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John Foxe and the Joy of Suffering

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John Foxe rejected the early Christian and medieval emphasis on the exceptional nature of martyrs and on the disjunction between vulnerable body and transported soul, focusing instead on the human qualities of his Protestant martyrs and the communal experience of the persecuted faithful, which becomes the *locus* of the sacred. He avoided the miraculous in attempting to reconcile representations of horrific suffering with traditional affirmations of the inner peace and joy of the martyr. Much of the drama of the *Acts and Monuments* arises from intrusions of the ordinary (the gesture of wiping a sooty hand on a smock) and the unpredictable (a fire that will not burn). It is Foxe's deviations from the unwritten script of martyrdom and his occasional inability to contain the horror of a scene with assertions of spiritual triumph that give his narrative its power.

NEAR THE END of his massive *Acts and Monuments*, John Foxe interrupts an account of the "shameful lives and desperate ends" of persecutors "stricken with God's hand" (8:668)¹ to praise the English Protestant martyrs with whom he contrasts them:

Let us now enter the consideration of the blessed martyrs, who although they suffered in their bodies, yet rejoiced they in their spirits, and albeit they were persecuted of men, yet were they comforted of the Lord with such inward joy and peace of conscience, that some, writing to their friends, professed they were never so merry before in all their lives, some leaped for joy, some for triumph would put on their scarfs, some their wedding garments, going to the fire; others kissed the stake, some embraced the faggots, some clapt their hands, some sang psalms; universally they all forgave and prayed for their enemies; no murmuring, no repining was ever heard amongst them. (8:669)

The passage epitomizes Foxe's vision of the spiritual triumph of the martyrs over the authorities, ecclesiastical and civil, who have power over their bodies. His hyperbole needs to be qualified by a reading of the stories of individual martyrs—few in fact forgive their enemies publicly; some betray their fears—but it captures the celebratory mood of a majority of these stories. Foxe insists upon the "inward joy and peace of conscience" of the martyrs, seen as enabled by the comforting presence of God and conveyed to the watching crowd by gestures of the sort he

¹My extracts are from Rev. Josiah Pratt, ed., *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, 8 vols. (London, 1877). Volume and page numbers are given in the text.

enumerates here. He saw the spiritual victories he proclaimed as demonstrating the power of a militant faith to those who observed or read about them and as offering “an hope of heavenly comfort” (1:521) for the persecuted. Foucault’s model of civil punishment, which shows authority affirming itself by the ritual exercise of its power to punish, does not go very far toward explaining the kind of *agon* Foxe represents, with its culmination in the triumph of the victim.² This model, helpful as it can be for understanding the uses of institutional power, shifts attention away from questions about the nature and meaning of suffering and the representation of heroism and spiritual victory that arise in connection with accounts of Christian martyrdom. To understand the distinctiveness of Foxe’s accounts of Protestant martyrs it is more productive to look at the tradition to which he was reacting.

Christian martyrology typically celebrates the peace and joy of martyrs, who are often represented as displaying an imperturbable faith and as welcoming whatever pain the torturer or executioner can inflict in the confidence that they will soon be united with God. Yet one of the most striking things about this writing is its fascination with the torments of the body. Accounts of the early Christian martyrs detail grotesque tortures, some of which Foxe catalogues: “stripes and scourgings, drawings, tearings, stonings, plates of iron laid into them burning hot ... gridirons, gibbets and gallows” (1:109–10). Foxe himself celebrates the “mild deaths of the [Protestant] saints” (1:521), as he describes these deaths at one point, yet he presents the violence they suffer in detailed and realistic ways, keeping the reader’s gaze focused upon the actual scene of suffering and the disfiguring effects of the flames. I want to explore why Foxe confronted his readers with such disturbing detail and how he reconciled, or attempted to reconcile, the representation of suffering with affirmations of spiritual joy. His task, as martyrologist, was to persuade his readers that his “saints” did indeed die mildly, with spiritual rejoicing, while experiencing horrific torments.

Foxe’s representation of the suffering of English Protestants was strongly influenced by examples of early Christian martyrdom that he knew well, mainly from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, yet he transformed the tradition he inherited in important ways.³ The story of Eulalia, a young Spanish virgin of the fourth century who sought martyrdom, illustrates the appeal of this material for Foxe and also his unease with the miraculous elements he found in his source, in this case the *Liber Peristephanon* of Prudentius. Eulalia in her abundance of zeal flees her parents and after a night journey guided by a troop of angels confronts the Roman judge who is persecuting Christians. Foxe reports Prudentius’ account of a white dove flying from Eulalia’s mouth at the moment of death and snow miraculously covering the scene of her execution but adds a revealing qualification, “whereof let every reader use his own judgment” (1:272). He admiringly describes the “bold stom-

²Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), chaps. 1, 2.

³Foxe extended his chronological range to the Roman persecutions of the early Christians in the second English edition of the *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1570), drawing extensively upon Eusebius.

ach" with which the twelve-year-old Eulalia defies Roman authority, scattering the images she is commanded to worship as a gesture of contempt for the idolatry they represent.⁴ She challenges her persecutor to "burn, cut, and mangle" her body and professes to welcome being slashed to the bone with iron claws: "O Lord! behold thou art inscribed upon me! how pleasant it is to note these piercings, which mark thy triumphs, O Christ!" (1:271).⁵ Her suffering becomes an emblem of Christ's, as she converts her punishments into a sign of victory. Foxe praises Eulalia as "merry" in embracing the "terrible harrowing of her flesh" and her final torment of being burned with torches. The only indication we get that Eulalia acknowledges pain at all is the report that she swallows flames to speed her death. Foxe could accept the seemingly miraculous tolerance of pain where he could not the appearance of angels and other manifestations of the supernatural or the creation of a shrine for the veneration of her bones, because he could understand it as evidence of a fortitude made possible by the sustaining power of God.

Eulalia's suffering conforms to a pattern often found in accounts of early Christian martyrs. She welcomes abuses of the body as if seeking to imitate the passion of Christ; she insists that the pain of the flesh cannot reach her spirit; she shows no sign of being mastered by this pain. In retelling the stories of the early martyrs, Foxe reproduces many of the formulas that signal victory over pain and hence over the agency that inflicts it. Blandina wears out her torturers and feels no pain when finally gored to death by a bull (1:138ff.); Peter Brown characterizes her as "rapt in communion with Christ" while she is being gored.⁶ Sanctus can endure hot plates applied to his "tender parts" because he is refreshed by "the water of life which flows from Christ" (1:139). So miraculously does God temper the fire that Laurence's gridiron becomes "not a bed of consuming pain, but a pallet of nourishing rest" (1:208). This is what Thomas Heffernan, writing about medieval saints' lives, calls the "analgesic state" often found in early acts of the martyrs.⁷ For Foxe it is evidence that God will comfort martyrs and strengthen them to endure their ordeals. He frequently describes his martyrs as displaying fortitude, but this is for him a distinctively Christian fortitude, an amalgam of the classical virtue and faith

⁴Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 142, discusses Eulalia as a type of the "virgo animosa," illustrating a new Christian *nobilitas*, and traces Virgilian influences on Prudentius' account of her.

⁵Prudentius has Eulalia assert that the name of Christ is written on her and that her blood speaks Christ's holy name. *Prudentius*, trans. H. J. Thomson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1953), 2:143. Catherine Randall Coats, *(Em)bodying the Word* (New York: P. Lang, 1992), 20–21, comments on the significance of this writing on Eulalia's body. Coats discusses Foxe, Jean Crespin (*Histoire des martyrs*), Beza (*Icones*), and d'Aubigne (*Les Tragiques*) as Protestant martyrologists, distinguishing their techniques and emphases from those of medieval hagiography.

⁶Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 73.

⁷Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 196–197.

in the truth of God's promises.⁸ The martyr's ability to display boldness and courage in the face of death depends upon a sense of God's supportive and comforting presence although this does not involve for Foxe the kind of divine intervention that miracles exemplify.

The accounts of seemingly superhuman endurance that Foxe drew upon emphasize the separation of the vulnerable body and the inviolable spirit and the liberation of the spirit through suffering. When Eulalia's body slumps in death, in the version of Prudentius, the dove representing her escaping soul claps its wings in a sign of victory and flies off to heaven. This translation forms the climax of the narrative. The emphasis in early accounts of Christian martyrdom on the way the spirit transcends pain and unites with God is if anything intensified in medieval saints' lives. David Morris has described how medieval renderings of martyrdom and suffering treat pain as "a medium of visionary experience," providing "a release into a pure communion with the divine."⁹ Morris observes that visual representations of Saint Sebastian, like Mantegna's famous portrait, tend to show him with upraised eyes, suggesting that he is already beyond normal experience, enjoying a form of communion with the divine.

In the most popular medieval martyrology, the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, the sense of disjunction between body and spirit is often striking. Saint Dorothy, one of many noble virgins, preserves her virginity and her faith through a series of torments directed by the Roman provost Fabricius. When he has her put in a barrel of burning oil, she is so sustained by the power of "her spouse Jesu Christ that she felt none disease ne harm, but a precious ointment of balm," in the words of Caxton's translation.¹⁰ Dorothy quickly and miraculously recovers from ordeals that include having her body beaten with rods and torn with iron hooks, her face disfigured with stones, and her breasts burned with firebrands.¹¹ Fabricius finally ends the confrontation by having her beheaded, but not before a child appears with a basket of roses and apples ("from Paradise") and the voice of Christ summons Dorothy to heaven and promises her a martyr's crown. Divine interventions so

⁸Patrick Collinson, "'A Magazine of Religious Patterns': An Erasmian Topic Transposed in English Protestantism," in *Godly People* (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), 499–525, argues Foxe's indebtedness to classical sources, particularly to the moral framework of Plutarch, for his conception of Protestant heroism. He sees Foxe's martyrs as demonstrating a classical *apatheia* in the flames, although not the extreme version of Stoicism. For Collinson they display a "true Aristotelian courage, midway between cowardice and temerity" and a kind of moderation, avoiding the extremes of speech and behavior that characterize their persecutors, that he associates with Aristotelian ethics. I would argue that one needs to look as well to Christian influences, in particular to the kind of bold speaking associated with the apostles in Acts and the emphasis on constancy and calmness in Christian martyrology. The boldness of Foxe's martyrs, in their examinations and also at the stake, is as remarkable as their apparent control of their emotions.

⁹David Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: U California Press, 1991), 126–129, 131–136. Morris discusses Saint Sebastian and the mystics Saint Teresa and Saint Catherine of Siena.

¹⁰F. S. Ellis, ed., *The Golden Legend, as Englished by William Caxton* (New York: AMS, 1973), 7:43.

¹¹Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 170–171, comments on the popularity of the bizarre and spectacular in late medieval English accounts of Roman virgin martyrs and on the proliferation of tortures in saints' lives of the period (fifty-two separate ones in the case of Erasmus).

dominate the story that it is difficult to form a clear sense of the character of her resistance; the narrator multiplies torments to enhance the moral power of her suffering, but her experience of these torments seems curiously unreal. Although Dorothy acts out the role of martyr in the material world, largely as passive victim, she seems increasingly connected to the supernatural one in which she will enjoy status and influence as “blessed saint Dorothy” and “protectress” of those who pray to her against the perils of fire and lightning.¹² The story of her suffering makes her appear unmistakably holy and so far removed from ordinary human experience as to seem inimitable. Her case could illustrate the claim of Brigitte Cazelles that the early martyrs celebrated in medieval saints’ lives “were not so much models to be imitated as they were exceptions to be admired.” She notes that until the late twelfth century sainthood tended to be reserved to episcopal or aristocratic figures: “distant, noble, heroic, admirable, inimitable.”¹³

Foxe found many reasons to be contemptuous of the *Legenda aurea* and other medieval saints’ lives, but one of the most fundamental was that they distorted what he regarded as “simple and uncorrupt” stories by the addition of “monkish miracles and gross fables” (1:258). These accretions were another sign of the venality of the medieval church to Foxe; by inventing ever more outlandish miracles, the monks promoted the cult of the saints and enhanced the value of the relics they preserved as objects of worship. They also attenuated the drama that Foxe found in the earliest accounts of Christian martyrs of his own time, a drama grounded for him in the Christian fortitude of the individual martyr. Foxe’s Marian martyrs, whose stories make up about a third of the *Acts and Monuments* and were the major reason for its enduring influence, display such fortitude in their examinations for heresy, where they boldly parry doctrinal questions with scriptural answers despite the threat of condemnation, and, especially, in their conduct at the site of execution.

Foxe was more interested in Eulalia’s bold speaking, in the manner of the apostles,¹⁴ and in her fortitude than in the pleasure she professes to take in numbering her gashes; he showed no interest in the connection between suffering and religious ecstasy one can find in medieval asceticism. His Protestant martyrs anticipate joining a perfected community of the faithful in heaven rather than achieving an ecstatic vision of God. Unlike the female saints discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum, they do not embrace pain as a means of joining themselves with the body

¹²Ellis, *Golden Legend*, 7:47.

¹³Introduction to *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timia Szell (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 2,3.

¹⁴See, e.g., Acts 4:13, 31; Phil. 1:14, 20. Speaking the word of God boldly, “filled with the Holy Ghost,” was a mark of the true follower of Christ. Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: U Wisconsin Press, 1992), 61ff., chap. 3, and passim, describes the evolution of *parthesia*, which he describes as bold and free speech, in the early Roman Empire. He shows the *parthesia* of philosophers, a kind of licensed speech by which they were able to offer frank counsel to authorities, succeeded by the *parthesia* of bishops and monks, often seen as spirit filled. Brown’s interest is primarily in the exercise of power through such speech, by influencing emperors and local governors who tolerated it. In Christian martyrology bold speaking of the word of God is invariably confrontational, a challenge rather than a genuine attempt to persuade, and it typically has the effect of intensifying persecution.

of the suffering Christ.¹⁵ Rather, they see suffering and pain as a trial of faith sent by God and as something to be endured and overcome through faith with the help of grace. It was the constancy of the early martyrs, which Foxe saw as made possible by divine support (while downplaying visible intrusions of the supernatural), that established the pattern he traced in the accounts of suffering under “bloody Bonner,” Bishop of London, and other Marian persecutors supplied by his informants. Foxe describes Bonner’s “rage” against a weaver of Shoreditch, Thomas Tomkins, who is “so endued with God’s mighty Spirit” that beatings and other forms of mistreatment fail to shake his “confession of truth” (6:718). Bonner finally tests Tomkins’ faith by holding his hand in the candle flame, as the “Etruscan tyrant” Porsenna tested the legendary Roman hero Scaevola. Foxe uses the comparison to invest Tomkins, the Shoreditch weaver, with a heroism comparable to that of the far grander figure; “this christian Scaevola so valiantly did despise, abide, and endure that burning, that we have less cause hereafter to marvel at the manfulness of that Roman Scaevola” (6:719). What separates the fortitude of Foxe’s faithful “soldier of God” from that of Scaevola is the assumption that he is aided by the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

A passage that does not appear in the original English edition of 1563 has Tomkins reporting to a friend afterwards “that his spirit was so rapt, that he felt no pain” (6:718). This denial of pain recalls the rapt calm of the early Christian martyrs and further undermines Bonner’s display of power. Foxe’s rendering of Tomkins’ experience shows him embracing the paradox at the heart of the Christian understanding of martyrdom, that one can suffer in body and yet rejoice in spirit. It also illustrates the martyrologist’s problem of making suffering so readily endured convincing and significant. Does Tomkins simply become the type of the martyr here, and, if so, can one believe in his fortitude and regard it as heroic? The solution to the problem for Foxe lay in supplying the kind of concreteness that would individualize his protagonists and make them credible, as by describing details of clothing, gestures, and snatches of conversation with bystanders. Having established the humanness of his characters and linked them with a supportive community, he could rivet his readers’ attention by describing the effects of the flames in particularly grisly terms. Unless immunized against Protestant propaganda, they were likely to believe in the authenticity of the story and empathize with the victim. Here, in another passage added to the 1563 edition, he shows Bonner relenting in his abuse of Tomkins only after “the sinews burst, and the water did spirt in master Harpsfield’s face” (6:719).

Elaine Scarry’s compelling study of the effects of torture suggests how the “annihilating power of pain” can shut out the victim’s consciousness of the world and disintegrate his or her sense of identity and power of speech. Pain dominates

¹⁵See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: U California Press, 1987), 183 ff., 245 ff., and *passim*.

¹⁶Foxe’s “endued with” appears to mean “invested with,” although it could also have the other archaic meaning of “instructed by.” See OED, s. v. “endued with.”

the consciousness and silences the victim.¹⁷ Foxe describes relatively few instances of torture (these are more frequent in accounts of the Roman persecutions), but he represents the experience of victims of burnings in ways that challenge the picture Scarry offers. Like such predecessors as Eusebius and Prudentius, he depicts a form of heroic suffering in which the victim manifests a new sense of identity, as one of a company of Christian martyrs reaching back to the apostolic church, and speaks with a voice that asserts an enhanced moral and spiritual authority. By demonstrating the resilience of their faith, Foxe's martyrs gain a powerful new voice and a new kind of influence. We apprehend this voice through the medium of print, in Foxe's reconstruction of the story, but it often has an immediacy that makes one feel like an eyewitness. In this instance Tomkins, as if enacting the martyrdom that he anticipated, calls out "O Lord! into thy hands, I commend my spirit" (6:718), thereby allying himself with the company of "godly witnesses" by echoing the last words of the protomartyr Stephen, appropriated by many of the Marian martyrs. Through such speech Foxe's martyrs invoke the power of the Word of God in a final act of witnessing, refusing to be silenced by the flames.¹⁸

Tomkins and those actually burned at the stake understood that the role of martyr called for demonstrating superiority to pain, and Foxe, drawing upon the detail supplied by reporters, shaped his accounts to show Protestant martyrs transcending their suffering. Foxe describes the Marian protomartyr John Rogers washing his hands in the flames "as one feeling no smart" (6:609), in an action that was to become a ritual gesture testifying to one's composure in extremity, and he frequently characterizes martyrs as sleeping in the Lord, echoing a phrase used in Acts of Stephen's martyrdom that dissolves any sense of the agony of death. He reports gestures that testify to astonishing feats of endurance. Robert Smith, though blackened by fire and apparently dead, "suddenly rose upright before the people, lifting the stumps of his arms, and clapping the same together, declaring a rejoicing heart" (7:367). George Marsh, so long in the flames without moving he was thought dead, "suddenly" spreads his arms and cries "Father of heaven, have mercy upon me" (7:53). According to Foxe, the people reported that Marsh "died marvellous patient and godly," evidence that he was secure in his faith and received into heaven; he shows the unrelenting bishop who condemned him, on the other hand, preaching in the cathedral church that Marsh "burnt like a heretic, and was a fire-brand in hell" (7:53).

These contesting interpretations of the meaning of Marsh's death underscore the crucial importance for Foxe and his contemporaries of how the martyrs played

¹⁷Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), chap. 1.

¹⁸Medical anthropologist Robert Kleinman, "Pain and Resistance: The Delegitimation and Relegitimation of Local Worlds," in *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good et al. (Berkeley: U California Press, 1992), 169–197, argues that expressing pain can become a form of resistance to authority, for example, in the case of victims of China's Cultural Revolution. Such pain, associated with symptoms of illness, becomes a means of relegitimizing local moral worlds. Kleinman's model can be adapted to Foxe's martyrs if one inverts it. In their case, *not* expressing pain becomes the means of resisting authority and of relegitimizing a moral world that they share with supportive onlookers.

their roles at the stake. Onlookers obviously watched for and recorded such seeming miracles of faith as the gestures of Smith and Marsh, or that of Thomas Haukes, who told his friends beforehand to watch for a sign that he could keep his mind “quiet and patient” despite the pain and subsequently raised his burning hands over his head and clapped them three times “with great rejoicing, *as it seemed*” (7:115, italics mine). Such gestures were taken as signaling the triumph of the spirit, yet this is never a disembodied spirit for Foxe. It expresses its victory through the medium of the body instead of by some form of communion with the divine. Where Eulalia’s spirit triumphs in the form of the dove that claps its wings as it ascends to heaven, Haukes claps his charred hands in a gesture that keeps the reader’s attention fixed on the actual scene and the human drama acted there. In the woodcuts that accompanied early editions of the *Acts and Monuments*, the martyrs stare out at the reader or at the onlookers (in fuller representations of the execution scene) rather than looking to heaven. Foxe’s narrative and the accompanying illustrations work together to reinforce the bond between the martyr and the community from which he or she emerged. This community, which Foxe liked to see as imitating the experience of the primitive church, becomes the locus of the sacred. His emphasis is on the communal experience of a persecuted band of saints, a “godly fellowship,” rather than on the rapture of the transported soul.

The fact of a supportive audience distinguishes Foxe’s execution scenes from many of those described in earlier accounts, including that of Eulalia, who confronts Roman authority alone, having escaped the parents who would have restrained her. Foxe’s martyrs are rooted in a sustaining holy community and consciously play to it at their executions, with hortatory prayers where these are allowed as well as with gestures affirming their faith. By reprinting the letters of martyrs, sometimes at great length, Foxe underscored the importance of their acts of witnessing to this community and stressed that their words would survive. Whether to family, friends, or parishioners, these letters typically construct arguments for martyrdom and urge recipients to be true to their faith under persecution, appealing frequently to scripture. Robert Smith’s letters repeat familiar biblical formulas: “God will try his elect as gold in the furnace” (7:365); “Your sorrow shall be turned into joy” (7:366).¹⁹ In a verse epistle to his brother, Smith urges:

Come forth out of all fear, and do as I have done;
And God shall be thy guide, and give thee such increase,
That in the flames of fire thou shalt have perfect peace,
Into eternal joy, and pass out of all pain:
Where we shall meet with mirth, and never part again. (7:362)

Smith does not appear here as exceptionally pious or holy, but as one ordinary Christian urging another to “do as I have done.” His focus is on the community of

¹⁹Wisdom of Solomon 3:6; John 16:20.

the saints in heaven, which he hopes will include his brother, rather than on individual union with the divine.

Smith's versified exhortation reveals an underlying concern of the letters with addressing the fear that led many to follow the easier way of conformity. By virtue of their spiritual authority and their assertions of faith, prospective martyrs might hope to lead others "out of" this disabling fear. In the process they could strengthen their own resolve. Professing their confidence, in conversations with fellow prisoners and in letters to supporters, was a way of maintaining it. Smith's verses, like many of the letters, accept the fact of pain and the need to prepare oneself for it. They rely upon the common assumption that divine guidance and support ("God shall be thy guide") coupled with the expectation of heavenly joy would secure inner peace whatever the physical torments of the flames. Paul had provided a model for such witnessing with his recitals of hardships endured (including beatings, imprisonment, perilous journeys).²⁰ By acting on his advice to "bear the cross of pain" with patience (7:369), Smith became for Foxe "a singular example of Christian fortitude, who so manfully and valiantly did stand in defense of his Master's cause" (7:356). Smith is described as acting manfully because Foxe thought of Christian soldiers and the fortitude they displayed as masculine. He tended to present his female martyrs as "poor sely women" emboldened by God.²¹

Whatever his idealizing and celebratory tendencies and those of the martyrs whose words he reproduced, Foxe grounded his stories of individual martyrdoms in a convincingly material world in which his human actors do register pain, at least on occasion, and are capable of hesitating. Regis Boyer has commented on the tendency of medieval hagiography to leave space and time relatively undefined and the saints themselves "weakly individualized ... copies of a common prototype" (the monk, the virgin, the confessor, and so forth).²² Foxe, by contrast, carefully established dates and settings, especially of examinations and executions, and embedded his accounts of martyrdoms in a larger narrative chronicling the resistance of individuals and the ultimate triumph in England of the true church. He recorded particularizing details that make the ordeals more credible than those described in the *Legenda aurea* and the martyrs themselves more distinctively human than the saints commemorated there. Such detail has the effect of authenticating Foxe's accounts and intensifying their drama and of making his protagonists seem familiar members of a community acting out roles that anyone could be called upon to play. He collapsed the distance that medieval hagiography tends to open up between the saint and the ordinary human. Foxe describes Cecily Ormes, identified as the wife of a weaver and daughter of a tailor, as grasping the stake in a symbolic gesture and declaring "Welcome the Cross of Christ," then finding her hand

²⁰2 Cor. 11:23–27.

²¹See Ellen Macek, "The Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality in *The Book of Martyrs*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19 (1988): 63–80. Macek's emphasis is on the "spiritual maturation" of Foxe's female martyrs.

²²Regis Boyer, "An Attempt to Define the Typology of Medieval Hagiography," in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker et al. (Odense: Odense UP, 1981), 29.

sooty and wiping it on her smock (8:427). It is characteristic of Foxe to report both gestures, the ritual one binding her to the invisible company of “godly witnesses” who have gone before, the other by its very ordinariness marking her kinship with the visible community of believers who gathered at the stake. The stubborn fact of soot and the natural impulse to wipe it off root Cecily Ormes in this world and give the scene a sudden poignancy. The effect could hardly be more unlike that which Prudentius created with the details of the white dove and the unexpected snow that mark Eulalia’s death, testifying to her purity and to the miraculous character of the event.

The story of Rawlins White, “good father Rawlins,” offers one of the better examples of the way Foxe presents the drama of an ordinary person, lacking education and social standing, who is called to play the role of martyr.²³ White is one of Foxe’s most individualized and engaging characters, an illiterate Welsh fisherman who with the help of his young son memorizes enough of the Bible to become an effective preacher. Foxe’s account emphasizes White’s plainness (he comes to the stake in an old russet coat with a kerchief on his head) and his habit of blunt speaking. White characterizes himself as a “poor simple man” who trusts that God will strengthen him, and he resists the bishop by stubbornly affirming his sense of his identity: “Rawlins you left me, and Rawlins you find me; and, by God’s grace, Rawlins I will continue” (7:31). When his examiners say a mass for his conversion, White rushes in from the next room at the sound of the sacring bell and calls on the people to witness that “I bow not to this idol” (7:31). At the stake White reduces the priest who sermonizes over him to amazed silence by challenging his “clerkly interpretation” of the sacrament of the altar with scripture.

Drawing upon the detail supplied by his reporter (“one master Dane”), Foxe presented White as exemplifying the kind of bold speaking in the name of truth that he associated with the apostles. Yet he also included details that suggest a very human vulnerability. White rises from kissing the ground before the stake with dirt sticking to his nose, an incident he turns into a reminder of his mortality (“Earth unto earth”). He confesses to feeling “a great fighting between the flesh and the spirit” and tells the blacksmith to make fast the chain that binds him to the stake, “for it may be that the flesh will strive mightily” (7:32). Such remarks may have become part of the ritual at the stake (Ridley urges the blacksmith to “knock [the chain] in hard, for the flesh will have its course” [7:550]), but they add a sense of inner conflict that one does not find in early Christian accounts, in which chains simply constitute another form of torment. Reminders of the rebelliousness of the flesh and of the anxiety of the prospective martyrs about their ability to control their bodies suggest the real difficulty of maintaining a “cheerful countenance” at the stake, as Foxe reports that White did.

²³The preachers and bishops whose stories Foxe gave the greatest prominence are in fact outnumbered by those of lower social station and considerably less education, as commentators on Foxe have long noted. Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1992), 264–266, argues the importance of Foxe’s emphasis on the poverty and simplicity of many of the martyrs he includes in his vision of the true church.

Foxe framed his account of the execution itself with a characterization that suggests White's dignity and calm. He remarks on the apparent alteration of White's appearance at the stake, noting that his white hair and beard make him seem "angelical," and that he appears "bolt upright" (he had walked with a stoop before) and with "a most pleasant and comely countenance." The fact that Foxe shows the aged Hugh Latimer similarly transformed (in his shroud he stands "bolt upright" and appears "comely" where before he had seemed a "withered and crooked silly old man" [7:549]) suggests that such characterizations are part of his construction of heroism. The individuals threaten to disappear into the type at such moments, with the implication that social and other distinctions are erased by the common experience of martyrdom, yet the characters of bishop and fisherman are firmly established before this point. Foxe assures his readers that "it cannot be said that [White] suffered or felt any great pain," since he "abode quietly and patiently" (7:33), this after describing him as bathing his hands in the flames until the sinews shrink and the fat drops away and as loudly crying "Lord, receive my spirit!" until he could not open his mouth, a period he characterizes as "somewhat long." One feels the tension here and elsewhere between Foxe's need to believe in the "mild deaths of the saints" and the evidence of what may have been prolonged and agonizing pain.²⁴ Foxe's "somewhat long" in effect concedes this pain but without acknowledging it or allowing anything to blur the heroic portrait of Rawlins White.

Sometimes the evidence of pain is unmistakable. We learn that Thomas Benbridge recanted at the stake because of the "intolerable heat" (8:492) from his leather stockings; Foxe can say this because Benbridge retracted his recantation and was burned indeed a week later. He describes botched fires that prolong the dying and records the kind of sensational detail, like Hooper's beating his breast with his arm until the arm falls off, that led Helen White to call him a "master of horror."²⁵ Foxe knew the dramatic power of such detail, and he knew also that by recording the fire's horrific torments, his version of the tortures imposed by Roman persecutors, he could make such triumphs of faith appear more astonishing and at the same time more tangible than the distant ordeals of the early Christian martyrs and the often fantastic ones of medieval saints' lives. A comment in his 1563 preface, "To the Persecutors of God's Truth, Commonly Called Papists," suggests another reason for preserving as full a record as possible of the abuses of the bodies of the faithful: "Behold, here present before your eyes, the heaps of slain bodies, of so many men and women ... whose wounds, yet bleeding before the face of God, cry vengeance!" (1:508). By displaying the wounds, "yet bleeding," he amplified his Protestant cry for revenge for those "slain for the word of God" (Rev. 6:9–10).

²⁴ We cannot know, of course, to what degree Foxe's martyrs actually experienced pain. Severe (third-degree) burns can deaden the nerve endings, and the state of mind of the martyr, demonstrating the power of his or her faith by refusing to recant and anticipating entrance into heaven, could have affected the perception of pain. We know of ritual practices in which celebrants in their exaltation show no sign of pain; for example, the hook-hanging ritual used in India. Celebrants of this ritual, thought to represent the power of the gods, hang from a special cart by steel hooks embedded in their backs. See Ronald Melzack and Patrick D. Wall, *The Challenge of Pain*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic, 1983), 28–30.

²⁵ Helen White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison: U Wisconsin Press, 1963), 161–162.

Those actually awaiting burning appealed to scriptural promises of bodily resurrection. As Robert Samuel put it, paraphrasing Paul (Phil. 3:21): "Christ shall transfigure our vile bodies, and conform them to his glorious body" (7:369). The vulnerable natural body, its corruptibility proven by the "wounds" inflicted upon it, would be "raised in incorruption" at the Last Judgment (1 Cor. 15:42). In a last prayer at the stake, Nicholas Sheterden found consolation in the prospect of a body made perfect, beyond the troubles of this world. After urging God to accept his body as a sacrifice ("whatever rebellion hath been, or is found in my members, against thy will"), he prays: "Let this torment be to me the last enemy destroyed, even death, the end of misery, and beginning of all joy, peace and solace; and when the time of resurrection cometh, then let me enjoy again these members then glorified, which now be spoiled and consumed by the fire" (7:313). Foxe's preoccupation with the details of the spoiling and consuming has the important effect of heightening the imagined contrast with the glorified body of the saint.

Foxe clearly thought he could contain the images of horror he captured within the frame of a narrative that celebrates the victories of the martyrs, neutralizing the terror such images might arouse by insisting upon the peacefulness and joy of the martyr in the flames. Yet the narrative frame can crack, as it does very noticeably in Foxe's account of the death of Nicholas Ridley, with his fellow bishops Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer the most prominent of the Marian martyrs. The woodcut that renders the famous scene at Oxford gives no indication of the rupture that we find in the narrative. This shows the heroic figures of Latimer and Ridley at the stake at the moment of the lighting of the fire, simultaneously uttering what are intended to be last words. Their preacherly gestures and assured expressions signal a triumphant faith to the supportive crowd, as the secular authorities and the priest who has just denounced them look on.

At the beginning of the narrative, Ridley seems remarkably poised, gesturing to heaven when he arrives first at the site of execution, then embracing Latimer "with a wonderous cheerful look" and assuring him that "God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it" (7:548). Ridley continues to play the more prominent role in the scene, taking the lead in attempting to respond to the sermon censuring them as heretics, elaborately giving away possessions and clothing to clamoring supporters ("Happy was he that might get any rag of him"), and pressing a suit on behalf of his sister and others dependent upon him. Yet Latimer speaks the memorable final words about lighting a candle that "shall never be put out," added in editions after 1563,²⁶ and dies the exemplary martyr's

²⁶"Be of good comfort, master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out" (7:550). Nothing else Latimer says or does in the scene prepares us for the measured eloquence of this remark. The only other speech we hear from Latimer is colloquial, including his response to Ridley's "Oh, be ye there?" on the way to the stake ("have after ... as fast as I can follow") and his reported reaction to the sermon ("Well! there is nothing hid but it shall be opened"). His final remark, while in character, has a rhetorical manner that suggests Foxe's shaping hand. Foxe's concluding comment, another addition to the 1563 text, shows a similar use of pauses: "What reward remaineth for them in heaven, the day of the Lord's glory, when he cometh with his saints, shall shortly, I trust, declare" (7:551).

death. Foxe shows him embracing the flames, stroking his face and bathing his hands in the fire, then dying relatively quickly, "with little or no pain" (7:550).

Foxe represents Ridley, by contrast, as suffering from a fire that cannot reach his upper body, ironically made worse by his brother's well-meaning act of heaping on more faggots. Instead of quietly enduring, with ritual hand washing, he struggles and cries "Lord, have mercy upon me" and "I cannot burn" (7:551) until a bystander removes some faggots, allowing the fire to flame up and ignite the bag of gunpowder around his neck provided by his brother as a kindness. Foxe focuses on the pain of Ridley's burning legs, "whereof he had no release, only his contentation in God." The formulaic assertion of content conveys little sense of satisfaction or comfort in God. In this case, the facts of the event seem to overwhelm the topoi of the martyrologist.

Foxe pictures hundreds weeping "in beholding the horrible sight" of such eminent men of the church destroyed by the "fury of the fire ... [raging] upon their bodies." His description of the sorrowing of the crowd and the past accomplishments of the victims registers a mixture of shock and outrage at the unseemliness of the event ("so many godly virtues ... such excellent learning, to be put into the fire, and consumed in one moment"). He ends his narrative abruptly and uncharacteristically by declaring, "Well! dead they are and the reward of this world they have already" (7:551). The account in the 1563 edition ends here. Foxe added subsequently that they would receive their reward in heaven at the Last Judgment. He obviously believed that Latimer and Ridley would receive their martyrs' crowns of eternal life (Rev. 2:10),²⁷ if not the immediate union with God that Eusebius and others saw for the early Christian martyrs, and felt the need to cap the disturbing account of Ridley's execution with an affirmation of ultimate victory.

The scene of Ridley's death illustrates something important about the *Acts and Monuments*. It is the deviations from the unwritten script of martyrdom, the unpredictable things like soot on the hands or a fire that will not burn right, that make Foxe's Protestant saints seem vividly human and their heroic suffering within reach of ordinary members of a holy community. While the conventional language of the martyrologist takes over at times, Foxe must have recognized that the rejoicing of the spirit he insists upon could not really be separated from the pain and the indignities of the flesh and that the struggle between flesh and spirit could not be transcended as simply as assertions about peace in the flames implied. The power of his evocations of heroic Christian fortitude depends upon his ability to suggest the weakness and susceptibility to pain of his protagonists even while recording their triumphant gestures of faith. The compelling drama that he was able to give his stories of martyrdom explains why the *Acts and Monuments* continued to appeal not only as a history of the triumph of Protestantism in England but, ironically, as a source of patterns of speech and behavior for those who thought the English Reformation far from over and could identify with the indelibly human gestures of resistance to persecution and endurance of suffering that Foxe represented. What

²⁷ The faithful are also promised crowns of glory. See 1 Pet. 5:4.

Foxe could not have foreseen was the subversive potential of stories like that of Rawlins White to fuel resistance to the authority of the established church: by Elizabethan Separatists, John Lilburne, John Bunyan, the Quaker leader George Fox, and a host of others who contributed to the emergence of a vigorous nonconformist tradition in England.²⁸

²⁸Richard Helgerson discusses the appropriation of Foxe by the Elizabethan Separatist Henry Barrow and by Bunyan in chap. 6 of *Forms of Nationhood*. I examine the influence of Foxe's representations of persecution and suffering at length in *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563–1694* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).