I framed it in that tongue which the simple people could best understand. (xxv)<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> John Knott discusses this in *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature: 1563–1694* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 46–47.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from the "The Utility of This Story" preface, indicated by Roman-numeral parenthetical references, are taken from the following edition of Foxe: *Acts and Monuments*, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1965) xxv–xxvii. This section of the AMS edition is based on the 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments*.

Although women are not specifically referred to as potential readers, the fact that he is framing his accounts in the simple language of the people suggests that these stories were not only to be read in private by those who could afford books, but to be read aloud in churches for the benefit of all those assembled.

Foxe then proceeds to tell us how much more meet it is for us to read and listen to the wholesome stories of Christ's soldiers than to indulge in stories which chronicle "worldly affairs, the strategems of valient captains, the roar of foughten fields, the sacking of cities, the hurlyburlies of realms and peoples" (xxv). Interestingly, Foxe avoids any sort of promotion of the often lurid or "tabloid" quality of his own accounts (the examinations, the tortures, the executions which are often described in colourful detail).<sup>8</sup> Rather, he concentrates on the martyrs' "cheerfulness and courage in suffering," as he calls it, and on what these accounts can do for us: namely, "confirm faith, increase godliness, abate pride in prosperity, and in adversity ... open an hope of heavenly comfort" (xxxv). The major difference the author stresses between his heroes and worldly heroes like Alexander, Hector, Scipio, and the warlike Julie, is that while the latter group delights in torturing or killing others, Foxe's martyrs delight in being tortured or killed.

In the next section, instead of making distinctions between worldly soldiers and the soldiers of Christ, Foxe concentrates on making comparisons between specific martyrs of the primitive church and those of the reformed church. This was the kind of impulse which drew criticism from more radical reformers who accused Foxe of replicating the idolatry of Roman books like *The Golden Legend*. In his attempt to demonstrate the saintly quality of these contemporary martyrs, the author first employs a metaphor of pious battle ("They [the early martyrs], standing in the forward of the battle, did receive the first encounter and violence of their enemies ...; these [the recent martyrs], with like courage again, like old beaten soldiers, did win the field in the rearward of the battle"), and then he uses a metaphor of pious farming ("They, like famous husbandmen of the world, did sow the fields of the church ...; these, with fatness of their blood, did cause it to batten and fructify"). Perhaps most significantly, Foxe then invites the reader to partake of this glorious cause, to become a part of this holy continuity, by

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, his description of Hooper's sizzle over a slow fire for three quarters of an hour. Foxe describes in graphic detail his blackened mouth and swollen tongue, and the arm that beat the breast until it fell off (AMS edition, vol. 6, 658). Although the author frequently protests at the horribleness of his material, his inclusion of grisly details often seems unrestrained.

joining the ranks of these Christian leaders (“Would to God the fruit might be speedily gathered into the barn, which only remaineth behind to come!” [xxvi]).

The most resonant part of this preface is where Foxe urges his readers to use these martyrs not only as a template, but to see them as a reflection of themselves. “For what man,” he writes, “reading the misery of these godly persons may not therein, as in a glass, behold his own case, whether he be godly or godless?” (xxv–xxvi). Clean living, Foxe argues, is the result of clean reading, so if you aren’t godly to start with, perhaps you will be by the end of *Acts and Monuments*. Besides, Foxe adds, these stories might be immediately useful if a reader ever finds himself in similar circumstances (“if by God’s permission they shall happen hereafter”). Foxe continues:

Methinks I have good cause to wish, that, like as other men, even so also kings and princes, who commonly delight in heroical stories, would diligently peruse such monuments of martyrs, and lay them always in sight, not only to read, but to follow, and would paint them upon their walls, cups, rings, and gates. (xxvi)

Foxe ends this short manifesto with specific instructions to his readers on how they should utilize the lessons contained in these pious chronicles: imitate the innocence and constancy of these recent martyrs; mortify your own flesh; put aside the riches and glory of the world for the love of Christ; be forgiving; imitate their power and strength; avoid giving offence but practise patience when someone offends you; and finally, be prepared to die for your beliefs. That these instructions, to imitate and mirror not only the spirit of these religious rebels but also their actions, were given to the masses is significant. That they were also meant for women is truly extraordinary. For surely the idea of a generation of women putting down their looms and following in the footsteps of women like Anne Askew or Elizabeth Young was a radical one.

One wonders, then, if the proximity of these female heroes to the average English woman didn’t make people feel slightly anxious. Carole Levin assures us that Foxe was an enthusiastic supporter of the womanly virtues of modesty, humility, sweetness, and piety.<sup>9</sup> But how, then, do we explain the fact that he also parades before us examples of women who leave their husbands and families to pursue their own “consciences,” who talk back, cross-dress, form their own “conventicles” or co-fraternities, and say no to the establishment? Foxe makes it abundantly clear that it is not always a virtue to remain silent and obedient. Alice Bendon, we are told,

---

<sup>9</sup> Carole Levin, “Women in *The Book of Martyrs* as Models of Behaviour in Tudor England,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 4.2 (1981): 196–207.

refused to go to church because of the “idolatry” practised there—even when admonished and commanded by her husband, Edward, who springs her from prison once but fails in his second attempt. She calls the Bishop of Dover “a most obstinate, irreclaimable heretic” to his face, and conducts herself, Foxe writes, “with remarkable courage”; he tells us that she sets an example to her fellow martyrs, four out of six of whom are men (423).<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Bosom (497) is persuaded to go to church, but once there makes a scene: “contrary in all things to the doings of the papists, she behaved herself so, that when they kneeled she stood, when they turned forward, she turned backward, & c.” Elizabeth Edmunds, the Protestant housekeeper of the Mayor of Chester, also takes matters into her own hands. When Dr. Cole, the Mayor’s brother who is stationed in Dublin, arrives for a stop-over *en route* to Ireland with a commission from Queen Mary to “lash the heretics of Ireland,” the housekeeper secretly takes the commission out of the box and replaces it with a pack of cards, knave face up. By the time Cole discovers the trick and attempts to rectify it, Mary is dead and Queen Elizabeth rewards Edmunds with £40 per annum. Mrs. Gaunt and Lady Lisle both conceal “traitors” (596). Joan Hornes, when grilled about her disbelief in transubstantiation, asks the church brass to “prove it,” and then says, in reference to the bishop and the Pope, “I detest them as abominations” (389). Mrs. Anne Lacy is forced to hide her vernacular Bible and other books in a dunghill (498). Elizabeth Prest’s long account tells how she left her labourer-husband and her three children after being forced to go to church. Traveling from place to place, maintaining herself by labour and spinning, she is finally brought before the church authorities. Before she is burnt, she tells them “where I must forsake Christ, or my husband, I am contented to stick only to Christ, my heavenly spouse, and renounce the other” (472). Joan Waste, whom Foxe describes as a “poor blind woman, at Derby,” purchases a New Testament in English and pays a man to read to her as directed. She becomes well-versed in holy scriptures and an accomplished debater on the finer points of religion, but calls herself “a poor, blind, and illiterate woman” to her accuser, Dr. Taylor (409). Perhaps the most sympathetic of the female martyrs, Foxe tells us that she is “terrified” at their threatenings of “imprisonment, torments, and death.” We are also told that she repeats prayers at her death and “desired the spectators to pray also for her departing soul”—almost as if she does not wholly trust God, her co-conspirator.

---

<sup>10</sup> Parenthetical page numbers in Arabic numerals refer to the 1845 edition (Philadelphia: James M. Campbell).

Perhaps Foxe's three most famous worthy women are Mrs. Joyce Lewis, Elizabeth Young, and Anne Askew. Joyce Lewis's martyrdom is, I think, most noteworthy in the way it mimics that of the original Christian martyr (432). Her story, much of it told in her own words, effectively appropriates Christ's passion, with a few temporal changes. After being turned over to the bishop's thugs by her husband in a Judas-like exchange for the clearance of a £100 fine he owed, she spends the evening reading, talking, and praying with her supporters (reminiscent of Jesus' night in the garden). She struggles with the voices of Satan in the middle of the night, but awakens in the morning. Two of her friends help her as she is driven through town to the cheers and jeers of bystanders. She prays with the people, we are told, and even stops for a drink. Her friends drink with her, as do the women of the town (a re-enactment of the Last Supper with an all-female cast?). Finally, we are told that she lifts up her hands towards heaven all the while she is burning—a gesture reminiscent of Jesus who, although he could not lift up his hands, lifted up his voice to God and said "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."<sup>11</sup>

The account of Elizabeth Young, a lengthy and full one, was obviously a story which much interested Foxe (489–95). It begins with a description of her trip to Amsterdam to get books on the Reformation (including one called *Antichrist* which was directed against the Queen) in order to bring them back and disperse them around London. It is not clear what Young's status is, or where she gets her money. No husband is mentioned, nor is she called a widow; she simply appears to be a free agent. The remarkable thing about Young's story is that she is brought to examination thirteen times—and survives. In fact, she is examined so many times that even Young herself appears to tire of it. During one session, when asked where she was born and who her mother and father were, she tells her examiner to get to the point. She is repeatedly called unflattering names by Dr. Martin, her most regular inquisitor—names that the gentlemanly editors of the 1845 edition won't even spell out—but she argues with the savvy of a barrister.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Foxe tells us that when she calls her accuser by name at one point, "then he raved as though he were stark mad, and said, Martin! Why callest thou me

---

<sup>11</sup> Luke 24.46 *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Insults which cast aspersions on the female martyr's chastity (even when there is no evidence that such a label is warranted, as in the story of the Guernsey Martyrs) are a common feature of these trials. One can only assume that the suggestion of sexual incontinence was one of the most offensive taunts that could be hurled at a sixteenth-century woman. Dr. Martin's favourite versions appear to be "rebellious whore" and "traitorous whore."

Martin?" When her evasive and ironical answers finally defeat Dr. Martin, two other interrogators, Bonner and Cholmley, take over. One interesting exchange is reported in which Cholmley begins, "Twenty points it is a man in woman's clothes, twenty points it is a man!" Elizabeth Young, apparently not flattered by this, replies "My lord, I am a woman." To which Cholmley responds "I will lay twenty pounds it is a man," obviously refusing to believe that an opponent with so much emotional, intellectual, and physical mettle (she is in seclusion and being starved throughout her inquisitions) could hail from the "weaker sex." Finally Young settles it with a domestic detail, saying "I say I am a woman and have children," and offers to be strip-searched to prove that very point. Cholmley is left no satisfactory rejoinder but to call her an "ill-favoured whore." After thirteen debates in which she bests her accusers every time, Young is finally set free for the most "womanly" of reasons. When her two baby-sitters become worried that they are going to be stuck with the permanent care of her three children, they come and sue for her release.

Finally, Foxe's account of Anne Askew (much of it in her own words) caused her to become one of the best-known martyrs of the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> He tells us that she is descended of "good family," and that she is said to have received an "accomplished education." It certainly shows in her debates with the Bishop of London, who is presented as an oleaginous fellow who is easily out-witted by her "weak woman's wit." Having come to London to seek a divorce from her husband, Askew nonetheless has friends and family in high places who plead on her behalf. Perhaps for this reason, the bishop and religious officers seem to spend considerable time trying to persuade her to recant and to turn in others of her "sect." Like Elizabeth Young, Askew's most powerful weapon appears to be her tongue. She is brave, brash, and witty in her responses to examiners, but when she thinks it prudent to remain silent she rehearses Solomon's famous words, "a woman of few words is the gift of God" (207). The final section on Askew is devoted to her torture and murder. When she refuses to cry while being racked, the Lord Chancellor and another officer called Rich, "throwing off their gowns," as Foxe puts it, rack her with their own hands until she is almost dead (but then attempt to reason "flatteringly" with her one last time). At the end, Askew is so mangled that she has to be carried to the stake

---

<sup>13</sup> See Levin, "Women in *The Book of Martyrs*" 200. See also Elizabeth Mazzola, who looks at Askew's personal record of her trial in "Expert Witnesses and Secret Subjects: Anne Askew's *Examinations* and Renaissance Self-Incrimination," *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women*, ed. Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995) 157-71.



on a chair, but still she manages to alternately confirm or contradict the priest's final sermon before she and three others are burned.<sup>14</sup> Foxe seems to enjoy telling us how many noteworthy people were in attendance, and exploits the drama of the crown's one last offer of pardon if she will only recant. Askew, of course, refuses, and the Lord Mayor himself commands the fire to be put to the heretics. Her constancy is documented as a source of inspiration for the three men condemned to die with her—a significant reversal of the inspiration women are traditionally meant to receive from men.<sup>15</sup>

These women are celebrated by Foxe and the Protestant establishment. They are lifted up as examples for readers to follow, when surely a mass following of their ways would have turned early modern society upside down. The choice they had to make was between God and their families, and choosing God often meant rejection by or rejecting their loved ones. Even if rejection was not a factor, Ellen Macek notes that their radical beliefs certainly promised a physical separation from their families (whether freely chosen or enforced) which must have caused disorder in Tudor society, "even while it enhanced the nascent moral autonomy of the women involved."<sup>16</sup> These stories show Herculean women verbally half-nelsoning men; they are cool and the men lose control. How was this not interpreted as a reversal of gender roles? How did Foxe manage these good but potentially unruly women?

Even though his promotion of unorthodox female behaviour is what really resonates at the end of Foxe's tome, there is throughout a sense of slight discomfort with his representation of female exemplarity.<sup>17</sup> In one

---

<sup>14</sup> Janel M. Mueller critiques Elain Scarry's transhistorical theory of torture in Part Two of *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), arguing that Foxe presents torture as an occasion for the making of the self rather than the unmaking of the self, as in Scarry's paradigm. My approach to Foxe's "athletes of piety" is similar to Mueller's.

<sup>15</sup> Diane Willen looks at Askew's importance as an example to the Marian martyrs in "Women and Religion in Early Modern England," in *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe*, ed. Sherrin Marshall (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 140–65. Willen's discussion includes Englishwomen's participation in radical Protestantism, as well as female Catholic recusants.

<sup>16</sup> "The Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality in *The Book of Martyrs*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19.1 (1988): 74.

<sup>17</sup> Susannah Brietz Monta explores the interpellative process in *Acts and Monuments* as an act of intimidation. "Foxe's sidenotes ... are insistent; they bully the godly reader to read the martyrs' words as their editor does" (8). While my reading of Foxe and his handling of the female martyrs is one of inflected discomfort, Brietz Monta sees a great deal of anxiety. "Foxe's Female Martyrs and the Sanctity of Transgression," *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.1 (2001): 3–22.

instance, for example, he will bombard us with the “fact” that women are “sely” and “poor”, while in the next recount for us the story of Julietta (an early martyr) who *rails* against the notion that women are naturally weak.<sup>18</sup> Foxe himself seems a bit confused, or at the very least ambiguous about the “true” capabilities of women. In the end, he appears to ascribe all female strength to divine intervention, so that these figures cease to be women and instead function as agents of God. Interestingly, the intermediary aid that God sends down to them is well-timed injections of “manly” spirit—perhaps borrowed from the shells of the interrogators these women spend their time outwitting. And while Suzanne Brietz Monta, in her discussion of the martyr Joan Dangerfield,<sup>19</sup> argues that Foxe suggests “only exceptional women may do as she does, and only under certain circumstances,” my assertion is quite the opposite. The “Utility” section—hitherto ignored by critics, but essential in that it lays out a reading strategy for the reader—implies, rather, that we can and should all seek to reproduce the qualities of the martyrs in ourselves either literally (if God should so choose) or in the spirit of our daily lives.<sup>20</sup>

What presumably begins, then, as a set of beliefs these women held in their heart—that is, an internal or interior meditation—becomes the occasion for their socio-political liberation once they are called upon to testify to those convictions. Of course, most of these female martyrs are dead by the end of *Acts and Monuments*, so they were unlikely to have inspired impostors looking for a convenient escape from a society which demanded feminine chastity, silence, and obedience. What I do contend, though, is that Foxe’s book destabilizes gender roles enough that a question mark remains around what might have stuck with—especially women—readers or listeners after the cover was closed. Was it the exhortations of sections like

---

<sup>18</sup> Julietta urges the women surrounding her to “cease to accuse the fragilitye of feminine nature. What? are we not created of the same matter, that men are? Yea, after Gods image and similitude are we made, as lyvely as they. Not fleshe onelye God used in the creation of the woman, in signe and token of her infirmity and weakenes, but bone of bones is she, in token that she must be strong in the true and living God, al false Gods forsaken” (Foxe, 1845 ed., 132–33).

<sup>19</sup> After her sentence has been handed down and she is encouraged to recant and return to her family, Joan Dangerfield retorts: “I wyll never turne from my heavenly husband, to my earthly husband: from the felowshippe of aungels, to mortall children: And if my husband and children be faythfull, then I am theirs.” As Brietz Monta points out, the faithfulness of her family is the condition under which her submission may be secured. “Foxe’s Female Martyrs” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Foxe urges us to “imitate their death (as much as we may) with like constancy, or their lives at the least with like innocency” (xxvii).

“The Utility of This Story,” asking us to be forgiving, patient, and “cheerful and courag[eous]” in our suffering? Or was it the dramatic details of the martyrs’ lives (lives Foxe encourages us to model our own lives on) who say “no” to the establishment? With an author who is as anxious as Foxe to ensure the interpretive coherence of his readers and listeners, it is useful to consider and question how much power a writer really has to control the responses of a reader.

