MAKING EDMUND CAMPION:
TREASON, MARTYRDOM, AND THE STRUCTURE OF TRANSCENDENCE

Alice Dailey

[B]eing set up in the carte, he blessed him self with the signe of the Crosse, being so weake as he fel downe in the carte, & after he was up, he said: I am a Catholike, and do dye in the catholike religion. and therewith he was interrupted by Sherife Martine, saying, you come not hither to confesse your religion, but as a traitor and malefactor to the Queenes Majestie and the whole Realme, moving and sturing of sedition.

—William Allen, XII Reverend Priests

It has become a critical commonplace to talk about the inherent constructedness of—well, of nearly everything: gender, race, culture, power, self, other, past, present. The field of early modern religious studies is no exception. Scholars have looked at the construction of English Protestantism and nationhood in Foxe’s Acts and Monuments (Haller, Collinson, Mueller); the pejorative construction of Catholicism through Protestant polemic; and the recusant Catholic community’s constructions of itself through writing, artifacts, and even physical space (Corthell; Dillon; Kilroy; Lake and Questier; Marotti, Catholicism; Shell; Yates). As these lines of inquiry suggest, our interest in religious constructedness has tended to be focused on the formation of religious communities. We seem reluctant to consider the deliberate fashioning of holiness, as though we might infect the study of early modern religious belief with an anachronistic element of postmodern cynicism. To suggest, for example, that a mystic or martyr is engaged in a conscious act of self-fashioning is to risk appearing disrespectful—or worse, ignorant—of the earnestness of early modern piety. To avoid this difficulty,
we habitually read devotional, martyrlogical, and hagiographic literature as the unmediated documentation of what people of the period thought and believed. The literary constructedness of these artifacts is bracketed, quarantined as a threat to the authenticity of faith. Brad Gregory’s *Salvation at Stake* is an exemplary study in this mode, reading martyrology as a transparent record of early modern Christian belief. Gregory’s stated goal is to “plumb the living souls” of early modern martyrs, thereby producing a reading that is “intelligible on the martyrs’ own terms” (1, 11).2 The imperatives of generic convention, which I will argue are absolutely central to both the event and text of martyrdom, exert no calculable influence on the martyrlogical world Gregory presents nor on the conclusions drawn from that world.

This essay takes seriously the notion of religious constructedness—the constructedness of not just sacred communities but sacred experience. In particular, I want to examine the active and conscious construction of martyrdom, first by victims themselves and then by those charged with the task of generating martyrology. We know little about early modern religious experience beyond the texts that document it. How then can we have direct access to that experience “on the martyrs’ own terms” without attention to the literary terms—the conventions and structures—which shape that documentation? And what of those kinds of religious experience, like martyrdom, which are as much about a faith event as the story that’s circulated of that event? How does the victim’s anticipation of being narrativized—of being recuperated by devotional text and memory—impact the experience of martyrdom? Indeed, does martyrdom ever entirely precede martyrology?

My point of entry is the 1581 conviction and execution of Father Edmund Campion, the first Jesuit executed in England for treason under Elizabethan anti-Catholic policy. Campion’s trial demonstrates the ways in which the statutes against English Catholics trapped recusants in an inescapable circular argument that reproduced its own signs of treason while simultaneously alienating the Catholic subject from the discursive mechanisms of martyrdom. The rhetorical substitution of treason for martyrdom is made possible by their structural similarities: the figure of religious exceptionalism is structurally analogous to the figure of consummate political crime, and thus the construction of both martyrdom and treason depends on what is fundamentally the same discursive operation. I wish to suggest that by reading the texts surrounding the Campion case with attention to his efforts to inscribe himself into the martyrlogical tradition, we can see the structural fissures that the charge of treason produces for martyrlogical discourse. Ultimately, I argue, it is a formal rather than a confessional or
political divide that renders the charge of treason such an effective measure for containing the Catholic mission to England.

The construction of a martyr depends on transposing the historical events of an individual’s life and death into the suprahistorical narrative that connects Christ, the martyrs of the early church, and the contemporary victim through typological reiteration. Martyrology’s stories of witnessing, torment, and constancy in death convert its subjects from mere instances of suffering and religious disidence into transcendent figures of Christian exemplarity. The construction of martyrdom is made possible only through strict narrative repetition. Augustine wrote that it is the cause, not the death, that makes a martyr (non poena sed causa); but this is in fact only part of the equation. The reproduction of martyrdom depends on the legible narrative rehearsal of martyr models. In his study of medieval hagiography, James Earl describes the genre as “literary iconography” in which “the individual, by conforming the patterns of his moral behavior to the larger patterns of history, enters into a typological relationship with that history” (21, 18). The legibility of the martyr icon Earl identifies is key: if an individual’s actions are inconsistent with established martyr formulas or cannot easily be read as reiterations of apostolic or Christological suffering, the individual will not transcend the death event. In other words, if a victim does not fit the mold, he or she can neither be interpreted nor reproduced as a martyr. Moreover, the mold is inflexible: the victims must be persecuted for their faith; they must openly confess their faith and readily defend it against the adversary, who represents heretical belief; they must die in defense of the faith and cannot appear to will their own deaths; in their manner of death, they must exhibit constancy and piety; and ideally, death is attended by miraculous or providential evidence of God’s favor.

The Elizabethan government’s strategic relocation of Catholic dissidence into a discourse of secular crime truncates the victim’s access to this paradigm. In place of martyrdom’s typological recapitulation, the secular trial produces a story of treason, duplicity, and attempted regicide. This is made possible by the Reformation’s consolidation of religious and temporal power under the Crown, which posed a problem—at least philosophically—for the Catholic recusant, whose allegiances became divided between monarch and pope. This problem was exacerbated in 1570 when Pope Pius V issued the bull excommunicating Elizabeth, deposing her from power, and absolving her subjects from obedience to her. Through this action, the pope essentially positioned the entire body of English Catholics as enemies to the Crown, threatening that any who continued in obedience to her would be “inmodate[...] in the like sentence of Anathema.” Spurred by the very real fears of domestic rebellion, foreign invasion, and assassination that grew
out of the bull, the Queen and her ministers developed several strategies designed to rid the realm of those Catholics who held with the pope over their sovereign and to protect the state from the internal threat they might pose. By 1585, Parliament had passed a series of laws naming any Catholic priest in England a traitor. The immediate targets of these policies were Jesuit and seminary priests, who, it was believed, were being sent to England from the Continent to stir up rebellion and prepare English Catholics to take up arms against their Queen in support of a papal-sponsored invasion. A 1571 Act of Parliament reminded subjects that not only direct actions against the state but also “imagining” or “intending” the Queen’s death, dethronement, or defeat by foreign power were points of treason.\(^1\) A 1582 royal proclamation,\(^5\) followed up by a 1585 Act of Parliament,\(^6\) made it illegal for Catholic priests to remain in or come to England on penalty of death for treason, on the stated presumption that any who did so were acting secretly against the Queen. Aiding, maintaining, hiding, or failing to turn in a known priest were also declared acts of treason, punishable by death. Two proclamations of 1591, citing the insidiously secretive nature of Catholic priests as particular cause for alarm, erected panels of inquiry to question suspected priests and abettors and established a series of questions intended to probe suspects’ allegiance to the Queen.\(^7\)

James came to the throne with plans for greater religious toleration that were quickly set aside in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. In response to the Plot and the perceived threat posed by secret Catholics, James’s administration passed an act in 1606 that included the Oath of Allegiance, which suspected Catholics would be required to take. The contents of the Oath reveal many of the anxieties that arose from Elizabeth’s excommunication and subsequent Catholic plots, real or imagined. It required one to state that James was the true and legitimate king of England; that no pope or foreign power could rightfully depose him or release his subjects from obedience to him; that “notwithstanding any declaration or sentence of Excommunication,” his subjects must maintain faithful allegiance to him and defend his person and throne; and that, regardless of any statement issued by the pope to the contrary, it is “impious and Heretical” to believe that subjects may depose and murder their sovereign (James 89).

The Catholic Church responded to these mechanisms by claiming religious persecution on the grounds that the questions being asked of Catholics, characterized in government literature (like James’s own defense of the Oath) as touching only secular allegiance, were fundamentally questions of religious conscience. But their claim to martyrdom was undermined by the charge of treason, a problem even Catholic apologists admitted. The relocation of Catholic dissidence into a discourse of secular crime had far-
reaching effects on the production of Catholic martyrdom. For a number of reasons, the charge of treason and its attendant legal developments made it very difficult for Catholic victims and their martyrlogists to establish the typological connections that would enable them to transcend trial and execution and find a place within the sacred narrative of God’s persecuted Church on earth.

Edmund Campion was one of the first two Jesuits, along with Father Robert Persons, to be sent on the mission to England. After training for the priesthood in France, he re-entered the country in 1580 in disguise and under an assumed name. Once his activities in England were detected by Cecil’s elaborate spy network, his capture was made a priority. The impetus to arrest him was boosted by the publication of a private document that he had composed to defend his missionary activities in the event of his capture. Campion had entrusted the treatise to a Catholic friend whose zeal led him to share it with others. When it eventually caught the attention of authorities, the audacity of the document that came to be known as Campion’s “Challenge” or “Brag” incited the government all the more vehemently against him.6 His capture in July 1581 was regarded as a major victory by the state. He was paraded through London on horseback with a sign on his head proclaiming, “Campion, the Seditious Jesuit.” He was then taken to the Tower, where he was tortured on the rack in an effort to extract information that would lead to the arrests of other Catholics. Six months after capture, he and the other priests apprehended with him were tried and convicted for treason. They were hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn on December 1, 1581.

Campion’s conviction hinged on two primary issues: the alleged meetings he had conducted with other Catholics, in which Elizabeth’s death and overthrow were plotted, and his opinions regarding the Queen’s supremacy. As the sixteenth century wore on and the state became more experienced at prosecuting recusants, these concerns would become streamlined to produce treason convictions that invited steadily decreasing public dissent. Witnesses like Anthony Munday, who was brought in to provide testimony of Campion’s supposed meetings and plots, might easily be discredited, and questions about the rights of the Queen were challenged as unlawful—with some success—by Catholic apologists like Cardinal William Allen.9 But Campion’s case is illustrative of the overarching rhetoric that would dominate Catholic treason trials for decades to follow.

In his opening arguments to the court, the Queen’s council laid out the relationship between Catholicism and treason that provided a template for subsequent trials. Catholic priests, he claimed,
must come secretly into the realm, they must change their habit and names; they
must dissemble their vocations, they must wander unknown—to what end? To
dissuade the people from their Allegiance to their prince, to reconcile them to the
pope, to plant the Romish Religion, to supplant both prince and province—by what
means? By saying of Mass, by administering the Sacrament, by hearing Confessions.
(Howell 1052-3)

This argument equates the behavior of Catholics—the secrecy and duplic-
ity necessitated by the laws enacted against them—with treasonous plots
to overthrow the state by arguing that secrecy is a symptom of treason.
Situating Catholic doctrine and practice within this discourse of treason,
the state makes the argument for Catholicism as a category of political
sedition rather than a matter of religious conscience, preemptively chal-
 lenging Catholic claims of religious persecution. The facts presented in the
trial—Munday’s dubious testimony and the priests’ ambiguous statements
regarding the Queen’s supremacy—were then normalized into this broader
rhetorical scheme of Catholic treason.

The state’s case against Campion and his fellow priests was founded on
the premise that the pope was above all a political enemy of the English
state, a point driven home by the prosecution’s rehearsal of the bull of ex-
communication and its implications. The pope was posited as the author
of all treasonous plots against the Queen, with Catholic priests acting as his
agents in England, ministers commissioned “to execute the Bull sent from
Pius Quintus against her majesty” (1053). Witnesses were brought forth to
testify to meetings with papal emissaries in Rheims and Rome where the
defendants “conspired the death of the queen’s majesty, the overthow of
the religion now professed in England, the subversion of the state” (1049).
Among the various plots they were accused of hatching, the priests were
said to have planned to ambush and stab Elizabeth while she was out on a
walk or set her barge on fire as she floated down the Thames (1067-8).

Campion, the most notorious as well as the most eloquent and outspoken
of the defendants, denied the charges and accused the state of persecuting
Catholics merely for religion. The fact that he and his fellow priests had been
offered clemency in exchange for going to Protestant sermons was proof,
he argued, that “Religion was cause of our Imprisonment and the conse-
quence of our condemnation” (1055). This argument, to which Catholic
apologists would return, insists on religious affiliation as a strictly spiritual
category that has no relationship to questions of political sedition. But the
link between ecclesiastical power and secular rule was long established in
the history of the Catholic Church, and the papal bull had renewed its
currency by pointedly politicizing religion in England.
In response to the claim that he and his fellow priests were sent into England for seditious purposes, Campion stated, “We are dead men to the world, we only traveled for souls; we touched neither state nor policy, we had no such commission” (1054). His remarks were immediately seized on by the prosecution in an effort to discredit his claims of ascetic religiosity and political innocence:

Were it not that your dealing afterwards [after Campion came into the realm] had fully bewrayed you, your present Speech perhaps had been more credible; but all afterclaps make those excuses but shadows, and your deeds and actions prove your words but forged; for what meaning had that changing of your name, whereto belonged your disguising in apparel, can these alterations be wrought without suspicion? Your name being Campion, why were you called Hastings? You a priest and dead to the world, what pleasure had you to royst that? A velvet hat and a feather, a buff leather jerkin, velvet venetians, are they weeds for dead men? Can that beseem a professed man of religion which hardly becometh a layman of gravity? No; there was a further matter intended; your lurking and lying hid in secret places, concluded with the rest, a mischievous meaning: had you come hither for love of your country, you would never have wrought in ______; or had your intent been to have done well, you would never have hated the light and therefore this beginning decyphereth your Treason. (1059)

Under the prosecutor’s skillful management, Campion’s attempts to hide himself are treated as manifest evidence of treason which, in turn, is intended to undermine anything he may say in his own defense. The luxurious clothing that he donned to avoid capture is used to challenge his religious commitment, likewise suggesting that his purposes for being in England were secular rather than spiritual.

Campion acknowledged his attire but contested the conclusion that it in any way proved treason. Rather, he said, his disguise was necessitated by the persecution of Catholics and was consistent with the model of apostolic behavior:

I wished earnestly the planting of the gospel. I knew a contrary religion professed. I saw if I were known I should be apprehended. I changed my name: I kept secretly. I imitated Paul. Was I therein a traitor? But the wearing of a buff jerkin, a velvet hat, and such like is much forced against me, as though the wearing of any apparel were treason, or that I in so doing were ever the more a traitor. I am not indicted upon the statute of Apparel, neither is it any part of this present arraignment. (1060)

Campion confronts the logic imposed by the prosecution by arguing that wearing a disguise and plotting treason are not the same thing. The parallel he draws between his own behavior and that of the apostolic missionaries was reiterated by another priest tried with him, Ralph Sherwin, who described his secret ministry as a model of “the apostles and fathers in the primitive
church” (1064). Such comparisons were rejected by the court: “your case differeth from theirs in the primitive church, for that those apostles and preachers never conspired the death of the emperors and rulers in whose dominions they so taught and preached” (1064). According to the logic of political crime, secrecy proves the treason, and treason invalidates the secrecy.

Campion and his fellow priests were caught in a circular argument from which there was no viable exit. The legal statutes against Catholics forced English missionaries into hiding and disguise; in turn, hiding and disguise provided the state with proof of the very treason it feared. In its effort to protect the state against crime, the law itself produced a set of behaviors that it then seized on as evidence of that crime. In response to this quagmire, Campion attempted to legitimize Catholics’ condemned actions by linking them to the uncontested sanctity of the originary Christian church: “At what time the primitive church was persecuted and that Paul laboured in the propagation and increase of the Gospel, it is not unknown, to what straits and pinches he and his fellows were diversely driven” (1059). The legitimizing religious narrative Campion provides—that secrecy is evidence of the true, persecuted church—has no efficacy within the context of the secular treason trial. There, what might be offered as evidence of persecution is construed as evidence of crime, ultimately undermining one of the basic tenets of martyrrology: that persecution itself witnesses to the truth of the victim’s cause.

The priests’ attempts to justify their position were further complicated by the vexed relationship to secular and ecclesiastical authority that the treason trial exposed. The martyrological imperative of witnessing to one’s faith, in conjunction with the papal bull, placed the Catholic defendant in a difficult position: his or her allegiance to the Crown had been directly prohibited by papal authority, which Catholics were equally bound to obey. The competing demands of sovereign and pope left the English Catholic caught between two equally dismal and damnable categories, the traitor and the excommunicate heretic. The trial accounts of Campion and his companions reveal the priests’ fraught attempts to avoid both categories by situating themselves in a delicate mediatal space. As a consequence of this tension, however, they become alienated from the discourses of both secular loyalty and Catholic constancy.

Before his formal trial, each defendant was interrogated regarding his allegiance to the Queen and pope. The government had carefully developed a series of questions meant to probe recusants’ beliefs regarding the pope’s right to depose temporal monarchs, the lawfulness of violent rebellion against the Queen, and the part they would take in the event that a
papal army invaded the realm. The questions were put to the defendants and their answers recorded for use in the prosecution's case against them. For the most part, however, the defendants’ answers were vague and non-committal. Campion’s fellow priests Ralph Sherwin and Alexander Brian refused to offer opinions on the pope’s right to depose on the grounds that doing so would imperil their own lives. Brian remarked that the question was “too high, and dangerous for him to answer,” and Sherwin “prayeth to bee asked no such question, as may touch his life” (1078). Two others, Thomas Cottam and John Shert, affirmed that they “swereth in no pointe from the Catholique Faith” but refused to elaborate their understanding of what Catholic doctrine demanded in present political circumstances (1080). William Filbee went so far as to confirm the pope’s power to depose but would not be pushed to apply this doctrine to the case of Elizabeth, claiming that “touching the Bul of Pius quintus he can say nothing” (1081). Campion himself made a bolder break with Catholic orthodoxy, testifying that he thought it unlikely that the papal bull was lawful: “the divines of the catholic church do distinguish of the pope’s authority, attributing unto him ordination and inordination, potestatem, ordinatem, whereby he proceedeth in matters merely spiritual and pertinent to the church, and by that he cannot excommunicate any prince or potentate” (1062).

In all of their answers, the Catholic defendants sought to avoid positioning themselves as traitors—as men who challenged or rejected the Queen’s authority over her subjects. But in their careful efforts to sidestep incriminating statements, they failed to affirm the rights of the pope, a cornerstone of Catholic orthodoxy. Their claims of religious persecution were therefore confounded by their own reticence to boldly confess the faith. This is the ingenious effect of the treason proceeding: it placed the defendant in an impossible situation. If he affirmed the righteousness of Catholic doctrine—i.e., the pope’s right to dethrone Elizabeth and absolve her subjects of allegiance to her—he fell into a discourse of treason that substantiated anti-Catholic sentiment and foreclosed the possibility of achieving martyrdom. On the other hand, if he did not uphold papal prerogative, he failed in one of the necessary acts of Christian martyrdom, the confession of the tenets of faith. In either case, the reproduction of exemplary martyrdom was jeopardized.

The repositioning of religious dissidence within the structure of secular law is what produces this crisis. The treason trial rendered it extremely perilous for the Catholic defendants to confess their religion—not because they would die, which is essential to martyrdom, but because they would die as criminals. For the English Counter-Reformation, two fundamental imperatives of Christian martyrdom, persecution for religion and confession
of religion, became radically fractured from one another. In consequence, defendants like Campion were trapped in a place of claiming that they were persecuted for religion at the same time they were working to dissociate themselves from perilous Catholic doctrine. Probed once more at the trial about his opinion of the pope's supremacy, Campion finally stated, "I say generally that these matters be merely spiritual points of doctrine and disputable in schools, no part of mine indictment, not to be given in evidence, and unfit to be discussed at the King's Bench" (1063). While Campion argued that the trial was a religious persecution, he simultaneously had to argue that religion could have no place in the trial, demonstrating how the charge of treason cut the defendant off from access to legitimizing orthodoxy.

Taken as a whole, these elements produce a prosecution scene whose overall structure is markedly different from what we find in patristic and medieval martyrology—or even in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments.* Rather than a theological or doctrinal dispute between one religious faction and another, we are presented with a secularized debate in which the established church and its theology have no visible role. Instead of being carried out by rival theologians, the prosecution is manage by the representatives of secular law, and the justice handed down is authorized by secular rather than ecclesiastical power. Throughout these trials, the government insists on Catholicism as a fundamentally political category by concentrating attention on the antagonistic relationship in which the pope's bull placed Catholic subjects vis-à-vis the Queen's supremacy. Government propaganda, legal prosecution, and execution scenes focus on the Catholic as a political enemy to the state, so that the individual's theology—central to a heresy case—is shifted away from view. As such, priests' trial scenes concentrate not on questions of religious doctrine like transubstantiation but on the issues of supremacy and seditious behavior: how defendants regard their duty to the Queen in light of the papal bull, what co-religionists they met with or helped, where they secretly attended mass. Within this structure, there is little opportunity for acts of religious confession or for the elaboration of theology. In the case of Campion, the defendant was granted a theological disputation while imprisoned in the Tower, but neither he nor his prosecutors ever mentioned that interview during the course of his trial; it had no place in the proceeding. Although Campion and his co-defendants often openly stated their Catholicism, the mechanisms of the treason trial transform this into a political—not religious—confession. The confrontation between disparate belief systems provided by a heresy trial sets up precisely the narrative paradigm required for martyrological transcendence, while the treason trial forces the victim into an alternative paradigm from which he or she cannot easily recover. As a result, instead of being assigned a heretic-
ALICE DAILEY

identity, which is fundamentally an identity defined by faith, the condemned Catholic subject is assigned a traitor-identity, an identity defined by political allegiance.

Most importantly, the treason charge situates Catholic subjects in an exceedingly complex relationship to both secular and papal authority. If they are to demonstrate that they are free from treason, Catholic defendants cannot readily challenge the moral authority of the court but have to present themselves as appropriately respectful of and subdued by the sovereign. The movement away from the Catholic-Protestant debate central to Queen Mary’s heresy trials toward a debate between Catholic subjects and their own temporal government forecloses the victim-persecutor dyad so central to the martYROlogical paradigm: the position of perpetrator is occupied not by a clear enemy but by a representative of the secular authority to which Catholics must continually demonstrate obedience. Further, the open confession of Catholic doctrine comes to function in the trial as proof of treason. If defendants proclaim their belief in papal supremacy—the only point of religious orthodoxy raised in the trials—this proves their rejection of Elizabeth’s legitimacy and, thereby, their treason. If, on the other hand, they deny or suppress their belief in the rights of the pope, Catholics are themselves in danger of excommunication. What’s more, their failure to fully confess the tenets of their faith separates them all the further from the rigid demands of exemplary martyrdom. Unless they are willing to give up their faith, which the government offered as the only way out of the conundrum, Catholic defendants find their relationships to both secular loyalty and Catholic orthodoxy compromised. They become what Julia Reinhard Lupton describes as vexed “citizen-saints,” “figures caught between two competing, mutually exclusive, social, political, and religious structures” (13). Circumscribed within the treason discourse, they cannot successfully represent themselves as at once true Catholics and true subjects of the Queen.

The stakes were high for both the government and the English Catholic cause, both sides showing an acute awareness of the importance of successfully disseminating their respective narratives. The Elizabeth government was faced with issues of national security and concerns about the regime’s public image. Whether the state was engaged in the same cruel persecution of which the notoriously “Bloody” Mary was accused or was justly defending itself against political threat is a question that is played out repeatedly in the polemics of the period.15 These questions have bearing on English public opinion as well as on a larger European audience and on the country’s engagement in international affairs. For Catholics, the question became whether their priests and faithful lay men and women would go down in
history as arch criminals or as glorious martyrs, each presenting alternative ramifications for the continuing viability and growth of the Catholic religion, especially in England. If Catholic apologists were unsuccessful, if the victims could not be recuperated into the ranks of faithful Christian martyrs, executed Catholics could become a liability rather than an asset for the Catholic cause. Failing to assuage public suspicion of Catholics’ activities might compromise the English mission as well as potentially undermine Catholic authority in other countries. Moreover, if a priest executed for treason were not successfully represented as a martyr, the victim’s salvation must come into question. The rival discourses of secular justice and Christian martyrology posit divergent outcomes for the victim: in the penal narrative unrepentant victims are damned, while in the martyrological narrative they are saved. How the victim is recorded for posterity—traitor or martyr—ultimately determines his or her eternal fate, at least insofar as the Christian community can read and determine that fate.

Given these stakes, it is no surprise that Campion’s case produced a heated controversy, one that gradually escalated from rumor to popular pamphlets to official tracts by the most prominent men on either side. A short, anonymous octavo pamphlet titled *An advertisement and defence for Truth against her Backbiters, and specially against the whispering Favourers, and Colourers of Campions, and the rest of his confederats treasons* (1581) is one of the earliest texts in the debate. Only five pages in length, it was published within the month of Campion’s execution. The title points to the Campion case as contested territory and announces the text as a response to the effort of pro-Campion gossip to recast his death as religious persecution. The author writes,

> it is maliciously, falsely, and traiterously by some of the secret favourers of the said Campion, and other the said condemned Traitours, whispered in corners, that the offences of these traitours, were but for their secret attemptings as jesuets by exhorting and teaching, with Shriving, Massing, and such like actes, to move people to change their Religion […]. (A2v)

Like the trial itself, the pamphlet formulates these Catholic practices as political acts—as “high ’Treasons committed against her Majesties most Royall person, and against the ancient Lawes and statutes of this Realme” (A3). The text thus acts to circulate the principle arguments of the trial in the effort to duplicate in the court of public opinion the conclusions advanced in the court of law—that the claim of religious persecution holds no weight since religious rites have been adapted by Catholic missionaries into vehicles for treason. In other words, the aim of the text is to organize popular debate over the Campion case by secularizing the discussion in accordance with the same precepts that governed the trial.
ALICE DAILEY

The most interesting element of the pamphlet is its representation of the defendants’ attitudes toward papal supremacy. According to the author, their refusal to condemn the pope’s bull against Elizabeth is tantamount to their agreeing with it and can thereby be understood as evidence of treason:

none of them all [...] could be perswaded by any their answeres to shewe in any part their mislikings ryther of the former Bull [...] or of the Pope that nowe is, if he shoulde nowe publish the like Bull against her Majestie, so as they did apparently shew their traiterous hearts stil fixed to persist in their devilish mindes against their naturall allegeance. (A4)

In this formulation, the “hearts” of the priests are laid bare not by what they say but what they fail to say; the verbal lacuna operates as a signifier of treason and “apparantly shew[s]” their “devilish mindes” as conclusively as any other form of testimony. The rhetoric of treason resolves the priests’ silence into an inflexible semiotic code: silence = treason. Silence ≠ absence of opinion; silence ≠ ignorance; silence ≠ indecisiveness. The discourses of secular law and public opinion operate according to a language in which silence is necessarily a signifier of guilt. By rehearsing and circulating this language, the author of the pamphlet attempts to ensure that the codes of legal discourse rather than of a religious or conscientious discourse, for example—penetrate popular renderings of the Campion narrative.

A Jesuit who was present at the priests’ execution, Thomas Alfield, soon responded with a pamphlet of his own, A true reporte of the death & martyrdom of M. Campion Jesuite and priest[e] (1582). He positioned his text as a rejoinder to An advertisement against Backbiters as well as to the “many slaunders” circulating to “diminish the honour of their [the priests’] resolute departure and Martyrdom” (Alfield A1r). A true reporte operates on the assumptions of ars moriendi, or the “art of dying”—namely, that comportment at death provides a transparent indication of the state of the victim’s soul and clearly demonstrates whether he or she is saved. But in this account of Campion’s execution, even the death scene is made problematic by the intrusion of secular authority, evidencing the impingement of the treason charge on martyrological narrative. For the most part, the account of Campion’s trial is devoid of the overt verbal and behavioral tropes that permeate patrician martyrological models: there are few displays of piety like kneeling, prayer, or kissing instruments of persecution—and little or no echo of traditional martyr language like lamb-to-the-slaughter metaphors, forgiveness of persecutors, or phrases repeated from Christ’s crucifixion. What we find instead is an execution that is closely focused on the question of whether or not Campion is guilty of treason.
At the scaffold, Campion’s attention is constantly being turned away from prayer and religious confession to the treason charge. Being brought into the cart from which he would be hanged, Campion proceeds to quote St. Paul, announcing himself “a spectacle, or a sight, unto God, unto his Angels, and unto men” (Alfield B4v-C1r). Those charged with overscoring his execution soon interrupt him, “earnestly urging him to confesse his treason against her majestic, and to acknowledge himself guilty” (C1r). Campion responds that he is “altogether innocent” of the charges brought against him (C1r). He begs to be allowed to “speake a worde or two for discharge of [his] conscience” but is again prevented from prayer and “forced to speake onely to that point which they most urged” (C1r). Campion proclaims that he is “giltless & innocent of all treason and conspiracie, craving credit to be given to his answere, as to the last answere made upon his death & soule,” and he forgives the jury who condemned him (C1r). The conversation then turns to his clarification of evidence presented in court, followed by the reading of his sentence, during which Campion is observed to be “devoutly praying” (C2r). Still unsatisfied with Campion’s failure to admit his treason, the officials next question him on his position on the bull of excommunication and his allegiance to the pope. He maintains himself a devout Catholic and resumes praying, again being interrupted and ordered to pray in English rather than Latin and to pray specifically for the Queen. He defends his use of Latin but wishes Elizabeth “a long quiet raigne, with all prosperity,” and then he is executed (C2v).

What we see in this account of Campion’s death is that the effort made throughout his trial to establish his identity as traitor spills onto the scaffold, where the rival discourses of treason and martyrdom play themselves out in a final, all-important push to secure the event for posterity. The continual shifting of attention back to the question of treason disrupts the victim’s attempt to control the terms of his own death. Just as in the trial, the two sides are at odds about the nature of the discourse at hand, each attempting to perform a discourse that is interrupted by the other. Campion’s death becomes a drama whose genre is under contention. The state seeks to perform the script of a treason trial and execution, while Campion insists that the operative script is that of a religious persecution—a martyrdom.17

As martyrrologist, then, Alfield is presented with a challenge. From this fractured performance of competing scripts, Alfield is charged with fashioning a typologically legible, unproblematic story of exemplary, holy death. To manage this, he can either falsify the historical events, eliminating the problematic treason cues, or situate those events within a larger framework of familiar typological formulas. Using the latter strategy, Alfield essentially bookends the narrative of Campion’s death with the conventional language
of Christian martyrdom. He introduces his account by saying that Campion “after many conflicted and agonies, joyfully [came] to receive his reward and crowne, the kingdome of heaven,” and the conclusion of Campion’s story rings with familiar martyrrological tropes: “he meekely and sweetly yelded his soule unto his Saviour; protesting that he dyed a perfect Catholike”; he “triumfed on the world, the flesh, the divell, and received his long desired crown” (B4v, C2v).

This representation of Campion is compromised not only by the circumstances of the execution but by the behavior of Campion himself: in his effort to prove once and for all that he is not a traitor, he ends his life praying for the Queen, a heretic excommunicated by his church. This conflicts with his representation of himself as dying “a perfect Catholike.” Alfield describes the executed priests as “paternes of piety, vertue, and innocencie,” but the narrative reveals a deeply heterodox, problematic pattern, one that bears important differences to the martyrrological paradigm evidenced by patristic and medieval models (A3r). While Alfield attempts to close these fissures by declaring that “all men are perswaded that those innocentes suffered only for religion for our fathers faith,” the circumstances that he describes as prompting his text—the “most infamous libel,” An advertisement against Backbilers, and the rumors that Campion had a bad death—indicate that the public’s interpretation of the execution was far less homogeneously sympathetic than he would wish (B1r, A3r).

It is the close structural relationship between the discourses of martyr and traitor that creates this representational rupture. Martyrdom is produced by transforming historical events (utterances, gestures, actions, death) into typological markers that allow for the positioning of the victim in a narrative of spiritual transcendence. Because the victim’s conscience is always finally a cipher, and what is written on the heart—true faith or hypocrisy—is never fully legible to any but God, the construction of martyrdom is necessarily an act of interpretive narration. If the martyr cannot be produced as a coherent literary figure, the existential category of martyrdom is likewise imperiled. The same is true for the traitor. Although the victim’s insides are exposed for all to see, the executioner’s invitation to “Behold the heart of a traitor” is essentially an invitation to the same kind of interpretive act that constructs martyrdom, one that demands that the body and soul be read as part of a broader story of treason that has already been composed from the victim’s words and behavior. This story, like the martyr’s story, is equally transcendent, situating the victim as the anti-citizen, the arch-criminal, the exemplar of the damned. The difference—and the reason that the treason charge is so disruptive—is that the narrative structure of treason is far more flexible than the structure of martyrdom, which is always bound up with the
rigid typological imperatives of Christological and hagiographic suffering. Thus Elizabeth’s discursive substitution of treason for martyrdom—her reinscription of the cipher of the heart—is essentially the substitution of one narrative for another. In place of martyrrological exemplarity, treason provides a rival story of transcendence that’s simply easier to tell.

Villanova University

NOTES

1. This passage from Allen’s martyrology refers to the execution of Thomas Ford, one of the priests tried with Campion.

2. Gregory’s introduction announces its hostility to a range of potential postmodern readings of martyrology, objecting that such readings can only fail to take early modern belief as seriously as it takes itself. Much of what he objects to and claims to be working against, however, are hypothetical, “straw man” readings of early modern religion that seem unlikely to be launched by any reasonable scholar. But the anxiety that underlies these objections is not specific to Gregory.

3. Pius V’s bull, Regnans in Excelsis, can be found in the original Latin and in an English translation in Barlow I-6.


6. “An Act for provision to be made for the surety of the Queen’s most royal person” in Elton 77-80.

7. “Establishing Commissions Against Seminary Priests and Jesuits” and “Specifying Questions to be Asked of Seminary Priests” in Hughes and Larkin 86-95.

8. Campion’s “Challenge” was published in a document that refuted it, Meredith Hanmer’s The great bragge and challenge of M. Champion a Jesuite. On the various responses to Campion’s “Challenge” and his Latin treatise in defense of his faith, Decem Rationes, see Milward 54-59.


10. The place name designated by the blank is excluded in the trial transcript. The prosecutor’s catalog of Campion’s attire comes from a description of him that was circulated to aid his capture.

11. A particular declaration or testimony, of the undutifull and traiterous affection borne against her Majestie by Edmond Campion Jesuite, and other condemned Priests is an account of the priests’ answers to the six questions. This short text was published by Christopher Barker, the Queen’s printer, and is therefore presumed to be an officially sanctioned document. Because it is unpagedinated and appears in its entirety in State Trials immediately following the account of
Campion’s trial), page numbers from this text will refer to the State Trials version.

12. Because Pope Pius V died less than two years (d. May 1, 1572) after he issued the bull of excommunication against Elizabeth, there was some question among Catholics about whether or not it was still officially in effect. Six subsequent popes would hold office by the time Elizabeth died in 1603, and none cared to weigh in on the issue with either a renewal or retraction of the bull. However, Pope Paul V, who was elected in 1605, made a statement warning English Catholics not to take James’s Oath of Allegiance. In it, he advised them that the contents of the Oath—the rejection of the pope’s power to depose and excommunicate—were heretical and that the Oath could not be taken without imperiling one’s salvation. This decree indicates that, although the papacy issued no official position on Elizabeth after Pius’s bull, the question of papal prerogative that was central to trials like Campion’s remained a consistent point of Catholic orthodoxy.

13. Imprisoned Catholics routinely expressed their desire for martyrdom, and Campion was no exception. Marotti reports, “When Campion had entered England, he did so with no reluctance, as he said to the authorities, to ‘enjoy your Tyburn.’” Like other militant Jesuits, he thought of himself as a martyr in the making” (Religious Ideology 91).

14. As I have argued elsewhere, Foxe’s Acts and Monuments successfully negotiates the demands of both historical accuracy and typological uniformity, principally because the Marian persecutions were centered on the charge of heresy, not treason.

15. Coffey suggests that the practice of executing religious dissenters for heresy had come to be associated with Roman Catholicism and was therefore regarded warily by a broad range of early modern English theologians, including King James, who told Parliament that “it is a sure rule in Divinitie, that God never loves to plant his Church by violence and bloodshed” (quoted in Coffey 27).

16. The text was published anonymously, but Alfield has long been considered its author.

17. For this metaphor I am indebted to Matthew Kozusko, who generously read multiple drafts of this essay.

WORKS CITED

An advertisement and defence for Trueth against her Backbitres, and specially against the whispring Fawoures, and Colourers of Campions, and the rest of his confederats treasons. 1581.
Alfield, Thomas. A true reporte of the death & martyrdom of M. Campion Jesuite and preiste, & M. Sherseyn, &M. Bryan priests, at Tiborne the first of December 1581. 1582.
Allen, William. A Briefe historie of the Glorious Martyrdom of XII. Reverend Priests executed within these twelvemonthes for confession and defence of the Catholike faith. But under false pretence of Treason 1582.
Religion & Literature

2000.
Hammer, Meredith. *The great bragge and challenge of M. Chapman a Jesuite, commonly called Edmund Camplion, latelye arrived in Englande, containing nyne articles here severally laide downe, directed by him to the fordes of the Counsail, confuted & aanswered by meredith Hamner, M. of Art, and Student in Divinete*. London, 1581.
A particular declaration or testimony, of the undutifull and traiterous affection borne against her Majestie by Edmond Camplion Jesuite, and other condemned Priestes. 1582.