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## WOMEN IN *THE BOOK OF MARTYRS* AS MODELS OF BEHAVIOR IN TUDOR ENGLAND

CAROLE LEVIN

### ABSTRACT

*John Foxe's The Book of Martyrs had enormous impact in Elizabethan England. His presentation of women was an effective guide to women readers about appropriate behavior patterns. The ideals for women in the Renaissance were basically the passive Christian virtues such as modesty, humility, sweetness and piety. Foxe was certainly concerned with these Christian virtues for women; however, in certain ways his positive examples of strong women not only reinforced, but also modified this point of view.*

### INTRODUCTION

One book that had enormous impact in the Protestant England of Elizabeth was John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, later known as *The Book of Martyrs*, first published in 1563. "Englishmen in general in the reign of Elizabeth accepted it as an expression of the national faith second in authority only to the Bible and an unanswerable defence of England's ideological position." (1) Historians have in fact suggested that it was nearly as influential as the Bible itself, and indeed was placed next to the Bible in many churches throughout England. It went through five editions in the 16th century. In 1571 the upper house of convocation at Canterbury ordered that a copy of *The Book of Martyrs* be installed in every cathedral church, and every member of the hierarchy from archbishop to resident canon should have one in his home available to all who came. The parish churches were not named in this order, but many also had copies of Foxe. And if people could not read the work themselves, they could at least look at the many woodcut illustrations while preachers explained the text. As D.M. Loades puts it, *The Book of Martyrs* "joined the Bible as a prop of the Anglican establishment." (2) New editions of Foxe were issued in the 1570's and '80's, and the material in it was even more readily available after 1589 when Dr. Timothy Bright published *An Abridgement . . . for such as either through want of leysure, or abilitie, have not the use of so necessary an history.* (3)

Foxe had made the decision to publish his work on the martyrs and the history of the Christian church in English, thus providing him with a much larger audience. As a good humanist, he had first considered Latin (his earliest work on the martyrs, written during his exile, was in Latin) but he felt the English people had the best claim on this information, and it could only reach them in the vernacular. An audience for a work on the martyrs had already been developing. Even during Mary's reign, "ballad-makers wove the names of the . . . men and women burned as heretics . . . into songs glorifying their heroism and blackening the clergy who burned them." (4) In the first half of 1559 Thomas Brice's *Compendious Register in Metre* was published. This work glorified the Marian

martyrs in doggeral verse. (5) According to J.F. Mozley, the “spontaneity and fire and . . . warm heart” that Foxe clearly expressed in his writing quickly found him readers. (6) Writing in 1583, Philip Stubbes recommended the lessons to be learned from the Bible and *The Book of Martyrs*. (7) A.G. Dickens suggests *The Book of Martyrs* was “in countless gentle, clerical and middle-class houses, even in those where other books seldom intruded.” (8) We know from letters and diaries of the time that women of both the middle-class and the aristocracy read Foxe. Lady Margaret Hoby even had it read aloud to her ladies. Another example is Elizabeth Wallington, wife of a turner in Eastcheap, who read Foxe along with the Bible and English chronicles. (9)

The reason Foxe wrote was to “honour the dead victims, and warn and encourage the living.” (10) Many of those Foxe chose to write about were women, and the manner in which he presented them would in certain special ways indeed warn and encourage women readers about what were appropriate behavior patterns for them. The way Foxe presented women is significant not only because of his tremendous popularity and influence, but also, suggests Roland Bainton, because “John Foxe tells us more about the women of the Reformation in England than does any other source.” (11) There is quite a debate on the veracity of Foxe. And, indeed, he may have improved on some of the speeches he reports. What is significant in this context, however, is the way Foxe presents these women, accurate or not. (12)

I would like to look at several different examples of women John Foxe presented in his *Book of Martyrs*: his discussion of women who were themselves queens, as well as the wife of a man arrested for heresy, women who were martyred for their beliefs, and one woman arrested for heresy, but who managed to survive her interrogation. Didactic literature of the 16th century advised women to be models of chaste, passive obedience. Pearl Hogrefe and Ruth Kelso both suggest that the ideals for women of the Renaissance were basically the passive Christian virtues. Sermons and courtesy books emphasized such qualities as modesty, humility, sweetness, and piety. (13) Though Foxe is certainly concerned with Christian virtues for women, in certain ways the examples in *The Book of Martyrs* not only reinforce, but also modify this point of view.

## THE MARTYRS

### Katherine Parr

Foxe writes extensively about one of Henry VIII's queens in a manner that is very interesting in terms of the lessons suggested for the survival of an intelligent, forceful woman. Katherine Parr was a “virtuous and excellent lady,” as well as a loving wife:

For never handmaid sought with more careful diligence to please her mistress, than she did, with all painful endeavour, to apply herself, by all virtuous means, in all things to please his humour.

Despite these qualities, Katherine Parr ran into trouble in her dealings with her lord and husband. Henry VIII, according to Foxe, “misliked to be contended withal in any kind of argument.” (14) (What a discreet way of putting it!)

Because of her intense faith, Katherine with “reverent terms and humble talk” would discuss the Scriptures with the king. Even reverence and humility were not enough once Henry was in an ill humor. Their discussions appeared amicable enough until “by reason of his sore leg (the anguish whereof began more and more to increase), he waxed sickly, and therewithal forward, and difficult to be pleased.” (15)

Katherine left the room after one such discourse with Henry; the king then turned to Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester (and one of Foxe’s principle villains) and muttered: “A good hearing . . . it is, when women become such clerks; and a thing much to my comfort, to come in mine old days to be taught by my wife.” Gardiner’s calculated response only stirred up Henry’s anger and displeasure. As a result, Gardiner left the king’s presence with a warrant to draw up articles against the queen. Winchester began to secretly gather information against Katherine’s religious practices to be used in a heresy trial. (16)

Though Henry had agreed to the drawing up of the articles against Katherine, Foxe suggests that he never intended to use them. This is of course a debatable interpretation. Even if it is true, however, it was clearly a most effective way for Henry to teach Katherine not to behave in a manner he deemed inappropriate in a woman.

According to Foxe, in an extravagant coincidence, the bill of articles drawn up against Katherine, which Henry himself had signed, was mislaid, found by “some godly person” who immediately brought it to Katherine. The queen was at once sick with fright (quite understandably, given the track record of her predecessors); she “fell incontinent into a great melancholy and agony.” (17)

When Henry heard his wife was so ill her life might be despaired of, he sent his physician to her — after swearing him to secrecy about the fact that he was about to have the queen arrested. Dr. Wendy valued Katherine, and “in secret manner” exhorted her “to frame and conform herself into the king’s mind.” Should she show Henry “her humble submission unto him, she should find him gracious and favourable unto her.” Here was a clear recipe of what was acceptable behavior for a woman. (18)

Katherine had the presence of mind to tell her ladies to dispose of all their illegal religious books. Then she went to Henry, who himself immediately began to argue with her over religion. Katherine, “mildly, and with reverent countenance” responded to Henry in a long speech Foxe reports verbatim:

“Your majesty,” quoth she, “doth right-well know . . . what great imperfection and weakness by our first creation is allotted unto us women, to be ordained and appointed as inferior and subject unto man as our head; from which head all our direction ought to proceed: and that as God made man to his own

shape and likeness, whereby he, being endued with more special gifts of perfection, . . . even so, also, made he woman of man, of whom and by whom she is to be governed, commanded, and directed; who womanly weaknesses and natural imperfection ought to be tolerated, aided, and borne withal, so that by wisdom, such things as be lacking in her ought to be supplied.

“Since, therefore, God hath appointed such a natural difference between man and woman, and you majesty being so excellent in gifts and ornaments of wisdom, and I a silly poor woman, so much inferior in all respects of nature unto you, how then cometh it now to pass that your majesty, in such diffuse causes of religion, will seem to require my judgment? . . . I refer my judgment in this, and in all other cases, to your majesty’s wisdom, as my only anchor, . . . next under God, to lean unto.”  
(19)

One would certainly expect such a submission to be enough, but Henry is still not placated. He accuses Katherine of wanting to be a doctor and instruct him, rather than be instructed. Katherine protests she was simply trying to learn, and to take Henry’s mind off his troublesome leg. At last Henry is delighted: “And is it even so sweet heart! . . . Then perfect friends we are now again.” Henry kissed and embraced Katherine, and told her her words, out of her own mouth, had done him more good than a present of £100,000 — but he did not cancel the arrest order. (20)

Meanwhile, Gardiner and his colleagues — unaware of the reconciliation — continued in their plans, with Henry deliberately doing nothing to stop them. Instead, the next day, he sat with Katherine in the garden and allowed the men to come forward and start to arrest her. Only then did he berate them, calling Wriothesley (whom Gardiner had prudently sent in case anything went wrong) “arrant knave! beast! and fool!” (21)

The presentation of Henry by Foxe is not entirely pleasant, though Foxe is never explicit in his disapproval. Though it was Henry who broke with the Catholic Church, the number of Protestant martyrs under Henry places Foxe in a difficult position. One way he resolves it, suggests Helen White, is the medieval explanation of the king misled by his evil counselors. (22) But if Foxe is ambivalent about Henry, he clearly approves of Katherine Parr, who while obviously most intelligent, survives by posing as a “silly poor woman.”

### **Marbeck’s Wife**

The Protestant John Marbeck’s wife (revealingly, only known in the text as “Marbeck’s wife”) is another example of a woman Foxe presented in a favorable light. At the time Marbeck is arrested, her youngest child is only a few months old. Though as a nursing mother, one might imagine her first thought would be for her child, “not knowing what should become of [her husband,] she left the child and all, and gat her to London.” (23)

In London, “by counsel of friends,” Marbeck’s wife went to Stephen Gardiner, asking leave to see her husband, and, in true wifely fashion, “help him with such things as he lacked.” Gardiner, however, refused. Marbeck’s wife, after many rebuffs, “was so bold” as to catch Gardiner by the sleeve and implore him. While doing so her neighbor, Henry Carrike, who also happened to be a servant to Henry VIII, entered the hall. Actually it was Carrike who convinced Gardiner to allow Marbeck’s wife to visit her husband. The argument he used was that Marbeck’s wife was a “poor woman, who had her mother lying bedrid upon her hands, besides five or six children.” This apparently convinced Gardiner (just as the claim of being a poor woman by Katherine Parr had saved her from the same Gardiner’s clutches). Gardiner finally gave her leave to visit her husband, on the stern order that she smuggle no letters in or out. (24)

At the prison, the porter almost refused Marbeck’s wife admittance for the same reason (fear of smuggled letters), but “the poor woman, fearing to be repulsed, spake the porter fair.” She offered to “be contented to strip myself before you both coming and going, so far as any honest woman may do with honesty; for I intend . . . only to comfort and help my husband.” The porter was so impressed by this, Foxe assures us, that “from that time forth, [she] was suffered to come and go at her pleasure.” (25)

The example of Marbeck’s wife is interesting. Foxe on the one hand mentions Marbeck’s wife leaving her infant child – and the phrase “left her child and all” does not sound admiring. He also refers to her boldness in her final approach to Gardiner. But though bold in this situation, Foxe also refers to her several times as a “poor woman” who makes the appeal to Gardiner in the first place on the advice of (probably male) friends, and finally succeeds not due to her own eloquence, but rather to that of her neighbor, who argues that (appearances to the contrary) she deserves to see her husband because of all the people (an old woman and children) she has cared for, certainly a traditionally womanly occupation. And in her final confrontation with the porter she is successful because she is submissive. Though a woman of lower status, in many ways she is similar to Katherine Parr; she has learned how to present herself in a manner that will provide her with what she needs. For women reading these stories, the lesson of playing the submissive role is certainly indicated here.

### **Anne Askew**

If some of the women Foxe wrote about were submissive, this is certainly not the case of Anne Askew “probably the best known of the women martyrs in sixteenth century England.” (26) Of course, when writing about Askew, Foxe was dealing with an already well established tradition. Part of this was due to the efforts of Foxe’s old friend and fellow Protestant propagandist, John Bale. Derek Wilson writes:

The accounts that Anne had written of her trials had been smuggled out of prison. . . . They fell into the hands of John Bale who immediately set about preparing them for publication. Early in 1547 they were published. . . . Before the first anniversary of Anne’s trial . . . , Bale’s pamphlets could be bought in London. (27)

Foxe in fact follows Askew's own account as given by Bale very closely. This account shows her to have not only been very brave but also brash and witty in her responses to her examiners. Writes A.G. Dickens, "If the documents present anything like an accurate picture [she] proved herself an educated, pert, and formidable disputant." (28) For example, when Askew did not care to explain how she interpreted certain Biblical passages she said: "I would not throw pearls amongst swine, for acorns were good enough." Though bold, Askew knew when for effect to be humble. "I told him I was but a woman, and knew not the course of schools." Given her usual style, this humility was probably the more exasperating to those in authority who had to deal with her. (29)

Though Foxe leaves most of Askew's story in her own first person account, he deviates from this form when he describes Lord Rich and Wriothesley racking her with their own hands. Foxe especially relishes the refusal of the Lieutenant of the Tower to continue the racking because of "the weakness of the woman." Wriothesley and Rich, "throwing off their gowns, would needs play the tormentors themselves," while Askew, "Quietly and patiently praying unto the Lord, . . . abode their tyranny." (30)

The description of her martyrdom is also of course in the third person. Foxe first explains that with her high birth, Askew could easily have lived in great prosperity and wealth, but she chose instead to follow Christ. Even at the end of her life, having been so racked she had to be carried to Smithfield in a chair, Askew was still bold enough to criticize the execution sermon. Foxe also makes it clear that at her execution Askew's constancy is a bracing example to the three men condemned to be burned with her:

It happened well for them, that they died together with Anne Askew. . . . Through the example and exhortation of her, they, being the more boldened, received occasion of greater comfort in that so painful and doleful kind of death; who, beholding her invincible constancy, and also stirred up through her persuasions, did set apart all kinds of fear.

One might more typically expect this to be reversed, that a woman would derive inspiration from a man. So Askew died, "the good Anne Askew . . . being compassed in with flames of fire, as a blessed sacrifice unto God . . . leaving behind her a singular example of christian constancy for all men to follow." (31)

Askew indeed was a singular example, and one for *women* to think about as well; yet though a woman of great courage, she was a very difficult model for the typical upper-class woman. "A vigorous, fearless Tudor woman who did not follow the courtesy books or the opinions of religious leaders," Askew, after all, had left her husband, come to London on her own to seek a divorce, spoke back even to Bishop Gardiner himself. (32) She had also paid for this temerity with torture and an agonizing death, of which Foxe spares us no details. (33)

### The Guernsey Martyrs

Fox had written movingly about Anne Askew's death. In his accounts of the Guernsey martyrs of 1556, Foxe is again at his best in drawing out the emotions of his readers. This time, however, he is not unqualified in his praise for these women. Even so, the Guernsey martyrs' story was so moving, so filled with horror, that it was one of the most attacked as false by Foxe's critics in the 16th century. As a result, this episode is particularly instructive both for how Foxe presents these women, and what his critics say about their characters.

Foxe himself clearly recognized the special nature of this tale: "Amongst all and singular histories touched in this book before, as they be many pitiful, divers lamentable, some horrible and tragical; so is there none almost either in cruelty to be compared, or so far off from all compassion and sense of humanity, as this merciless fact of the papists, done in the Isle of Guernsey, upon three women and an infant." (34) The events that led up to the executions are significant in how Foxe's story was later criticized.

A woman named Vincent Gosset stole a goblet and attempted to pawn it with one of the future martyrs, Perotine Massey, who lived with her mother and sister even though she was married. Massey took the goblet to restore it to its rightful owner, but during the subsequent investigation she, her sister, and her mother were arrested for harboring stolen goods. While Foxe is sympathetic to Massey and the others, he also, from the beginning of the account, refers to them as "silly women." (35) Of course, the word silly has changed a bit in meaning from the middle of the 16th century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, around 1550 it could mean "deserving of pity" as well as "weak, feeble, and frail," and "unlearned, unsophisticated, simple, ignorant." As the authors of the *O.E.D.* state: "In a number of examples it is difficult to decide which shade of meaning was intended by the writer." (36)

At their trial, neighbors reported that they were neither thieves, nor evil-disposed, but lived truly and honestly, as became Christian women. But while they were found "not guilty of that they were charged with," what was also discovered was that they had not always been obedient to the holy church, and were thus returned to prison. At the same trial, Vincent Gosset was condemned to be whipped and banished. In the meanwhile, the three women were examined for heresy and condemned to death. At their execution, Massey "who was then great with child," from the shock of the fire, gave birth to a boy. Someone rescued the baby and laid him safely on the grass, but the bailiff ordered that the baby be cast back in the fire "where it was burnt with the silly mother, grandmother, and aunt, very pitifully to behold." (37)

In 1567 Thomas Harding wrote *Rejoinder to Jewel*, and in this work attacked Foxe, accusing "prattling parrot Perotine" of theft, whoredom and murder. His argument is as follows: Perotine, her sister and her mother were willing accomplices to theft, and besides Perotine was a whore. If she were not ashamed of being pregnant, she would have used her condition to escape punishment, since by law a pregnant woman could not be executed until her child was born. Since she did not do so, claims Harding, Perotine is herself actually the murderer of her child. (38)



Harding's point of view was further expounded in 1587 by Cardinal William Allen in his *A True, Sincere, and Modest Defense of English Catholics*. Allen explains that since Perotine Massey hid her pregnancy she alone was responsible for her child's death. Allen adds, "Almighty God discovered her filth and shame, where she looked for the glory of a saint and of a virgin martyr." (39)

In discussing Harding's criticism of Foxe, J.F. Mozley points out that Foxe, in his account names witnesses and quotes documents, while his assailants "name nobody and quote nothing." (40) While all this is true, what seems especially interesting is that Foxe's accusers attempt to discredit the story through the character assassination of the women – and especially use the commonest attack – sexual incontinence.

In his 1570 edition Foxe himself responds to Harding. Foxe assures his readers they "thus have the true narrative of this history." He continues, "but . . . herein to wonder at master Harding who . . . seeking by all means to clear the clergy from the spot of cruelty, transferreth the whole blame only upon the women that suffered; but principally upon poor Perotine, whom he specially chargeth with two capital crimes; . . . whoredom and murder." The charge of whoredom comes from her pregnancy, but Foxe assures the reader Massey indeed was married. To the charge that she murdered her child because she did not claim the benefit of her condition, Foxe suggests that she may have been ignorant of the law. Besides, says Foxe, even were she ashamed, would shame have kept her from saving her life? (41)

Foxe finally concludes, "whatsoever the woman was, she is now gone." As for Harding, "charity would have judged the best. Humanity would have spared the dead. And if he could not afford her his good word, yet he might have left her cause unto the Lord, which shall judge both her and him." Though Foxe intently criticizes Harding for his lack of generosity, he himself continues to refer slightly to the Guernsey martyrs. "When I had written and finished the story of the Guernsey women . . . I well hoped I should have found no more such stories of unmerciful cruelty upon silly women" – but alas for Foxe, this is not the case. He finds more cruelty and more silly women to write about as well. (42)

### **Elizabeth Young**

The last example I wish to deal with is an interesting contrast. Elizabeth Young was a woman who came to London to disseminate Protestant literature. She was arrested, examined, but managed to survive. In some ways Elizabeth Young breaks the pattern of martyrdom as expressed by Foxe: she talks back as did Anne Askew, rather than using the traditional feminine ploys utilized by Marbeck's wife or Katherine Parr – yet she is one woman who also survived.

The examiner, Dr. Martin, asks Young who suggested she bring the books to London, as if a woman could not decide to do this for herself. He adds that if Young confesses the Queen will be merciful, and she might as well since "we know the truth already: but this we do, only to see whether thou will be true of thy word or no." When Young refuses this gambit, Dr. Martin begins to get angry: "Thou must say more, and shalt say more. . . . thou rebel whore and traitor heretic! . . . Thou shall be racked inch-meal, thou traitorly whore." Martin apparently likes this last expression; he continues to use it frequently

when addressing Young. Dr. Martin orders Young to be racked not only to force her to give the names of those to whom she sold books, but also “that thou shall be an example to all such traitorly whores and heretics.” Apparently to Dr. Martin heretical belief and lack of sexual chastity went hand in hand. Martin ends this particular examination by ordering Young to be fed nothing but bread one day and water the next. Always insistent on the last word, she responds, “If ye take away my meat, I trust God will take away my hunger.” (43)

In a later examination, one of the examiners, Sir Roger Cholmley, could not believe that anyone so stubborn could be a woman. Cholmley was so excited with the idea he was even willing to wager on it: “Twenty pounds, it is a man in a woman’s clothes!” When Young finally convinces Cholmley she is indeed a woman, he calls her repeatedly an “ill-favoured whore.” (44)

In a later examination the bishop’s Chancellor attempts a different approach with Elizabeth Young. Carefully explicating what is a woman’s proper place, he tells her: “Why thou art a woman of fair years; what shouldst thou meddle with the Scriptures? It is necessary for thee to believe, and that is enough.” By putting this statement in a Catholic examiner’s mouth, Foxe seems to be questioning its validity. In her interview with the Chancellor, Young’s responses make him angrier and angrier because she is not following proper womanly submission. “Thou wilt take upon thee to teach me” is an echo of Henry VIII’s outrage over Katherine Parr. Later he adds almost incredulously, “Ye are not afraid to argue with the best doctor in the land.” The Chancellor finally concludes that Young must be a priest’s mistress. Like Cholmley he seems puzzled that a woman can continue to argue with him. Since she is indeed a woman, he denies her strength by assuming she is under the influence of a man. “What priest has thou been withal,” he asks her, “that thou hast so much Scripture? Thou are some priest’s woman, I think, for thou wilt take upon thee to reason, and to teach the best doctor in all the land, thou!” When Young replies she was never a priest’s woman, the Chancellor is even angrier. “Thou hast read a little in the Bible or Testament, and thou thinkest that thou art able to reason with a doctor that hath gone to school thirty years.” What makes the Chancellor most furious is that he is learned, yet cannot get the best of Young. (45)

For Young too it is important that she *understand* her beliefs. She becomes angry when material is read in Latin during her examinations. And this is her grievance against the mass as well: “I will not go to the church . . . till I may hear it in a tongue that I can understand: for I will be fed no longer in a strange tongue. . . . I will never go to mass, till I do understand it, by the leave of God.” (46)

One would imagine that all this dazzling reversal of status would lead to yet another gruesome description of martyrdom. But this does not happen. Some women come to beg her release. When told this makes them suspicious as heretics themselves, they respond with the most practical and womanly reasons why they want Elizabeth Young: they are not heretics, but they are caring for her children, and if anything happens to her, the children will be left on their hands. Elizabeth Young is released to their care temporarily, and as it is 1558 she soon has nothing to fear when another Elizabeth becomes the blessed queen.

The case of Elizabeth Young shows clearly 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. Katherine Parr and Marbeck's wife may be women who survive by playing a traditionally submissive and sexually chaste role, and Anne Askew and Perotine Massey are ones who refuse that role (or so at least it was said) and die for their trouble. But Elizabeth Young bested a Catholic theologian who boasted he was the most learned man in the realm (surely a total reversal of roles) and lived to go home and to care for her three children, a most traditional feminine occupation.

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#### NOTES

(1) William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Women Martyrs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 14.

(2) D.M. Loades, *The Oxford Martyrs* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 30.

(3) Timothy Bright, *An Abridgement . . . for such as either through want of leysure, or abilitie, have not the use of so necessary an history* (London, 1589) cited in Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), pp 333-334.

(4) Carroley Erickson, *Bloody Mary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1978). p. 435.

(5) J.F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970; reprint edn.), p. 124.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

(7) Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583) cited in Wright, *Middle-Class Culture*, p. 101.

(8) A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 305.

(9) Wright, *Middle-Class Culture*, p. 107; *Diary of Lady Margret Hoby*, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (London: George Routledge and sons, Ltd., 1930), p. 175.

(10) Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*, p. 156.

(11) Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation: In France and England* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 211.

(12) Questions over the veracity of Foxe's work began soon after its publication. If the Anglican establishment enshrined the work, contemporary Catholics contemptuously dismissed it. For example, Robert Parsons refers to Foxe as "that unconscionable creature" who writes about "a rable of heretical abstinat coblers, tynkars, and such other trash" (*A Brief, and Cleere Confutation of a New, Waine, and Vaunting Callenge made by O.E. Miniester, Unto N.D.* [London, 1604], pp. 106, 216). This debate continues today. G.R. Elton stands clearly on one side of the fray: to him *The Book of Martyrs* "did not (as apologists would have it) create a legend; it commemorated a truth" (*Reform and Reformation England, 1509-1558* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977], p. 386). Philip Hughes is a good representative of the other point of view. He accuses Foxe's work of being "a mighty piece of anti-Catholic propaganda," which is not only credulous but supresses any information that does not fit the author's purpose. (*The Reformation in England* [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954], II, 257).

when addressing Young. Dr. Martin orders Young to be racked not only to force her to give the names of those to whom she sold books, but also “that thou shall be an example to all such traitorly whores and heretics.” Apparently to Dr. Martin heretical belief and lack of sexual chastity went hand in hand. Martin ends this particular examination by ordering Young to be fed nothing but bread one day and water the next. Always insistent on the last word, she responds, “If ye take away my meat, I trust God will take away my hunger.” (43)

In a later examination, one of the examiners, Sir Roger Cholmley, could not believe that anyone so stubborn could be a woman. Cholmley was so excited with the idea he was even willing to wager on it: “Twenty pounds, it is a man in a woman’s clothes!” When Young finally convinces Cholmley she is indeed a woman, he calls her repeatedly an “ill-favoured whore.” (44)

In a later examination the bishop’s Chancellor attempts a different approach with Elizabeth Young. Carefully explicating what is a woman’s proper place, he tells her: “Why thou art a woman of fair years; what shouldst thou meddle with the Scriptures? It is necessary for thee to believe, and that is enough.” By putting this statement in a Catholic examiner’s mouth, Foxe seems to be questioning its validity. In her interview with the Chancellor, Young’s responses make him angrier and angrier because she is not following proper womanly submission. “Thou wilt take upon thee to teach me” is an echo of Henry VIII’s outrage over Katherine Parr. Later he adds almost incredulously, “Ye are not afraid to argue with the best doctor in the land.” The Chancellor finally concludes that Young must be a priest’s mistress. Like Cholmley he seems puzzled that a woman can continue to argue with him. Since she is indeed a woman, he denies her strength by assuming she is under the influence of a man. “What priest has thou been withal,” he asks her, “that thou hast so much Scripture? Thou are some priest’s woman, I think, for thou wilt take upon thee to reason, and to teach the best doctor in all the land, thou!” When Young replies she was never a priest’s woman, the Chancellor is even angrier. “Thou hast read a little in the Bible or Testament, and thou thinkest that thou art able to reason with a doctor that hath gone to school thirty years.” What makes the Chancellor most furious is that he is learned, yet cannot get the best of Young. (45)

For Young too it is important that she *understand* her beliefs. She becomes angry when material is read in Latin during her examinations. And this is her grievance against the mass as well: “I will not go to the church . . . till I may hear it in a tongue that I can understand: for I will be fed no longer in a strange tongue. . . . I will never go to mass, till I do understand it, by the leave of God.” (46)

One would imagine that all this dazzling reversal of status would lead to yet another gruesome description of martyrdom. But this does not happen. Some women come to beg her release. When told this makes them suspicious as heretics themselves, they respond with the most practical and womanly reasons why they want Elizabeth Young: they are not heretics, but they are caring for her children, and if anything happens to her, the children will be left on their hands. Elizabeth Young is released to their care temporarily, and as it is 1558 she soon has nothing to fear when another Elizabeth becomes the blessed queen.

The case of Elizabeth Young shows clearly 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. Katherine Parr and Marbeck's wife may be women who survive by playing a traditionally submissive and sexually chaste role, and Anne Askew and Perotine Massey are ones who refuse that role (or so at least it was said) and die for their trouble. But Elizabeth Young bested a Catholic theologian who boasted he was the most learned man in the realm (surely a total reversal of roles) and lived to go home and to care for her three children, a most traditional feminine occupation.

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#### NOTES

(1) William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Women Martyrs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 14.

(2) D.M. Loades, *The Oxford Martyrs* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 30.

(3) Timothy Bright, *An Abridgement . . . for such as either through want of leysure, or abilitie, have not the use of so necessary an history* (London, 1589) cited in Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), pp 333-334.

(4) Carroley Erickson, *Bloody Mary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1978). p. 435.

(5) J.F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970; reprint edn.) p. 124.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

(7) Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583) cited in Wright, *Middle-Class Culture*, p. 101.

(8) A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 305.

(9) Wright, *Middle-Class Culture*, p. 107; *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby*, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (London: George Routledge and sons, Ltd., 1930), p. 175.

(10) Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*, p. 156.

(11) Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation: In France and England* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 211.

(12) Questions over the veracity of Foxe's work began soon after its publication. If the Anglican establishment enshrined the work, contemporary Catholics contemptuously dismissed it. For example, Robert Parsons refers to Foxe as "that unconscionable creature" who writes about "a rable of heretical abstinat coblers, tynkars, and such other trash" (*A Brief, and Cleere Confutation of a New, Waiane, and Vaunting Callenge made by O.E. Miniester, Unto N.D.* [London, 1604], pp. 106, 216). This debate continues today. G.R. Elton stands clearly on one side of the fray: to him *The Book of Martyrs* "did not (as apologists would have it) create a legend; it commemorated a truth" (*Reform and Reformation England, 1509-1558* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977], p. 386). Philip Hughes is a good representative of the other point of view. He accuses Foxe's work of being "a mighty piece of anti-Catholic propaganda," which is not only credulous but supresses any information that does not fit the author's purpose. (*The Reformation in England* [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954], II, 257).

(13) Pearl Hogrefe, *Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens* (Ames: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1975), p. 3; Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine for a Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1956), pp. 23-25.

(14) *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. Rev. George Townsend (New York: AMS Press, 1965; rept. edn.), V, 553, 554.

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 554.

(16) *Ibid.*

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 558.

(18) *Ibid.*

(19) The careful submission does bring to mind another Kate, who is tamed into a similar declaration:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee

...

*Taming of the Shrew*, V,II, 146-164.

(20) *Acts and Monuments*, V, p. 560.

(21) The incident is strange enough to draw comment from modern historians as well. Writes J.J. Scarisbrick: "It is exceedingly difficult to know what to make of this incident. . . . Whether or not Henry was ready at one point to throw her to the wolves and then changed his mind, whether or not he had all along only feigned assent to Gardiner's conspiracy, we cannot know. But why did he indulge in such elaborate subterfuge? Was it to teach Gardiner and the others a macabre lesson, or to frighten Catherine, or to break her evident independence of mind? Did it spring from that strange preference for the devious which was apparently now a trait of the man?" (*Henry VIII* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968], pp. 480-81). Lacey Baldwin Smith explains the incident (and the similar ones in which Crammer and Gardiner himself were the objects of suspicion) as a way for an elderly king to maintain control. It also demonstrates Katherine's "wordliness and tact . . . and her ability to manipulate a king who was also a man and a husband" (*Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971], pp. 34, 226). G.R. Elton is also impressed by how easily Katherine, through "careful submission" and "elegant surrender to [Henry's] supremacy" extricated herself from such a problematic position (p. 330).

(22) Helen C. White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 178.

(23) *Acts and Monuments*, V, p. 480.

(24) *Ibid.*

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 481.

(26) Hogrefe, p. 80.

(27) Derek Wilson, *A Tudor Tapestry: Men, Women, and Society in Reformation England* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), p. 234. Ballads about Anne Askew also began to appear at this time (Matthias Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspapers in England, 1476-1622* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1929], p. 202).

(28) Dickens, p. 194.

(29) *Acts and Monuments*, V, p. 538.

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 548.

(31) *Ibid.*, pp. 550-551.

(32) Hogrefe, p. 82.

(33) Anne Askew was but the most famous of a number of women, who responded to their examiners and were executed for their pains. For example, Joyce Lewes, like Askew, was a gentlewoman who could have had an easy and pleasurable life, filled with foolishness and frivolity. But upon hearing of the martyrs under Mary "she began to be troubled in conscience, and was very unquiet." In her examinations, she was "ever found stout," including telling the bishop that his words were ungodly and wicked.

Like Anne Askew, Joyce Lewes' constancy at her execution impressed all who witnessed it. "She showed such a cheerfulness that it passed man's reason." *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, pp. 401, 402, 404. Most of the women Foxe discussed, however, were of humble status. This did not make them any the less courageous in their responses — Katherine Hut said of the sacrament, "I deny it to be God; because it is a dumb God, and made with man's hand" — or less constant in their deaths. *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, p. 143. Of the two hundred and seventy-five convicted of heresy and executed during Mary's reign, fifty-five were women.

(34) *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, p. 226.

(35) *Ibid.*, p. 227.

(36) *The Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), IX, pp. 50-51.

(37) *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, pp. 227, 230.

(38) Thomas Harding, *Rejoinder to Jewel* (1567), cited in Mozley, p. 226.

(39) William Allen, *A True, Sincere, and Modest Defense of English Catholics*, ed. Robert M. Kingdon (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), p. 104.

(40) Mozley, p. 227.

(41) *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, pp. 233, 234, 237.

(42) *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 251. This incident was also used by other Protestant propagandists as well. For example, William Cecil compares treatment of that reign, refers to Perotine Massey and her child as an example, "beyond all heathen cruelty" (*The Execution of Justice in England*, ed. Robert M. Kingdon [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965], p. 20). Ballads also commemorated the story (Shabber, p. 202).

(43) *Acts and Monuments*, VIII, pp. 537, 538.

(44) *Ibid.*, p. 540.

(45) *Ibid.*, pp. 541, 544.

(46) *Ibid.*, p. 545.