Introduction: conflicting testimonies

During the Reformation era, England witnessed religious persecutions of unprecedented intensity.[1] Under Henry VIII numerous reformers suffered, and Mary I's heresy proceedings against Protestants represented the most concentrated persecution of religious dissidents in England's history. Catholics too were threatened with hardship and death under Henry VIII, while in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they endured further periods of intense persecution.[2] Those who suffered were celebrated as martyrs for their particular causes. Yet as a Protestant minister arguing with the recusant Catholic Margaret Clitherow notes, "In the tyme of Queen Marie were many put to death, and now also in [Elizabeth's] tyme, of two severall opinions; both these cannot bee martyrs."[3] The minister's comment identifies the crucial Reformation-era problem on which this book focuses: how to interpret martyrdom in an age of warring truths.

Competing martyrologies had a much wider, more pervasive influence on English literature and religious culture than is usually acknowledged. The sheer volume and popularity of texts about martyrs suggests their importance to early modern culture. Nine complete editions of John Foxe's Protestant *Book of Martyrs* were produced by 1684 (six of these by 1610) and over 50 works concerning the persecution of Catholics in England were published between 1566 and 1660.[4] Yet martyrologies deserve attention not only for their widespread popularity but also because martyrology is a key genre through which early modern writers grappled with religious change and conflict. Martyrological controversies and literary reactions to them focus crucial Reformation-era questions: questions concerning authority and resistance, the nature of the church, religious subjectivity, justification and sacrament, and historical continuity (or discontinuity). Martyrological controversies led writers to imagine the delineation of individual and corporate religious identities as a competition between variant forms of steadfastness, resolve, and sacrifice.

Examining in detail both Catholic and Protestant martyrological texts, I trace the literary impact of the Reformation era's complicated plurality of testimonial voices. I focus on areas of conflict and overlap between Protestant and Catholic martyrological discourses, broadly understood, because early modern martyrologists usually portrayed the religious world in these (admittedly simplified) terms. Even in the face of significant intra-Protestant or intra-Catholic fissures, most Protestant and Catholic martyrologists are reluctant to admit intra-faith divisions and instead labor to rally their co-religionists into an integrated opposition to a clearly demarcated religious Other. While I acknowledge and attend to divisions within Protestant and Catholic traditions, I focus primarily on the literary effects of interconfessional martyrological controversies. This wider perspective shows that in the early modern period the generic separation Protestant and Catholic martyrologists attempted to effect was difficult, imprecise, and incomplete. Martyrologies, texts seeking to draw firm boundaries between saint and sinner, often overlap uncomfortably with their polemical opposites in their rhetoric, conventions, and assumptions. Early modern martyrological writing both wishes to draw firm distinctions based on religious differences and, in its controversial context, reveals the considerable difficulty of doing so. This prolonged struggle to delineate different religio-literary traditions using an inherited generic arsenal warns us against adopting models of early modern culture that presume stable religious identities and representational habits.

My study's chronological limits highlight the main conflicts I trace: the book focuses on material written between roughly 1540 and 1650. In this period, even as magisterial Protestant martyrology (especially that associated with John Foxe) established itself, it underwent significant challenges from the conflicting testimonies offered by contemporary Catholic martyrologists. Simultaneously, both Protestant and Catholic martyrologists struggled to unite their often fractious co-religionists behind the causes for which their martyrs died. By the mid-seventeenth century Protestant unity was, of course, a distant dream; the use of martyrological tropes in Protestant nonconformist writing flourished alongside the *Eikon Basilike*'s rhetoric of martyrdom.[5] Still, I show that even martyrological texts at the end of my chronological range use the persistent allure of simple, binary oppositions between sharply demarcated "Protestants" and "Catholics" for particular religious and/or political purposes.

Throughout this book, I read Protestant and Catholic martyrological discourses against each other. A side-effect of my comparative approach is to give the Catholic presence in early modern literature more attention

than is usual in most current studies.[6] Further, my approach imitates the way many early modern authors read martyrological texts. Patrick Collinson has argued that we do not yet fully understand how the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe was read.[7] I present evidence for one important way that contemporary authors read Foxe and other martyrologists: in the context of their competition. Each of the authors I discuss demonstrates awareness of Protestant and Catholic martyrological efforts; each shows the increasing strain competing martyrdoms placed on common hagiographical conventions and assumptions. Anthony Munday, Thomas Dekker, and Philip Massinger drew on Catholic and Protestant martyrologies for their plays. William Shakespeare's (and possibly John Fletcher's) *Henry VIII* adapts Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* and yet in doing so places Foxean martyrological conventions in tension with overlapping Catholic ones. John Donne's prose and poetry show his familiarity with Protestant and Catholic martyrologies. Robert Southwell's prose attacks Protestant claims about martyrdom and his poetry, often taking suffering as its subject matter, proved popular with Protestant and Catholic readers. Book I of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is informed both by Caxton's *Golden Legend* and Foxean martyrological paradigms, while Anthony Copley's *A Fig for Fortune*, a Catholic rewriting of Spenser, responds both to Spenser's poem and to Catholic martyrologies.

As these cross-confessional reading habits suggest, if we do not consider martyrological discourses in the context of their competition we oversimplify early modern religious culture. Although literary scholarship on martyrologies has taught us a great deal, literary studies to date have focused on single confessional strands and influences, such as John Foxe's importance for nonconformist writing or the influence of rhetorical training on Catholic martyrologies.[8] Yet martyrologists were intensely aware of the competition's efforts. To be a martyrologist was also to be a polemicist; a martyr's biography in early modern England is essentially dialogical, not just encomiastic. A central claim of this book is that conflicts between Protestant and Catholic martyrological writing helped to produce, not merely to record, religious divisions. If we pursue only single-sided studies of martyrological discourse, we adhere to the lines martyrologies themselves helped to draw and may obscure a primary function of those texts: to wrest discrete religions from a shared (if sometimes only partially or half-heartedly embraced) generic inheritance.

Yet even as martyrologies undertake their work of sifting true from false witnesses, persistent, uncomfortable overlaps in their testimonial strategies and epistemological assumptions suggest the messiness of the very

distinctions martyrologies tried to foster. Martyrologists' competitive zeal is aroused largely because, across religious lines, early modern martyrologies share the same primary concern: how to interpret particular lives and deaths as confirmation for abstract belief systems. John Foxe prints a letter from the Marian martyr George Marsh in which Marsh writes that he is willing "to confirm and seal Christ's gospel" with his blood.[9] Insisting that the charismatic Jesuit Edmund Campion (*d.* 1581) died a martyr to the truth, Father Henry Walpole, S.J., claims that Campion's "death confirmes his doctrine true."[10] Both the Protestant Foxe and the Catholic Walpole assume that the words, actions, and sacrifices of individual believers may witness to religious truth. This assumption reflects the etymology of "martyr," an etymology that suggests the epistemological issues at stake (pun intended) in martyrological discourse. In classical rhetoric the term "martyria" refers to a witness who confirms something by virtue of his/her own experience.[11] In religious discourse the word "martyr" has come to mean a person whose words, actions, and death offer authoritative testimony. As a friend of Foxe's martyr Joyce Lewes tells her, "Mistres Lewes, you have great cause to praise God, who will vouchsafe so speedely to take you out of thys world, & make you worthy to be a witnes to his truth, and to beare record unto Christ that he is the onely Saviour."[12] Lewes's friend makes a claim that is both conventional and remarkable: her death will point to and uphold religious truth.

The notion that individual testimony may confirm a body of religious precepts is one that many contemporary academics might well question. Indeed, literary critical paradigms have done more justice to the contours of religious ambiguity, equivocation, and irony than to representations of unshakeable faith. My approach to martyrological controversies corrects a tendency in some forms of literary scholarship to gloss passionate commitment to religious belief systems as the effect of political or ideological manipulation.[13] It is not helpful to impose the effects of twenty-first century skepticism on another culture with quite different methods of reading the world. To take seriously what early modern martyrological discourse purports to be about – the role of the individual subject in ascertaining and testifying to religious truth – is to embark on a study of historical epistemology, to uncover ways in which early modern people thought one might come to know what beliefs were true. The epistemologies of martyrdom are adapted and redeployed by writers of various religious persuasions as they reflect upon achingly similar problems: how truth may be confirmed by subjective testimonies in an age when so many suffer for different causes.

While my book focuses at different moments on various martyrological conventions and arguments, they all bear on this central assumption that martyrs could be used to confirm religious truth. Under the force of this central claim, martyrological writing had a particular impact on certain areas of literary production: on the imagining of history, on the formation of subjectivity in religious lyric, on the representation of corporate bodies of believers, and on the conception of forms of passive yet potent resistance to established ecclesiastical and political bodies. Discussion of each particular area does not appear in every chapter; the material is too varied to permit a neat march through the evidence. Nevertheless, these literary reactions to competing testimonies all indicate the difficulties of interpreting martyrdom and suffering in the early modern period. Some texts mourn persistent problems in interpreting testimonies. Others reveal a range of compensatory literary strategies that competing testimonies provoked. Still others show that these compensatory strategies could become so strained that they were not capable of papering over the growing faultlines in martyrological discourse, or of reconstituting its effectiveness in the service of a particular religio-political agenda.

The book is divided into two parts. The first highlights martyrologists' efforts to delineate distinct religions still newly separating and thus still using several uncomfortably overlapping (though certainly not identical) means of verifying martyrs' truth claims. Here, I give martyrologies sustained attention. They deserve it: they are of literary interest, by which I mean not that they are fictional (many are generally reliable), nor that they are exemplars of a particular martyrologist's rhetorical habits or prose style (many are formulaic and are not authored exclusively by the martyrologist whose name became associated with them). Instead, they are of literary interest because of their focus on hermeneutics. Early modern martyrologists are aware that they must foster particular methods of reading and interpretation in order to render their martyrs persuasive. The simple presentation of testimony is no longer, in an atmosphere of intense religious conflict, enough.

In Part I, I examine how Protestant and Catholic martyrologists try to establish interpretive frameworks that promote particular readings of martyrs' testimonies even as they counter polemical attacks and competing sets of martyrs. This part's three chapters explicate the logic of martyrology and show by a cross-confessional approach that that logic is put under severe pressure by the period's competing martyrdoms. Part I's title, *Non poena sed causa*, echoes the common argument that the cause, not the death, determines whether a particular person was a martyr. Given this

assumption, it should be relatively easy to distinguish representations of martyrs in Protestant and Catholic martyrologies: the cause for which martyrs died should shape representations of martyrs' lives and deaths. This is sometimes the case. For instance, Catholic martyrologies uphold traditional reverence for relics by investing their martyrs' material remains with sacred power. Yet I show that complications arise and persist because Protestants and Catholics also share, often uncomfortably, similar assumptions about the best ways to authenticate their martyrs' testimonies. For example, the cross-confessional elevation of a martyr's conscience, the importance of an unbroken history of martyrs' testimonies, and the common belief in providential retribution against persecutors complicate representations of martyrs for different causes. Finally, the phrase *non poena sed causa* begs the question of how one determines what a good cause would be. Too often, martyrologies' rather circular answer is that the good cause is the one reinforced with the best martyrs. Because of uncomfortably overlapping assumptions and conventions, early modern martyrologies do not permit the tidy separation of suffering and doctrine, the *poena* and the *causa*, nor are the problems of competing martyrs easily resolved. Read against their polemical opposites, early modern martyrologies suggest the complex interaction between theology and representational habits, between splintering religious factions and a shared reverence for the Christian tradition of martyrdom.

In Part II, each chapter pairs texts influenced by both Protestant and Catholic martyrological material; each pairing is focused around a martyrological strategy shared in some fashion across religious lines. I have selected particular texts not out of an effort to be complete or even broadly representative – an impossible task, given martyrologies' wide reach – but rather on the basis of those texts' engagements with both Protestant and Catholic martyrological arguments. These chapters give sustained attention to the texts in question because the complex ways martyrological arguments are implicated in the texts I have chosen reward careful scrutiny. Chapter 4 shows that Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Anthony Copley's *A Fig for Fortune* reveal the pressure competing martyrdoms exerted on early modern understandings and reworkings of Revelation's allegory. Chapter 5 explicates martyrology's powerful claim that those who suffered could be assured they were of God's flock and argues that that claim influences much of the prose and poetic work of John Donne and Robert Southwell. Chapter 6 examines a common guarantor of martyrological testimony, the claim that a martyr testifies in accordance with his/her conscience, as it is negotiated in *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (Anthony

Munday, *et al.*) and *Henry VIII* (Shakespeare and, possibly, Fletcher). In chapter 7, I argue that the interpretive habits martyrologists tried to foster persisted into the mid-seventeenth century, shaping the ways contemporary conflicts were understood. Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr* (1620) and Catholic martyrologies published in Latin during the 1640s simplify seventeenth-century conflicts into a stark confrontation between right religion and idolatry or heresy; yet they also acknowledge new military and political realities by incorporating more active forms of resistance into their representations of martyrs.

As I show, martyrology is crucial to literary history not simply as a popular body of literature but for its pervasive influence on many central representational concerns of early modern religious writing, broadly construed. Competing martyrologies pressured early modern authors to represent the search for religious truth as essentially agonistic and as taking place in a world in which a true martyr could look disturbingly similar to a false heretic or a damnable traitor. It is no wonder that Spenser's Una is veiled as she wanders the world, or that Milton's Truth is herself a martyr.

NOTES

1 Although religious persecutions in England never reached the intensity of continental persecutions, the sixteenth century saw a clear, traumatic break from earlier, comparatively scattered executions for heresy. There were at least 53 executions of Protestants for religion in England and Scotland between 1527 and 1546 (excluding those executed as Anabaptists, such as the ten executed in 1535), at least 282 executions during Mary Tudor's reign, and at least 300 English Catholics executed between 1535 and 1680 (Brad Gregory, "The Anathema of Compromise: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1996, 13). See also Geoffrey P. Nuttall, "The English Martyrs 1535–1680: a Statistical Review," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 22 (1971), 191–7; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: Batsford, 1964), and F. H. Hansford-Miller, *The 282 Protestant Martyrs of England and Wales, 1555–1558* (London: Hansford-Miller, 1970).

2 The worst were during Elizabeth I's and James I's reigns, the 1640s, and the Titus Oates plot.

3 John Mush, *The life and Death of Mistris Margarit Clitherow*, Bar Convent (York) MS, 97.

4 On recusant Catholic publication, see Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4; *A Catalogue of Catholic Books in English Printed Abroad or Secretly in England, 1558–1640*, ed. A. F. Allison and D. M. Rogers (London: W. Dawson, 1964); and *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the*

English Counter-Reformation between 1558 and 1640, ed. Allison, Rogers, and Wolfgang Lottes, 2 vols. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989–94, works in English and in other languages). I discuss important post-1640 publications on Catholic persecutions in chapter 7.

5 The dynamics of seventeenth-century intra-Protestant martyrological controversies have been well addressed by John Knott in *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563–1694* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6 A notable exception is Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1588–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

7 "John Foxe and National Consciousness," in *John Foxe and His World*, ed. Christopher Highley and John N. King (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 25–6.

8 I am indebted to Knott, *Discourses*, and Ceri Sullivan (*Dismembered Rhetoric: English Recusant Writing, 1580 to 1603*, London: Associated University Presses, 1995).

9 *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1563), 669.

10 The line is from the poem "Why do I use my paper, inke, and pen?," published in Thomas Alfield's *A True Report of the Death and Martyrdome of M. Campion Jesuite and prieste, & M. Sherwin, & M. Brian priests* (London, 1582).

11 Nancy Wright discusses the term in "The *Figura* of the Martyr in John Donne's Sermons," *English Literary History* 56 (1989), 293–306.

12 *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1583), 2014.

13 Some scholarship on martyrologies tends to read through or past (and implicitly demote) their religious concerns. Hence in her theoretically sophisticated book Megan Matchinske nevertheless often reads past religion in martyr-accounts to posit supposedly secular forms of resistance (*Writing, Gender, and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). As Claire McEachern has recently argued, religion is not something to be read *through* but is "something in and of itself" (*Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 7).

PART I

Non poena sed causa: martyrdom and the hermeneutics of controversy

Most simply, the martyrologist's task is to show that the lives and deaths of particular witnesses confirm the beliefs they held. In the Reformation era, competing sets of steadfast, devoted martyrs complicated this task considerably. To resolve the dilemma competing martyrs posed, martyrologists proposed that the cause, not the death, makes the martyr (*non poena sed causa*). A letter from a Catholic man (named only "J. A.") who witnessed the martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury, gives us a rare glimpse of a writer attempting to use this dictum to resolve his conflicting feelings about the good death of a supposed heretic. Under intense pressure from Marian authorities, Cranmer had recanted his religious beliefs, only to recant his recantation in spectacular fashion at the stake.[1] J. A.'s letter records that after denouncing his earlier recantation, Cranmer held his right hand, which signed that recantation, steadily in the fire so that it might burn first: "he put furth hys Ryghte hand & hild yt styll therein a good space before the fyre came to hys body, & so dyed paceintly & never stered or cryed." Impressed by Cranmer's steadfastness, J. A. calls him an "Image of sorowe" and arranges to have a "dirige" sung for him at an Oxford church. Yet he laments that this good death was for error:

> hys pacience . . . hys corage in dyeyng, yf yt had byn token ether for the glory of god, the welth of hys countriy, the testimony of truth, as yt was for a pernycious error, & subversion of true Rilygion, I could worthily have commended the example . . . but . . . seying it [is] not the death, but cause . . . thereof, [that] commendyth the . . . sufferer: I cannot but moche dysprase hys obstinante stubbirnes & sturdie[nes] in dying in specially in so evell a cause.[2]

With startling candor, J. A. acknowledges that heretics and martyrs may look very similar, that Cranmer's behavior resembles the ideal behavior of one who dies for the glory of God (or country). Yet the traits J. A. admires – Cranmer's patience, steadfastness, and bravery, all traits Christian martyrs traditionally exhibited – are precisely those he must disparage in order to

reconcile his admiration for this heretic's good death with his own faith. Patience becomes obstinacy, courage stubbornness. Significantly, he distinguishes martyrs from heretics only by using his religious predilections to turn a would-be martyr's ideal behavior into its dark opposite. He formulates an interpretational distinction, in other words, not one based upon any formal variation in what a martyr should do or say.

While prioritizing the cause helped J. A. resolve his conflicting feelings about Cranmer's patient/obstinate death, it could also work against persuasiveness. If the cause, not the death, makes the martyr, then martyrologies become mostly reflexive or circular confirmations of the causes readers are already inclined to endorse. Thus, although martyrologists frequently assert that the cause should determine whether a person died a martyr, in practice martyrologists also used martyrs' lives, words, and dramatic self-sacrifices to argue that their martyrs died for truth. Many early modern writers attributed considerable persuasive force to martyrs. Though he often repeats the mantra that the cause, not the death, makes the martyr, John Foxe also argues explicitly that the manner of one's death reveals the rightness of one's beliefs. Foxe added a section to the second (1570) edition of his work detailing the joyful, steadfast deaths of Protestant martyrs and the shameful deaths of Catholic persecutors for just this reason: "what greater proufe can we have to justifie their cause and doctrine agaynst the persecutyng Church of Rome, then to behold the endes of them both."[3] Recusant Catholic martyrologists also highlight the persuasive force of martyrs' deaths. In a letter describing the deaths of English martyrs, William Cardinal Allen writes, "Loud, indeed, is the cry of sacred blood so copiously shed. Ten thousand sermons would not have published our apostolic faith and religion so winningly as the fragrance of these victims, most sweet both to God and men."[4] The deaths are superior to discourse itself; martyrdom alone has "published" the Catholic faith.

Furthermore, the priority of the cause for people like J. A. should not blind us to the fact that a good death could lead witnesses to embrace the martyr's beliefs.[5] This proved true for Joyce Lewes, who embraced Protestant beliefs after hearing of Laurence Saunders's martyrdom, and for Henry Walpole, who converted to Catholicism after witnessing Edmund Campion's death.[6] Even persecuting authorities recognized the persuasive force of a good death. In 1546 Stephen Gardiner, leader of Henrician conservatives, wrote that reformers' "wilful death in obstinacie" might "serve for an argument, to prove the truth of their opinion."[7] Walsingham echoed this complaint under later, different circumstances; in a note dated December 1586, he writes that the "execution of [Catholic