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Excerpt

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Introduction

In one of the pivotal episodes of the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Faithful dies a martyr's death in Vanity Fair, subjected to various abuses of the flesh (whipping, lancing with knives, stoning) before being burned "to Ashes" at the stake. By rejecting the assumptions governing life in Vanity Fair, as incompatible with the faith that defines their pilgrimage, Faithful and Christian so enrage the authorities of the town that they are arrested, beaten, tried for the "Commotions" they cause, and Faithful is executed. Bunyan makes the confrontation and the martyrdom of Faithful seem inevitable, although such a martyrdom was far removed from his own experience and that of his readers, something that belonged to a legendary past. The episode is dramatically right because it distills a tradition of "suffering for Truth's sake" that for Bunyan and many others was at the heart of protestant Christianity. Bunyan absorbed this tradition mainly from two books he knew well, the Bible and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and experienced it through his imprisonment for unauthorized preaching. He had learned to see faith as demanding that one act upon the Word in ways that could not help but arouse the world's hostility. Such faith had to prove itself by a willingness to suffer, "unto blood," as Evangelist warns in telling Christian and Faithful what to expect in Vanity Fair. Faithful embodies an ideal of heroic suffering that emerges from this tradition and that can be found, in one form or another, in all the writers that I discuss.

Milton describes this ideal in *Paradise Lost* as "the better fortitude/ Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" (9.27–28), "better," that is, than the fortitude of martial heroes, including those of the classical epics in relation to which he defined his own form of Christian heroism.¹ The Son provides the pattern for such heroic martyrdom:

¹ Quotations from Milton's poetry are taken from Merritt Hughes, ed., *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York, 1957). For a discussion of the virtue of fortitude in relation

in *Paradise Lost* by volunteering to die for man to satisfy the demands of divine justice, in *Paradise Regained* by demonstrating a willingness to wait and to suffer patiently in response to Satan's offers of means to power and worldly satisfaction.² All Christian martyrdom is in some sense an *imitatio Christi*, because the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ established the pattern of winning spiritual victory through suffering and thereby overcoming worldly strength through apparent weakness. Adam grounds his conclusion that "suffering for Truth's sake / Is fortitude to highest victory" (12.569–70) upon the example of Christ's sacrifice, as this is described to him by Michael. Yet the vision Michael offers Adam of truth besieged and slandered and the faithful persevering in the face of "heavy persecution" derives primarily from the sense Milton came to have of the true church as a suffering church persisting in a world in which the faithful find themselves surrounded by the "enemies of truth." New Testament texts provide the basis for the theology of suffering that informs Michael's vision, but the history that gave it a context and made the term "Heroic Martyrdom" so resonant for Milton was presented most memorably by John Foxe.

For Milton, even more for Bunyan and for others such as George Fox and Richard Baxter who in their various ways defined a nonconformist tradition in which faith was inseparable from suffering,³ Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was an inescapable text. It articulated the themes and provided the examples that shaped an ideal of protestant heroism, while tracing the story of the survival of the true church and the triumph of the Reformation in England under Elizabeth. The outcome of the story Foxe told, with the final chapter provided by the emergence of Elizabeth as the new Constantine who united church and state, proved controversial for those who came to challenge the established church and was less important for many

to Miltonic and Renaissance notions of heroism see John M. Steadman, *Milton and the Renaissance Hero* (Oxford, 1967), chapter 2.

² John M. Steadman, "The 'Suffering Servant' and Milton's Heroic Norm," *Harvard Theological Review* 54 (1961), 29–43, argues that Milton derives his heroic norm from Christ and discusses the pattern of humiliation and exaltation that Christ exemplifies. See also Steadman's *Milton and the Renaissance Hero*. Stella Revard, "The Heroic Context of Book IX of *Paradise Lost*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 87 (1988), 329–41, sees the Son of *Paradise Lost* as both Christian and classical hero, sacrificing himself for man and defeating Satan, prospectively, in single combat.

³ N. H. Keeble comments on the impact of Foxe's accounts of Marian martyrs upon nonconformist writing and also upon the nonconformist sense of suffering as "the badge of the saint." See *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester, 1987), pp. 5, 187–91.

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than the history of persecution and heroic suffering to which he gave a definitive shape. I am more interested in this history, and in the image of a faith defined by acts of resistance and a capacity for patience and constancy presented by the *Acts and Monuments*, than in the grand movement toward decisive victory over Rome of the English church that Foxe celebrates. Thus my emphasis differs from that of William Haller, whose influential and still valuable book on the *Acts and Monuments* argues Foxe's importance in establishing the idea of England as an elect nation governed by a godly prince.⁴

For those who thought reformation in England far from complete, Foxe's narrative offered only the illusion of closure. Its most enduring appeal lay in the images of resistance to persecution it offered and in its claims for the survival of the ideals of the primitive church. Foxe showed his own unease with pressures for conformity in the Elizabethan church, even while celebrating its triumph under the godly rule of Elizabeth, and also his deep attraction to the simplicity and purity of the faith he found in the primitive church and in those he saw as perpetuating this faith among the Waldensians on the continent and the Lollards in England. Yet he could not have envisioned the subversive potential of his work.

The major irony of the reception of the *Acts and Monuments* is that a work embraced by the governing body of the church (Convocation ordered in 1571 that copies be placed in cathedral churches and the houses of various orders of the clergy)⁵ should have fuelled resistance to the church's authority. Elizabethan Separatists, including Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, identified instinctively with Foxe's

⁴ See William Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (London, 1963), especially chapter 7. Haller has been criticized for overemphasizing Foxe's nationalism and neglecting his concern with the international character of protestantism. See V. Norkov Olsen, *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 35ff.; Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon* (Toronto, 1978), pp. 41ff. I did not see Richard Helgerson's recent *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago and London, 1992) until my book was in press. Helgerson's suggestive discussion of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (chapter 6) reveals various areas of mutual interest, including Foxe's presentation of a community of believers defined by suffering and resistance and the appropriation of Foxe by such antagonists of the established church as Henry Barrow and John Bunyan. While I find that what I have to say about Foxe often complements or extends Helgerson's argument, my interest is not so much in Foxe's contribution to a "discourse of nationhood" as in his role in shaping a discourse of persecution and martyrdom that leaps national and temporal boundaries, joining English protestants to the larger community of "godly witnesses" that embraces such figures as Paul, Stephen, and the early Christian martyr Polycarp and includes the Waldensians as well as the Lollards.

⁵ Many parish churches acquired their own copies. See J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (London, 1940), pp. 147–48.

Marian martyrs and accused bishops and other dignitaries of the church of assuming the roles of persecutors, like “bloody Bonner,” given notoriety by Foxe. In the next century another group that attacked bishops, at least those they saw as abusing their authority – the trio of William Prynne, Henry Burton, and John Bastwick along with Bastwick’s younger ally John Lilburne – would invoke Foxe freely in identifying with the tradition of those who suffered for God’s truth. The direction of the church had of course changed by this time under the leadership of Archbishop William Laud, in ways that surely would have troubled Foxe. Laud was sufficiently alert to the dangers of Foxe’s legacy to refuse to license a new edition of the *Acts and Monuments* in 1637.

I have not attempted to trace this legacy in seventeenth-century England (its history has been written in part already),⁶ rather to focus on some events and texts that show Foxe’s impact upon the consciousness of those who saw themselves as resisting ill-founded or ill-used authority and to explore related questions about the representation of persecution and suffering. As my chapters on Milton, Bunyan, and George Fox and Quaker “sufferings” should demonstrate, my interest goes beyond questions of influence to how these writers engaged the tradition of suffering in the name of God that Foxe did much to shape and popularize. I am interested in Milton’s complex responses to Foxe but also in his attempt to protect the tradition of protestant martyrdom from the efforts of Charles and his followers to appropriate it and, more generally, in the evolution of his attitudes toward suffering and martyrdom.

Foxe had pointed relevance for Bunyan and George Fox, both of whom wrote out of an experience of persecution that they saw, from differing theological perspectives, as linking them with the time of the Marian martyrs as well as with that of the apostles. Living through the period of the most severe persecution of nonconformist worship in England (1660–88), under the pervasive threat of the series of penal laws known as the Clarendon Code, they identified readily with the long line of Christian witnesses Foxe described.⁷ Bunyan addressed the problem of how to justify and endure suffering in his works of practical divinity, most notably *Seasonable Counsel*, and imagined

⁶ See especially William Lamont, *Godly Rule: Politics and Religion, 1603–60* (London, 1969); Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*; Haller, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*.

⁷ For a discussion of the experience of nonconformists in this period, see Gerald R. Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution: 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1957); Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford, 1978), chapter 3.

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himself playing the role of martyr in his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, and in the series of pastoral letters published as *A Relation of My Imprisonment*. He made the Christian experience of suffering a major theme of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. George Fox engaged the problem of suffering in his letters and tracts and rendered his abundant experience of suffering and his resistance to persecution in his *Journal*. Persecution was so central to Quaker experience in seventeenth-century England that recording their sufferings became a prescribed way for Quakers to witness to their faith.

The *Acts and Monuments* itself claims a major share of my attention, as an important and still insufficiently studied work in its own right and as a foundation for the chapters that follow. A preliminary chapter treats Foxe's account of John Rogers, the London minister who was the first to die in the Marian persecution, as a case study of how he constructed his drama of martyrdom, adapting sources (here principally Rogers's own account of his examinations) to serve the purposes of martyrology and grounding his sense of the necessity and meaning of suffering in Scripture. My long second chapter explores Foxe's responses to stories of early Christian martyrs, as filtered by the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, and the critical influence of John Bale upon Foxe's conception of protestant martyrdom; it considers the importance of accounts of examinations for heresy to Foxe's portrayal of resistance to persecution and to his conception of heroism; and it traces thematic emphases that color Foxe's representation of martyrdom, especially the contrast of protestant plainness and Catholic ceremonialism and that of the joyfulness and peace of mind of the martyrs in their suffering and the graphically represented horrors of their actual executions. A final chapter on Foxe places his portraits of heroic suffering in the context of his ideal of a holy community of Christians and his understanding of the tradition of the suffering church.

The text of the *Acts and Monuments* presents problems that demand some comment. Foxe included documents of many kinds, including accounts of Marian persecutions collected by Edmund Grindal and others and letters and narratives of the martyrs themselves, and he made extensive use of translations, for example, of Eusebius' accounts of early Christian martyrs.⁸ He functioned as editor as well as author,

⁸ He also relied upon assistants to translate the Latin martyrology he composed in Basel, *Rerum in Ecclesia gestarum* (1559), and incorporated into the first English version of the *Acts*

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blending a multitude of texts and altering these at times to suit his purposes. To isolate Foxe's voice one must try to determine what sources he may be using at a particular point in his narrative and how he is framing or modifying them. I have chosen to quote from the nineteenth-century Cattley–Pratt edition of the *Acts and Monuments*, recognizing that it must be used with care, because this is the most generally accessible and also because it offers a composite version of a text that continued to evolve as Foxe incorporated new evidence and simultaneously cut sections from previous editions in response to pressure to hold down the length of the work.⁹ Where it seemed important, I have quoted from the Elizabethan editions.

The question of Foxe's reliability as historian has been argued since the first appearance of the *Acts and Monuments*, until relatively recently in fiercely partisan ways. Contemporary historians, beginning with J. F. Mozley and including A. G. Dickens and Patrick Collinson, have established that Foxe was diligent about collecting evidence and careful in reporting it, at least by Tudor standards, and not the willful fabricator many of his critics made him out to be.¹⁰ The more interesting and current questions have to do with the ways Foxe shaped his material, often through omission or editorial emendation, to create his vision of English protestantism unified and triumphant. As Collinson and others have shown, Foxe tended to suppress doctrinal differences among martyrs, presenting even the most radical and unruly as true protestants.¹¹

and Monuments in 1563. For accounts of the composition and evolution of the *Acts and Monuments*, through the greatly expanded 1570 edition and a final revision by Foxe in 1583, see Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*; Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*; Warren Wooden, *John Foxe* (Boston, 1983).

⁹ Stephen Cattley brought out a new, complete edition of the *Acts and Monuments* in eight volumes (London, 1836–41), following a plan of collating “the original Latin edition of Foxe's history and the five authentic English editions” and using the 1583 edition as his copy text (1.484). He and his assistants checked Foxe's facts against the authorities he used and modernized punctuation and spelling. Corrected and revised editions followed, after 1853 under the editorship of Josiah Pratt. The last and most complete of these appeared in 1877. Wooden discusses the faults of this edition and calls for a modern scholarly one. *John Foxe*, pp. 11–12, 117–19. Mark Breitenberg questions Wooden's concern with textual integrity, noting the composite and evolving nature of the *Acts and Monuments*, and focuses instead on the interpretive history of the text. “The Flesh Made Word: Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 25 (1989), 381–407.

¹⁰ See Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*, *passim*; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1964), 26–27; Patrick Collinson, “Truth and Legend: The Veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs,” in A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse, eds., *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands* (Zutphen, 1985), pp. 31–54.

¹¹ See Collinson, “Truth and Legend,” 39ff. I discuss this aspect of the *Acts and Monuments* in chapter 3, below.

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Anyone writing on a work as vast and inclusive as the *Acts and Monuments* must make choices of emphasis, and mine reflect an interest in continuities between Foxe's discourse and that of selected writers who pursue some of the basic reformation themes that engaged him: the nature of persecution, the inevitability and meaning of suffering, the shape of protestant heroism, among others. These continuities should emerge in the course of the pages that follow, but one is so fundamental that it deserves mention here. This is a fascination with the ideals and experience of the primitive church, by which I mean primarily the apostolic church but also the church of the first three centuries described by Eusebius, and with ways in which they had been and might be reproduced.¹² At the outset of the *Acts and Monuments* Foxe insists, in response to Catholic taunts, that reformed practices are not new "but the renewing of the old ancient church of Christ."¹³ In reading the stories of Foxe's martyrs, one is frequently reminded of the book of Acts, with its stories of individual actions of witnessing and its portraits of embattled communities of Christians. The Pauline epistles provide many of the texts, including those in which Paul details his own afflictions, that shape the martyrs' sense of their roles. They often appear to be acting out a drama learned from the New Testament, repeating key texts to reassure themselves or justify their actions, as by invoking the example of the protomartyr Stephen denouncing his accusers or that of Paul and Silas singing in prison. What Theodore Bozeman says about "biblicist primitivism" can be applied to many of those Foxe describes. They, and Foxe himself, approached Scripture as a dramatic narrative and a "treasury of archetypes" with which they could identify. It offered a "recapturable mythic drama," in Bozeman's phrase, in their case a drama of persecution and suffering for what they understood as the true faith.¹⁴

This drama involved testifying to the truth, speaking "boldly" in the name of Jesus in the fashion of Paul and the apostles, as well as suffering for it. In the *Acts and Monuments* bold speaking, primarily in

¹² Foxe followed the periodization of John Bale (*The Image of Both Churches*), in which the first 300 years marked a time of special purity in the church. Apologists for the English church, most notably John Jewel, took 600 AD as the outer limit of the primitive church. See F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, Calif., 1967), pp. 99, 107ff.

¹³ Rev. Josiah Pratt, ed., *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe* (London, 1877), 8 vols., 1.9. Hereafter references to the *Acts and Monuments* will be given in the text by volume and page number.

¹⁴ Theodore Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill and London, 1988), chapter 1 *passim*.

examinations for heresy, is as important to Foxe's narrative as the examples of heroic suffering provided by his accounts of executions. Foxe sought to establish a record of these encounters by means of whatever evidence he could find, ideally accounts of the protagonists themselves such as those of John Rogers and John Philpot that I discuss below. Such accounts, with the numerous accounts of examinations or trials for issues arising from the exercise of religious beliefs that follow in the hundred years or so after Foxe's death in 1587, form a distinct genre. Rogers and Philpot and the rest whose stories are woven into Foxe's vast tapestry are succeeded by, among many others, the Separatist Henry Barrow, William Prynne and his companions John Bastwick and Henry Burton, John Lilburne, Bunyan, and Fox. While the issues and the circumstances may change, the central elements of this drama remain: heroic resistance to hostile authorities, determination to witness to the truth regardless of consequences, and persistent appeal to Scripture against doctrine or civil law. The protagonists are typically guided by biblical examples and sustained by biblical texts promising that the Holy Spirit will tell them what to say, that God will support them in their ordeal, and that they will triumph in the end despite their apparent powerlessness. The trial of Faithful and Christian for heresy belongs to this genre. It captures a fundamental truth of the experience Bunyan sought to render, by showing Christians forced to prove their faith by denouncing their accusers in the name of God.

These accounts of trials and examinations present a contest between the power of the presiding authorities, whether clerical or secular, and the power of God acting through the faithful Christian. They typically show the authorities, unmoved by argument, sentencing or condemning the accused Christian, who nonetheless displays spiritual strength and a superior spiritual authority, emboldened by a sense of divine presence. When the scene shifts to prison or the place of execution, the contest continues in other forms. Here patient suffering rather than bold speaking becomes the means of resistance. The victim defeats the intent of the punishment by bearing physical abuse calmly, with a peace of mind shown to contrast with the "rage" of the persecutor, often by finding means of demonstrating joy in suffering. By remaining unmoved by punishment, or even exulting in it, the victim shows the limitations of the power of church or state to control the subversive spirit. Such resistance is seen as enabled by God, portrayed as strengthening the

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suffering Christian to endure affliction and torment. Constancy becomes proof of God's power to sustain the faithful. Foxe found a more tangible demonstration of divine power in reports of divine judgments on persecutors, reports he was eager to believe.

Michel Foucault's influential writing on punishment offers only limited help in explaining the dynamic I have described. One can apply Foucault's discussion of the spectacle of public execution in France as political ritual, by which the power of the punishing authority is inscribed on the body of the victim and sovereignty is reaffirmed, to the punishments inflicted upon those who suffer for religious truth. But Foucault's model of punishment does not address the kind of *agon* one finds in the accounts of religious suffering that I discuss.¹⁵ Much of the interest of such accounts lies in the way they display contending truths and understandings of power, spiritual as well as material. Their authors, including Foxe, typically show spiritual power triumphant over whatever physical punishment may be inflicted, through the heroic suffering of the persecuted Christian. In these accounts pain does not have the obliterating effects described by Elaine Scarry.¹⁶ Foxe's Marian martyrs affirm their identity as true Christians by gestures, such as clapping their hands in the flames, and memorable last words. Rather than losing their voices in the manner of Scarry's victims, they gain new ones through suffering, as pain becomes a source of enhanced spiritual power.

By extending his story in the 1570 edition of the *Acts and Monuments* back to the period of the Roman persecutions described by Eusebius, Foxe was able to place the victims of the Marian persecution whose stories were his immediate concern in a long tradition of godly witnesses and in a history that he saw, following his friend John Bale, as that of a continuing spiritual warfare between true and false churches. Bunyan could imagine his pilgrims as belonging to this

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), chapters 1 and 2. Foucault deals with the torture and execution of criminals, of course. He does address the question of whether the souls of those executed were thought to be saved, focusing on the way spectators studied the behavior of the victim for signs of God's judgment (46–47), but rejects the concept of the soul he finds in Christian theology in favor of the "historical reality" of a soul "born... out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint" (29). One can recognize that the victims of persecution were shaped by their ordeals (they themselves describe their faith as refined like gold in the fire, in the words of 1 Peter) without going to Foucault's extreme of locating meaning solely in the exercise of power by authority. The drama of the accounts I discuss depends upon a sense that the individual Christian can act, heroically, out of a faith grounded in what he or she regards as the superior power and reality of the Word.

¹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford and New York, 1985), chapter 1.

company of witnesses and the providentially ordered history to which they contributed. Others like John Lilburne and George Fox who recounted their own experience of persecution could place themselves in the context established by Foxe. They could also respond to another aspect of the *Acts and Monuments* to which Eusebius contributed, the rendering of appalling physical torments associated with martyrdom. The most horrific of these were to be found in the stories of the early Christian martyrs. Foxe, like other martyrologists, lingered over abuses of the body, including the slow deaths in the flames of many of the English martyrs. Such descriptions can be seen as a form of literary sensationalism in the service of religious polemic, but they have the important dramatic effect of magnifying the heroism of the protagonists and the power of God to bring good out of apparent evil. The greater the physical abuse the victims of persecution endure, the more impressive their spiritual victory and the more telling the contrast between the abused body of the martyr and the glorified body of the saint.

My focus is limited to the discourse of protestant martyrdom and suffering, especially as this is presented by Foxe and developed in seventeenth-century England by the writers I consider. I ignore the literature of Catholic persecution and martyrdom under Elizabeth, a fertile subject in itself.¹⁷ Except for *Eikon Basilike*, which I read through the lens of Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, I do not consider royalist appropriations of the literature of martyrdom, another rich subject. The major thrust of my argument is to show how themes and conventions from the *Acts and Monuments*, and the discourse Foxe developed and publicized, stimulated the imaginations of those who resisted the authority of the established church, including those who embraced arguments for separation (Barrow, Burton, Lilburne), the iconoclastic Milton, and the two writers who rendered the suffering of nonconformists in the later seventeenth century most powerfully, Bunyan and Fox.

¹⁷ For discussions of this persecution see, among others, Philip Hughes, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in England* (Birmingham, 1942); John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London, 1975). A recent article by Elizabeth Hanson offers a suggestive discussion of Elizabethan torture and Catholic martyrdom, that of Edmund Campion in particular. See "Torture and Truth in Renaissance England," *Representations* 34 (1991), 53-84.