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Reinventing the Marian Persecutions in Victorian England

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Surveying the religious landscape of Victorian England, Protestants saw no heretics burning at the stake, no racks, no fearful imprisonments. Yet this absence of violent martyrdoms turned out to be deeply (if paradoxically) disquieting to many Victorian observers, who feared that England was mutating into the England of 1555 to 1558 — the years in which Protestant heretics were burned during the reign of Mary I. The Evangelical Irish novelist Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna warned parents and children of the threat in her pedagogical dialogue *Alice Benden; Or, the Bowed Shilling* (1846), which retells the martyrdom of Alice Benden (betrayed by her own husband) in 1557. But why must this story be told now? Explains the dialogue's Evangelical Mamma: "The greatest danger lies in our having so entirely forgotten its [Catholicism's] real character, and being so willing to judge of it by what we see around us, not from what we know, from past history" (Tonna 1846: 68). Far from being viewed as a positive development, this disappearance of martyrdom into the confines of historical narrative seems to endanger England's national stability. Nineteenth-century Englishmen and women mistake, as it were, their comfortable encounters with contemporary Catholics for authentic *knowledge*, derived from the authenticated testimony of the past. Personal experience erases Catholic history, and thus the "essence" of Catholicism, from the Protestant mind.

In this account, the "victory" of Protestantism trembles on the verge of self-destruction. For novelists, historians, and poets, the reign of Mary I (1553–1558) epitomized the physical and spiritual violence finally suppressed (but, Protestants feared, not *eradicated*) by English Protestant policy under Elizabeth's regime. In and of itself, the polemical turn to the Reformation was nothing new; seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers drew on the Reformation, including the Marian persecutions, to work through such crises as the attempt to exclude James II from the succession or the growing popularity of Dissenting sects (Miller 67–90; Lynch 78–96). The "vivid, lurid and crude" (Wheeler 77) terms of the nineteenth-century debate about the persecutions, however, pointed to

a lurking threat to British national stability within the very nation itself, apparently enabled by the events of Catholic Emancipation (1829) and after. By granting Catholics seats in Parliament, a supposedly Protestant government threatened to subject the nation to foreign Papal rule. In fictionalizing the persecutions, often by explicitly adapting John Foxe's martyrologies, Protestant authors warn their audiences that violent martyrdom may well be on the brink of an ugly return.

This strategy was played out in a conflict between the treatment of *Queen Mary's body* and the *martyr's body*, which I explore in this paper. Novelists resorted mainly to martyrs who were female (my focus here), impoverished, children, or all the three, and this was no accident. As Edith Snook has argued about early modern Protestant polemic, "[t]he Protestant Christian displays all the virtues conventionally denoted as feminine and speaks in a language of piety, simplicity, and unlearnedness that women inhabit by virtue of their gendered social position and which men — at least upper class men — employ only with more vexatious negotiations of the structures of masculinity, class, and education" (43). Nineteenth-century Protestants, especially Evangelicals, maintained this gendered link between faith and femininity, associating ideal femininity with Protestant virtues and a monstrous, corrupt femininity with Catholic faults. Thus, Mary I's excessive erotic attachment to Philip of Spain and her false pregnancy are emblematic of the pathologies that underlie religious persecution and threaten English nationhood itself. By contrast, the injuries inflicted on the female martyr's body testify to the universal truths of Protestant faith. Not surprisingly, these works posit the memory of martyrdom as necessary to correct historical interpretation. As Brad Gregory notes and nineteenth-century Catholics and Protestants alike would have agreed, martyrdom "meant conformity to an ancient course of action, grounded in scripture and epitomized in the crucifixion of Christ himself" (119). By extension, the ability to recognize that Protestant martyrdoms bore witness to Christian truths became a key to historical consciousness.

Although it was men who wrote most of the histories of the Marian persecutions, women authored most of the novels on the topic. This gendered division did not result in a split between "masculine" and "feminine" narratives of the persecutions, thanks to the authors' shared source materials and overlapping agendas. Instead, Protestant women authors saw themselves as *collaborating* on a massive religious project, one partly intended to protect themselves and their children from Catholic priests. But, as it turned out, Protestant narratives of the persecutions were not

free of Catholic influences. In the first half of this article, I analyze how the Catholic historian John Lingard's revisionist portrait of Mary insinuated itself into even Evangelical texts (owing largely to the work of the historian Agnes Strickland) — this sentimental Mary, virtuous but weak, threatens the nation through her perverse sexuality and equally perverse religious obsessions. In the second half, I turn to the popular martyr Rose Allin, whose resistance to torture suggested how heroic women could counteract the moral threat posed by the queen's weakness. The novel-length treatments of Rose Allin's agonizing torture by the folklorist-cum-novelist Anna Eliza Bray and the prolific Evangelical Emily Sarah Holt demonstrate how Protestants felt increasingly embattled over the course of the nineteenth century.¹

Victorian quarrels over Mary I and her legacy took place against an intellectual background shaped by sixteenth-century interpretations of God's role in history. Evangelical historical narratives try to resolve Protestant-Catholic tensions into a war between Christ's church and the Antichrist, a model of historical conflict stretching back to St. Augustine but popularized during the Reformation in the work of John Bale and John Foxe. This battle can only resolve itself apocalyptically at Christ's second coming. For example, in this reading of ecclesiastical history, the Lollard movement that began in fourteenth-century England turns into manifestations of proto-Protestant belief that demonstrate the existence of true believers (the invisible church) within even the most corrupt of institutions (the visible church).² Foxe's historical narrative effectively subordinates material history — politics, culture, economics, and so forth — to a transcendent historical narrative that features God as the one true agent. Human agents act with more or less knowledge of their actual divine purpose, but all of their doings can and must be attributed to God's will. Within this framework, persecution was a divinely ordained test of Protestant faith that revealed the corrupt nature of the Roman Catholic Church. Once translated into an Evangelical theodicy, the Marian persecutions paradoxically became a sign of God's *favor*, as He inflamed Protestant faith through the unwittingly self-destructive acts of the persecutors.

While nineteenth-century authors had increasingly easy access to significant Reformation primary texts as well as to older secondary works, thanks to the Parker Society reprints of English Reformation theologians

¹ For a brief earlier discussion of these two novelists, see Burstein 77–78.

² Two of the most helpful overviews of this topic are Milton 270–310 and Barnett.

(1841–1853), the most popular source was Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, better known as the *Book of Martyrs*. A veritable Foxemania set in during the nineteenth century, as the *Book of Martyrs* — last reprinted in full in the seventeenth century and since available only in excerpts and abridgements — reappeared in (controversial) multivolume editions, cheap print, serials, and yet further abridgements.³ Foxe's new popularity after several decades of extreme redaction was sparked by the reappearance of Catholicism in the public sphere. An end to over two centuries of penal legislation sparked explosive fears about Catholics' political intentions: Catholic Emancipation (1829) finally enabled Catholics to sit in Parliament, much to the dismay of Evangelicals who feared that the Reformation had just been undone; the Maynooth Grant, the government subsidy for the Irish Catholic seminary, inspired new controversy in 1844; and the so-called "Papal Aggression" of 1850 (the prime minister, Lord John Russell, fanning the flames of public outrage after the Roman Catholic Church restored the hierarchy in England), suggested to some that Catholics were trying to conquer the country. Not coincidentally, seven different editions of Foxe appeared in 1851 alone (Greenberg 318). To make matters even worse, the Oxford Movement within the Church of England appeared to be rejecting Reformation principles altogether — a trend embodied, for many Evangelicals, in a declaration made by the Anglican clergyman Richard Hurrell Froude: "Reformation was a limb badly set — it must be broken again to be righted" (I: 433). Under the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that Evangelicals rejoiced that the *Book of Martyrs* was obtaining a widespread readership among all social classes, and gloated at signs that Catholics might be "indignant" at its success ("Notes" 138).

Although the Papal Aggression led to a surge of grassroots anti-Catholic organizations, the truly apocalyptic event was Emancipation. As Alexandra Walsham points out, Reformation antitolerantists insisted that "failure to implement justice against religious and moral deviants was a recipe for divine retribution, if not complete destruction" (Walsham 46; cf. Murphy 48, 54), and Victorian anti-Catholic polemicists interpreted the aftermath of Emancipation in the same light. Its very legislative success, they argued, demonstrated conclusively that Protestants had cut themselves off from their historical origins and, in so doing, sealed their damnation. As Catholicism made headway in English culture, apocalyptic speculations about the approaching end of days became common

³ See the useful overviews by Nockles and Westbrook.

currency among all Protestant denominations. Although Protestants had long identified the Pope with Antichrist, Emancipation suggested that the millennium itself was at hand.⁴ In a gloomy meditation on the tenth anniversary of Catholic Emancipation, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna warned that “1829 witnessed our revolt against our God and against his Christ; and 1839 finds us rapidly sinking towards the horizon, while the blood-red star of our enemy triumphantly approaches the meridian. So it must be, while England, as a nation, persists in her presumptuous sin; and that she will so persist is, alas! too evident” (1839: 6–7). Tonna believes that 1829, the year of Catholic Emancipation, effectively undoes the Reformation, that it amounts to an act of national apostasy with apocalyptic overtones, as heralded by the “blood-red star” (an allusion to Wormwood, the “burning” star of Revelation 8:10–11). The Reformation re-established man’s relationship to providential history on the grounds of Scriptural truth, but that relationship, clearly, is volatile, violent, and easily reversible. Catholic Emancipation indicates modern Britain’s ultimate unwillingness to read history “properly,” an unwillingness that slips easily into erasing the records of martyrdom on which the Protestant present stands. This “sin” could itself be reversed by reversing the Emancipation Act, as an anonymous author argued in the wake of the Papal Aggression scandal (“Intelligence” 240).⁵ By tolerating Catholics, Protestants become Catholic — if not in doctrine, then in the state of their souls.

The most potent Foxeite materials for anti-Catholic historical polemic were the Marian persecutions, in which nearly three hundred Protestants were executed as heretics. This comparison took on added pungency once Victoria ascended to the throne. Even though Victoria appeared to be Mary’s Protestant and virtuous opposite number, a protector of true religion instead of its destroyer, the increasing visibility and confidence of Catholicism suggested that Mary might be the fearsome ruling spirit of the age. In 1852, during the uproar over the Papal Aggression, an article pointedly entitled “Popish Tortures, Massacres, and Persecutions” declared that “[t]he whole system of Rome . . . is essentially bloody and intolerant, and to give it power is only to prepare for our own destruction” (295). “Bloody Queen Mary” and the number of her victims feature prominently on the article’s list of Roman Catholic enormities (which

⁴ On the surge in English millennialism immediately before and after Emancipation, see Carter 152–94; Wallis 107–109; Wolffe 113–16.

⁵ Wolffe dates the emergence of such calls for repeal to 1835, when Evangelicals believed that they had seen “a practical demonstration of the evils of Catholic power in causing the fall of the Peel administration” (88).

concludes with a total of 16,390,277 victims!). As the overlapping adjective “bloody” suggests, Mary functions in this list as an organic expression of the “essence” of Catholicism. Yet while some authors felt no compunction about declaring that “the previous reign of the bloody Mary gives one the best idea which history presents of the fiendish spirit of Rome” (“Reign” 182), her image remained contested even among Protestants. Did Mary persecute because she was Catholic? Because she was female? Because she married a Spaniard? Or, perhaps, some combination of the three?

Protestant ambivalence about Mary initially derived from the work of the Catholic historian John Lingard, whose popular *History of England* (1819–1830) obtained a broad ecumenical readership, despite its attack on the mainstream Protestant account of English history in general and on David Hume’s *History of England* in particular.⁶ Lingard argued against triumphalist interpretations of the Reformation that represented medieval and early modern Catholicism in terms of moral degradation and decay; far from understanding the Reformation as an inevitable response to the needs of a spiritually starved population, he and later Catholic historians saw it as a radical rebellion against divine authority, fuelled by personal ambition, wayward sexuality, and sheer greed. Although even Protestants frequently looked askance at Henry VIII’s motives for closing the monasteries — namely, his need to replenish his rapidly emptying coffers — they nevertheless saw the King as unwittingly carrying out the will of God. Lingard and his fellow Catholics, however, saw only the King’s willfulness at work. Lingard’s work participated in a larger Whig and Catholic project to develop a new history of the Marian persecutions that would demonstrate their irrelevance to modern Catholic culture — thereby justifying the repeal of the Test Acts, which, as of 1678 (30 Car. II. st. 2), required potential office-holders to swear an oath denouncing Catholic practices such as the Mass (Drabble; O’Day 65; Wheeler 77–110).

Certainly, in early modern romances, Mary “oscillated between different poles . . . for example, her representation as Queen by God’s grace and as the epitome of women’s monstrous rule, as Queen of England and as the wife of Philip I, the titular King of England, or ultimately between her representation as victimizer and victimized (bloody/unhap-

⁶For a detailed account of Lingard’s revisionist approach to conventional Protestant historiography, see Mitchell. Müller notes that Mary’s reputation in the nineteenth century rose as Elizabeth’s sank (361).

py)" (Müller 343; my translation),⁷ in which figures of her emotional vulnerability contended with figures of her religious violence. But Lingard de-exemplified Mary, insisting that the Marian persecutions were an anomalous response to Reformation violence with no predictive value for the present. The sixteenth century was an age in which the reformers readily "displayed the same persecuting spirit which they had formerly condemned"; there was nothing Catholic *per se* about executing heretics (V: 227). But while admitting that "[t]he foulest blot on the character of this queen is her long and cruel persecution of the reformers" (V: 259), Lingard invokes the "more moderate of the reformed writers" (V: 259) to substantiate her practice of the holy virtues, such as charity and humility, and decouples her acts of persecution from Catholic modes of thought.⁸

In Lingard's hands, then, the sixteenth century does not give birth to modernity, but stands out as a moment of radical disjunction and near-Gothic chaos. The queen's "blot" is not an individual moral failing but the stain of an entire century, wrongly imputed to a single religious tradition. Pointedly, Lingard tells the reader that the thoughtful mind, contemplating the sixteenth-century historical spectacle, "learns to bless the legislation of a more tolerant age, in which dissent from established forms, though in some countries still punished with civil disabilities" — a sharp glance in England's direction — "is nowhere liable to the penalties of death" (V: 239). Lingard's understanding of modernity relegates violent martyrdom to the Gothicized past, while folding Protestantism into that age's unspeakable "horrors." In a moment of sly reversal, the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations, far from erasing the Catholic "blot," in fact contribute to it.

Catholic apologists would recuperate Mary's reputation as a virtuous queen besieged by traitorous Protestant subjects, as would canny political agitators like William Cobbett, whose *History of the Protestant "Reformation"* (1824–1826) represented the Reformation as a greedy power grab. But the most influential reassessment of Mary came from

⁷ "oszilliert zwischen verschiedenen Polen . . . beispielsweise ihrer Darstellung als Königin von Gottes Gnaden und als Verkörperung der Monstrosität weiblicher Herrschaft[,] als Königin von England und als Gattin Philips I, des titulären Königs von England, oder eben zwischen ihrer Darstellung als *victimizer* und *victimized* (*bloody/unhappy*)."

⁸ In martyrological and pseudomartyrological discourse, "persecution" signifies an unjust act, which sixteenth-century Protestants and Catholics distinguished from righteous "prosecution" (Gregory 74–96). This distinction remained operational in the nineteenth century, as the Catholic polemicist C. W. Russell illustrates: "we must avow our opinion that Mary's sanguinary acts were indefensible, and deserve the name of persecution" (446).

the bestselling historian Agnes Strickland, whose *Lives of the Queens of England* (silently co-authored with her sister Elizabeth) further popularized Lingard's Catholic revisionism while offering a more psychological interpretation of the persecutions. Like Lingard, Strickland historicizes sectarian violence as the product of a mindset in which "toleration" turns out "to nominate a crime" (V: 280). The executions embody a general rather than a Roman Catholic tendency. But she also argues that the persecutions were a delayed effect of Henry VIII's own executions of Mary's close friends and associates. In Strickland's reading, Mary reworks and augments the traumatic lessons she learned from her father's example:

Dr. Fetherstone . . . suffered the horrid death of treason, in company with Abel, her mother's chaplain, and another zealous Catholic. They were dragged to Smithfield with fiendish impartiality on the same hurdles that conveyed the pious Protestant martyr, Dr. Barnes, and two of his fellow-sufferers, to the flaming pile. Scarcely could the princess have recovered the shock of this butchery, when the frightful execution of her beloved friend and venerable relative, the countess of Salisbury, took place. She was hacked to pieces on a scaffold, in a manner that must have curdled Mary's blood with horror, and stiffened her heart to stone. The connexion of these victims with Mary has never been clearly pointed out, nor the consequent effect of their horrid deaths on her mind properly defined, nor her feelings analysed, which were naturally excited against those who were in power at the time of their destruction. (V: 230)

Strickland's sixteenth century is even more explicitly Gothic than Lingard's. Executions are "horrid" and "frightful," the mind set (Henry VIII's) is "fiendish," and the effect on Mary herself is sensational. The atmosphere suggests a charnel-house run by a madman. In a world where even women can be subjected to brutalities of the most spectacular sort, it is no wonder that the queen's mind warps; her "curdled" and "stiffened" interiority will become permanent. To make matters worse, Mary cannot escape her father even after his death. The moral and economic corruptions that emerge during his reign produce a state of "national depravity" in hers (Strickland V: 415). Thus Henry VIII haunts Mary's reign, as his daughter simultaneously confronts the ballooning effects of his misrule and reenacts his violence on the English public.

Unlike Strickland's beloved Victoria, acclaimed by a "united nation" (I: xviii), Mary exists at cross-purposes with her degraded government. Strickland follows Lingard in refusing to make Mary embody national disorder, turning her instead into an idealized figure of queenly chastity whose values fail to influence the public. The persecutions thus signify

the fatal split between the nation and its monarch, a split exacerbated by Mary's failed maternal impulses. Without directly arguing for causation, Strickland notes that Mary's false pregnancy coincided with the beginnings of the persecutions — a monstrous birth:

Her hope of bringing offspring was utterly delusive; the increase of her figure was but symptomatic of dropsy, attended by a complication of the most dreadful disorders which can afflict the female frame, under which every faculty of mind and body sunk, for many months. At this time commenced that horrible persecution of the Protestants, which has stained her name to all futurity. (V: 413)

As Thomas Betteridge points out, sixteenth-century Protestant controversialists like John Foxe and Robert Crowley established the false pregnancy as “a metaphor for the sterility and corruption of the Marian regime,” and centuries later authors were still unpacking not only its figurative potential, but also its psychological ramifications (169–71, 179–81; cf. Dolan 39–41). Thus Hume proposed a connection between the false pregnancy and the persecutions, but only to the extent that it exacerbated Mary's pre-existing disposition to persecuting Protestants, not altered it (III: 444).

Strickland, however, suggests a different cause and effect. Neither a physical nor a national mother, the queen finds herself at war with her own body in a fashion that parallels her struggles with the nation itself. What Mary “births” instead is not just blood, but her own future as Bloody Mary — the stain that parallels Lingard's “blot.” And yet, as Strickland's phrasing suggests, Mary is a virtual sacrifice *to* the persecutions, a point this author reiterates by twice calling Mary the “half-dead queen” (V: 413, 415). Hovering between this world and the next, the queen disappears offstage in Strickland's analysis, to be replaced by the politicians of “selfish interest” who “were dishonest, indifferent to all religions, and willing to establish the most opposing rituals, so that they might retain their grasp on the accursed thing with which their very souls were corrupted — for corrupted they were; though not by the unfortunate queen” (V: 415).⁹ Strickland turns from a feminized monstrous birth to a masculinized political disorder, reinventing the Bloody Mary legend as

⁹Cf. Moran 136: “Representations of the sixteenth-century Marian persecutions . . . vilify sovereigns who sacrifice the interests of their subjects for reasons of their own personal prejudices and predispositions.” As we see in Strickland and elsewhere, however, writers who wanted to complicate the portrait of Mary herself often gendered such bad sovereigns as male.

the paradoxical result not of religious controversy, but of rampant self-interest grounded in all the vices of which the virtuous queen is innocent. The persecutions are neither “Catholic” nor “Protestant” in nature, but rather derive from early trauma, disrupted maternal desires, and a perverted male regime of unenlightened self-interest.¹⁰

Strickland’s Mary I resonated even with Evangelicals, some of whom sought to rescue the woman from the legend — the better to insist on the essentially anti-English character of Catholicism. Even towards the end of the century, an anti-Catholic novel like Miss Pocklington’s *The Secret Room* (1884) still urged readers to remember that far from being “the hard, unfeeling woman that history too often paints her,” Mary was the product of a wretched upbringing and terrible illness (186). Pocklington “rescues” Mary from the accumulated legends about her evil nature, only to make her incapacity as a queen the result of her bodily weakness. It is, Pocklington argues, “Philip of Spain” and Mary’s cabinet who must be blamed for the persecutions (187). Pocklington’s Mary is still domestic enough to care for the children she cannot have, but her tender femininity lacks the strength that authors found only in Protestantism. For many Evangelicals or more moderate Protestants, such appeals to Mary’s goodness served as a dangerous apology for the revival of Catholic domination. Instead of sentimentalizing Mary’s weak femininity, violated by foreign invaders, writers called for her to be represented as a deadly manifestation of the worst features of Catholicism. But those who sought to cleanse both Mary and Catholicism from the taint of blood insisted, like Pocklington, that the Spanish were to blame — a staple of anti-Catholic polemic even before John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* first appeared (Garcia 80).¹¹ In this reading, Mary’s failed marriage to Philip of Spain symbolizes a Catholic attempt to take over a naturally Protestant England: England rejects Catholicism just as Mary’s body rejects Philip’s

¹⁰The nineteenth-century historian J. A. Froude offered a slightly different interpretation of this point, blaming the persecutions on the influence of the usually-celebrated Cardinal Pole: “Mary was driven to madness by the disappointment of the grotesque imaginations with which he had inflated her; and where two such persons were invested by the circumstances of the time with irresponsible power, there is no occasion to look further for the explanation of the dreadful events of the three ensuing years” (223–24). Note how the imagery suggests false pregnancy, as though the persecutions had been the unnatural result of an equally unnatural relationship.

¹¹Even Catholic writers occasionally agreed on this point, e.g., the author of the oft-reprinted *A Popular Manual of Church History* (202). Originally published in the UK in 1857, the manual was still in print as late as 1921.

attempt to inseminate it. The persecutions result from a combination of thwarted romance and biological sterility, which, taken together, unhinge Mary's mind even as they providentially strip Catholicism of any future on English soil.

Whereas Sabine Lucia Müller argues that early modern representations of Mary insisted on her "fundamentally Spanish body and soul" ("Körper und Geist als essentiell spanisch"; 356), Victorian authors often emphasized Mary's fundamental but vulnerable *English* nature. In these texts, Englishness quite literally cannot reproduce with the Spanish Other. For example, Sir Aubrey de Vere, an Irish Protestant whose sons later converted to Catholicism, authored a lengthy two-part tragedy, *Mary Tudor* (posthumously published in 1847), which suggests that the persecutions derive from the fatal intersection of Spanish rule and Mary's emotional fragility. Mary's English mercy and virginal chastity are no match for the designing Philip, whom we first meet using a church as a pick-up spot (II.3.i). He proceeds to assault most of Mary's ladies-in-waiting, only to accuse Mary herself of dallying with Cardinal Pole (II.4.i). De Vere thus transforms the court into a site not of feminine monstrosity, but of rampaging masculine heterosexuality, which violates virtuous Englishwomen much as Spanish Catholicism violates English moral sensibilities. Alfred Butler had earlier offered an even more extreme interpretation in *Midsummer Eve: A Tale* (1842), which represents Philip as physically and morally "hideous" (II: 51); to love such a man is itself a "stain" on Mary's character (II: 52). Far from embodying a domestic ideal, Mary's marriage enthrones perversion at the very heart of the nation. Even Mary's patriotic Englishness (II: 27–29) falls prey to her idolatry of her husband, whose very walk is "un-English" (II: 62). Unable to reproduce with her absolutely othered husband, who is so horrific as to be virtually inhuman (not just un-English), the Queen fails to reconcile her Englishness with her desire for both a foreign faith and a foreign body. In such a union, the novel argues, native Englishness winds up repelling Spain and Spanish Catholicism from its sexual and political bodies, no matter what a lovelorn woman like the Queen might desire.

Mary's problematic, sterile relationship with Philip highlights the apparent incompatibility of Catholicism with domesticity itself, an anti-Catholic trope already popular by the seventeenth century and still operational several decades after Butler and de Vere (Dolan 36–37). Emma Leslie's *Cecily: A Tale of the English Reformation* (1879) is moderately sympathetic to the young Princess Mary, whose attitude to Protestantism has been permanently tainted by the suffering of her mother, Catherine of

Aragon. But the embittered princess' obsession with her mother renders her unfit for either wifedom or motherhood. In a moment reminiscent of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," Mary "dr[aws] aside a richly embroidered curtain, disclosing a life-size portrait of Catharine of Arragon" (70). Mary, attempting to convert the title character, uses this portrait as the pretext for an encomium to Catharine's virtues as a "saint" (70). The list that follows — fasting, long hours praying, asceticism — inadvertently sums up the standard Protestant objections to Catholic spirituality: it emphasizes ritual performance and bodily discipline over Bible reading. As Cecily points out, however, Catharine Parr abstained from such things because Henry VIII "would have complained that she did not perform her duty as a wife and Queen" (71). Mary's devotion to her mother, embodied in the quasi-iconographic portrait, idolatrously conflates filial and spiritual love. Worse, it inadvertently indicts the queen as a failed role model. Although the novel denounces Henry VIII's treatment of his first wife, it nevertheless suggests that Catholic motherhood quite literally cannot reproduce itself: Mary explicitly rejects Cecily's vision of domestic sanctity, in which "a wife caring for her husband and children, or a daughter dwelling with her father" (74) is superior to the most virtuous nun. Mary's inability to understand Protestant domesticity, rooted in marital and filial obligations, prefigures her inability to be a successful mother herself.

More dangerously still, Catholicism turns out to be anti-domesticity not only when it comes to the home, but also the nation itself. As one of Cecily's friends later remarks of Philip of Spain, "the Queen will be only too willing" to help him undermine the country, which he will effectively "rule" in her name (211). By marrying Philip and acceding to his desires for power, Mary reveals that her contempt for private domesticity also extends to domestic policy; in effect, she rejects her duties to the nation at the same time that she misunderstands her proper wifely role as a queen regnant.

By transforming Mary's sterile Spanish marriage into a figure for both national disorder and lack of a British future for Catholicism, writers associated Roman Catholicism both with "failed" womanliness and with the dangers of improperly managed womanly rule. But did Protestants understand the message? At the end of Lord Tennyson's critically and commercially unsuccessful verse drama *Queen Mary* (1875), one character cries out "God save the Crown! the Papacy is no more." "Are we so sure of that?" another asks in an aside (V.v). In this moment of prophetic doubt, the play calls into question England's own supposedly

permanent “Protestantism” — an ironic reflection on the nation in the aftermath of both the papal aggression and the rise of Anglo-Catholicism. Tennyson’s wry admission that Protestantism had failed to eradicate Catholicism from its midst hints at a potentially fatal flaw in Protestant self-consciousness. Representations of Mary warned of the threat posed by a feminine ritual and erotic excess, whereas representations of the Marian martyrs demonstrated how a God-given self-control could inspire an *equally* feminine resistance to religious oppression. Such resistance, however, needed historical awareness in order to work. In Protestant narratives, the Reformation emerges from a growing sense of Catholicism’s own blindness to itself and its history, symbolized by Mary’s failed pregnancies and figurative sterility, since Mary believed in a fiction (the false pregnancy) that turned out to be short-lived. Cristina Mazzoni has recently argued that quickening is “an explicitly sexualized knowledge that stages a sexed corporeality as constituting and constituted by a particular subjectivity: the pregnant woman’s” (68), but in these pre-psychoanalytic texts, Mary’s inability to decode the signs to which she has *privileged* access simultaneously figures her failures as woman, as ruler, and as religious authority. In turning to the martyrs, authors hope to stave off a reverse Reformation, in which Protestantism’s own historical blindness might precipitate a new reign of terror under Catholic control.

By memorializing the Marian martyrs, writers hoped to rehabilitate Protestant historical consciousness by fixing their audience’s attention on the Christian witness of the tortured body — in particular, the body of a tortured woman or child. Mary’s sterile body and her improper marriage to Philip both indict Catholicism in England for perversely rejecting domestic heterosexuality even as it scandalously embraces it elsewhere. By contrast, the Protestant female martyr understands the distinction between suffering pursued for its own sake and suffering *sent* by the will of God. Edith Dolnikowski reminds us, apropos of Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, that if “authority is a revelation from God to the individual believer,” then the believer’s obligation to testify means that “gender, wealth, or social status should not be barriers to Christian witness” (207); the heroism of women, children, and the poor imitated Christ’s scandalous death on the cross. In fact, such “meek” bodies in and of themselves witness to the truth of Protestant faith. The uneducated, impoverished, or underage believer challenges an elitist, male Catholic hierarchy that claims absolute control over Biblical reading and interpretation. Cultural marginality turns into a mode of authority in its own right. Such qualities extended into the experience of martyrdom itself. In dying for their

faith, Protestant women like Alice Benden or Anne Askew could play the same heroic role as Thomas Cranmer or Nicholas Ridley and be the more exemplary for it, precisely because their femininity made their heroism a testimony to divine grace.

The story of Rose Allin (sometimes Allen) offered an alluring opportunity for representing such heroism in action. Allin's martyrdom was roughly contemporaneous with Alice Benden's: she was executed at the stake in 1557, after Edmund Tyrrel horribly burned her hand while trying to force her to persuade her mother and stepfather, the Mounts (or Munts), to recant (Foxye 2167–69). By the nineteenth century, narratives of Rose Allin's fearlessness in the face of both torture and persecution had transformed her into an exemplary Protestant virgin martyr. Unlettered and apparently impoverished, Rose Allin demonstrated that authentic Christian heroism required no guidance beyond that of the Scriptures. She was, in the words of one enthusiastic poet, "but a simple peasant; truth in its simplicity, / Truth she lov'd as Jesus gave it; 'but believe and follow me.' / Truth she learn'd not from tradition; hers the faith that God reveals / By his spirit to the childlike, from the worldly-wise conceals" ("A Father" 5). This accumulation of Christian clichés demonstrates that Rose Allin's martyrdom exemplifies the radical *accessibility* of the Protestant message, as well as its potentially infinite reproduction across boundaries of gender, class, and culture. At the same time, as Maria La-Monaca reminds us, "[t]he martyr was, without exaggeration, the only truly heroic literary prototype for women, suggesting a courageous, active femininity which legitimately transgressed traditional gender norms and expectations" (111). Called by God, the female martyr engages in feats from which "normal" women are debarred. Moreover, Rose Allin's "bodily decorum" (Dolan 180) under torture, as well as her resistance to improper sexual advances, indicates that she was a chaste virgin albeit one not committed to a life of celibacy.¹² Rose dies not *for* her virginity but *while* a virgin. And, significantly, she suffers because her filial loyalties cannot be separated from her religious faith. Her martyrology soon dovetailed with other mid-century polemical narratives about the violence of Catholicism; at the same time, as Allin became an icon of maidenly Protestant heroism, her persecutors were turned into case studies in wayward, deformed masculinity.

The novelist and folklorist Anna Eliza Bray's *The Protestant* (1828), published just a year before Catholic Emancipation, adapts Foxye's Rose

¹² On the Victorian antagonism to women's "vowed virginity," see Casteras 129–60.

Allin material to the figure of Rose Wilford, who is tormented not by Tyrrel but by the historian and polemicist Nicholas Harpsfield. (Bray appears to be conflating Rose Allin's torture with the near-identical experience of Thomas Tompkins, who suffered at the hands of Harpsfield; see Mueller 166.) By transposing her villains, Bray turns Harpsfield's own blistering critique of Foxe's text, the *Dialogi sex* (1566), into a direct attack on the martyr's body itself, while further sexualizing what is already in Foxe a "sexually obscene" encounter (Hickerson 89). The novel traces the persecution of a married Protestant priest, Owen Wilford, who is imprisoned with his wife and daughter and sentenced to execution, only to be reprieved at the very last moment by Mary's death and Elizabeth's providential accession to the throne. Contemporaries interpreted the novel as an intervention in Catholic Emancipation debates, although Bray herself insisted that the novel's political overtones were the work of her publisher, Henry Colburn — an argument which seems "somewhat disingenuous" (Bostrom 165).¹³ Rose's torture and heroic resistance appears in the second volume, approximately midway through the novel, and occurs in two parts: first, an attempted seduction by John Thornton, the Bishop of Dover (Bray's invention); next, the actual assault by Harpsfield. Rose's miraculous resistance to both men provides the feminine counterpart to her father's own Protestant steadfastness, and suggests that the obverse side of persecution on theological grounds is persecution on erotic grounds.

Rose's sexual trial prefigures her trial by fire. Initially, the drunken Thornton calls Rose a "pretty damsel," praises her "pretty little hand," and indicates that she could save herself by becoming his "lady-love" (Bray 1828, II: 107, 110). Contemptuous, Rose refuses him, and he storms off, "incensed at the unshaken firmness of her manner" and "maddened by the just but severe reproaches she had cast upon him" (II: 111). The encounter miniaturizes several Protestant topical issues. Although neither this scene nor the next precisely replicates the confessional, frequently figured in anti-Catholic polemics as a site for corrupting innocent women, both represent an apparently helpless young woman at the mercy of violent male authority. Thornton's obviously inappropriate sexual desires indict the results of clerical celibacy; similarly, his willingness to

¹³ Bray complained that "[a]ny one would have supposed by the rancor and the abuse aimed at me, that the whole Catholic question was dependent on discrediting or extinguishing a tale grounded on *historical record*, and written in illustration of the principles which led so many martyrs to the stake during the sanguinary reign of Mary" (1884: 203–4).

exchange sex for safety reveals the obsession with the body lurking at the heart of Catholic faith. He promises clemency not for abjuring Protestantism, but for abjuring chastity — thereby profaning the Church's desire to reclaim its lost souls. Unintentionally, Thornton makes illicit sex the functional equivalent of Catholic belief. Rose's resistance to his advances, meanwhile, turns her into the Protestant equivalent of a Catholic virgin saint — something Thornton fails to notice — and Thornton into an updated pagan tormenter (a comparison that Holt will make explicit). Finally, Thornton's insane rage as he exits suggests how male Catholic consciousness, supposedly unshaped by the Scriptures, fractures at the appeal to conscience. Despite the hierarchical imbalance of the confrontation — young, imprisoned, female Protestant versus older, empowered, male Catholic — the character grounded in Scriptural authority easily trumps one equipped with all the privileges of approved religion, gender, and wealth.

Harpsfield's direct attack further tightens the link between sexual and purportedly religious violence; moreover, it prefigures what the reader expects will be Rose's martyrdom by fire. The monstrous Harpsfield undertakes his work in a spirit of "savage exultation" (II: 112), transforming persecution into perverse pleasure. When Rose refuses to "kiss the cross" (II: 112), Harpsfield decries her as a "harlot" (II: 113) before searing her hand with a "flaming candle" (II: 114). Despite the pain, Rose silently calls on God, then "st[ands] with a noble constancy and an unchanged mien, in deep silence, enduring the burning flame" (II: 114) — keeping so still that she spills none of the water she carries. As is the case with Thornton, the persecution rebounds on the perpetrators. While one man "turn[s] aside his head, as if ashamed to witness the scene," Harpsfield is overcome:

At length the sinews of her hand, that were withered by the flame, cracked, and burst asunder. Rose only turned her eyes for a moment and looked upon her hand. Awe-struck, confounded, and even abashed by her magnanimity, Harpsfield dashed the candle on the ground, uttered a horrid oath, and walked towards the lower end of the room. (II: 115)

Given Rose's encounter with Thornton, Harpsfield's demand that Rose "kiss the cross" sexualizes ritual obeisance, and this burning intensifies Thornton's attempted seduction. Thornton treats Rose as a potential "harlot," while Harpsfield sneers that, as an unregenerate Protestant, she *is* one; Thornton offers the alternatives of sexual exchange or martyrdom, while Harpsfield similarly offers the alternatives of ritual submis-

sion or torture. But in resisting Harpsfield, Rose specifically witnesses to the authority of *Protestant* belief, for Harpsfield burns her to make her “disclaim her faith.” Neither Harpsfield nor Cluny, the witness, can interpret the physical proof of this faith, manifested in her perfect stillness, although Cluny’s refusal to gaze at the scene attests to the power of the martyr’s witness. In fact, Cluny is moved enough to volunteer medical assistance afterwards, implying that the martyr’s testimony may lead to a fleeting awareness of true Christian love. By contrast, Harpsfield’s “horrid oath” doubles Thornton’s mad ravings. In this novel, Catholic speech is always just one step away from devolving into the unprintable (literally) disorder of a religious regime grounded in human desires. Harpsfield’s total confusion in the face of faith in action, which leads him to denounce Rose (“woman, angel, or devil — for I know not what you are . . . for something more or less than human you must be”; II: 115), demonstrates how a fallen man falters when he interprets the effects of authentic belief without the framing narrative of the Scriptures.

As noted above, Rose and her family are never martyred. Instead, Elizabeth ascends to the throne and saves everyone at the last minute, an evasion of the historical record in a bid to pre-empt the possibility of Catholic Emancipation. “God bless Queen Elizabeth!” says Owen Wilford, toasting the new queen, “and may England for ever preserve that liberty gained for Englishmen by the Reformation of the Church!” (III: 280–81). This Elizabeth *ex machina*, a common trope in novels about the Marian period, simultaneously rewards the would-be martyr’s constancy and shapes the Elizabethan settlement as the *end* of Catholic history in England.

Sixty years later, Emily Sarah Holt’s novel about Rose Allin (Rose Allen), *The King’s Daughters: How Two Girls Kept the Faith* (1888), warned that such claims for historical closure were unwarranted. Unlike Bray, writing just before Catholic Emancipation, Holt writes in the wake of Emancipation and the Papal Aggression. Moreover, she and her brother, the politician James Maden Holt, were active campaigners against Ritualism, the incorporation of Catholic liturgical practices (e.g., candles on the altar, mixing water and wine in the chalice) into Anglican worship. A tract writer for the anti-Ritualist Church Association, Holt does not flinch from casting herself as a hardboiled antitolerationist. Whereas Bray rescues the Wilfords, and thus suggests that Protestant power brings Catholic persecution to a crashing halt, as the nineteenth century draws to a close Holt argues for the power of necessary martyrdom.

Not surprisingly, Holt's account of Rose Allen's torture both hews closer to Foxe and dwells in more detail on its historical and theological implications. Following Foxe, there is no seduction scene, and Edmund Tyrrel carries out the burning. In this case, the burning constitutes multiple interpretive failures on Tyrrel's part:

Mr. Tyrrel was in the habit of looking with the greatest reverence on certain other young girls, whom he called Saint Agnes, Saint Margaret, and Saint Katherine — girls who had made such answers to Pagan persecutors, twelve hundred years or so before that time: but he could not see that the same scene was being enacted again, and that he was persecuting the Lord Jesus in the person of young Rose Allen. (146)

Tyrrel fails to draw the appropriate analogy between past ("twelve hundred years") and present, suggesting that tutelage in saints' lives does not, in fact, prepare him to recognize either saints or persecutors. The latter misreading further suggests that Tyrrel has not learned to engage in self-critique: the situation repeats itself identically, and yet the Catholic cannot perceive that his own traditions indict him. His "looking" paradoxically blinds him to the *lack* of moral difference. In the above passage Holt further emphasizes that paradox after the colon by shifting from the would-be virgin saints of Christian antiquity to Christ's immanent presence. In fact, the "same scene" features not the saints and their resistance to persecution, but the ultimate model for all martyrdom, Christ's passion. Alice Dailey (14) notes that one of Foxe's innovations in martyrological literature was "the simultaneous representation of the martyr as a specific human being and as an archetypal soldier and sufferer for Christ," and here, Holt praises Rose Allen's power only in order to point toward Christ Himself, who is both the inspiration for and end of Rose's resistance. Tyrrel, who cannot read this moment in either historical or spiritual terms, is incapable even of the bewildered response of Bray's Harpsfield to this event.

In the end, both the torture and Tyrrel's blindness to its meaning prefigure Rose's death at the stake. Like many Victorian novelists, however, Holt emphasizes the audience's response to the martyr's death, not the burning itself. Dailey argues that "without that audience, there is no *martyrdom*, for martyrdom is a semantic distinction — an interpretive construction negotiated by victim and viewer, by historiographer and reader" (23), and Victorian fiction similarly insists that the spectacle of martyrdom instructs and enlightens the audience. As Alice Lang puts it in *From Prison to Paradise*, "[t]he horror of the persecution swept away

all other considerations, and every death at the stake won hundreds to the cause for which the victims died" (241) — the Catholic audience's visceral response to exemplary punishment leads them to interpret these deaths properly *as* martyrdoms, and not criminal executions. Providence becomes visible as God thwarts Mary's desire to reestablish Catholicism in England, multiplying Protestants by the very method Mary chooses to eliminate them. To spiritual seekers, martyrdom momentarily reveals that the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism is not that of heresy versus orthodoxy, but of Christ's true Church versus the Antichrist.

Holt, who did not shy away from representing the physical effects of torture or long-term incarceration, adopts the comedic emplotment of martyrdom familiar from Reformation polemic.¹⁴ The martyrs go to their deaths "joyfully," cheered on by a crowd that calls on God to "strengthen them, and comfort them, and pour Thy mercy upon them!" (200). She follows Foxe's text, borrowing his term "joyfully," the martyrs' address to the crowd, and the crowd's enthusiastic reaction to the martyrs' bravery (Foxe 2202). What she adds to both this scene of martyrdom and the one that took place earlier in the day are other, dissonant responses, all of them female: a young girl who faints at the sight of her much-loved servant's death (199–200); Agnes Bongeor, not martyred that day, "weeping" in disappointment (201); and Margaret Thurston, who has returned to the Catholic fold, and whose reaction is not spelled out (201). The primary responses to the martyrs are affective and communal; they identify Protestantism with a grassroots English spirituality — "Ah," says the narrator, "it was not England, but Rome, who burned those Marian martyrs!" (199) — and dissociate violent persecution from Englishness. Punitive burnings, far from ejecting Protestants from the community, knit the martyrs and the survivors together in a celebration of divine joy. Agnes Bongeor's reaction is entirely appropriate: held back from martyrdom, she is both more "dead" and more isolated than those who have gone before. By contrast, Margaret Thurston has no voice at all; ironically noting her "better lodging" (the jailer's term), the narrator tells us that she "had shut herself out, and had bought life by the denial of her Lord" (201). Margaret follows the "wrong" Biblical script, choosing St. Peter's denial of Christ. The narrator emphasizes this moral failure by playing up Margaret's free will, as the active verbs suggest, and by assimilating her to the Catholic jailer. Only Margaret's eventual decision to recant her recantation and accept martyrdom restores her textual voice, albeit

¹⁴ On the "comedic" nature of Foxe's plotting, see King 443.

in a “meek and fervent appeal” (236). But the true Evangelical power of martyrdom appears in the case of Amy, who experiences the death of her servant-friend in apocalyptic terms: “I felt as if the last day were come, and the angels were shutting me out” (202). In Amy’s violent reorientation towards Protestantism, the image of being shut out — already deployed by the narrator in the case of both Agnes and Margaret — takes on eschatological significance. Amy’s shock at the martyr’s death opens into a vision not just of personal salvation or damnation, but of universal Christian history — a brief glimpse of the providential narrative in which all the characters exist, but of which only a few are ever aware. It is this narrative that Holt fears modern Protestants have lost.

In fictionalizing the Marian persecutions, Protestant women novelists rewrote the *Book of Martyrs* so that Victorian readers might see just how the Marian past ought to inform the nineteenth-century present. These novels insist that the sixteenth-century persecutions, far from being anachronistic, lie dormant within Victorian culture, ready to be awakened by the promise of toleration; Protestants who fail to remember history are doomed to repeat it. Where Mary’s body testifies to the self-inflicted ignorance and anti-domestic irresponsibility of Catholic culture, Rose Allin’s tortures — inflicted because she would not influence her parents to recant — link domestic loyalty to divinely inspired opposition.

Let me conclude, however, by allowing a Catholic novelist to respond to these Protestant visions of history. Fanny Taylor, a convert who founded the order of the Poor Servants of the Mothers of God (see Gilpin Wells 112–25), dryly observed in her novel *Tyborne and “Who Went Thither in the Days of Queen Elizabeth”* (1859) that “religious persecution” has led readers to empathize with the Albigensians, Huguenots, and Covenanters — all of whom Taylor finds dangerous — and so, she asks: “Is it not, then, wonderful that when the persecutions under Mary Tudor have been written indelibly on the page of history, the long, the terrible, the patient sufferings of Catholics in the succeeding reign should remain unnoticed?” (ix–x). In offering an alternative narrative of English national identity, Taylor seizes the countercultural high ground from Evangelicals like Charlotte Elizabeth, for whom Catholicism posed an apocalyptic threat. For Taylor, the Protestant queen offers a very different historical possibility: “A new dynasty holds the scepter of England, and a queen, with all a woman’s virtues, sits upon the throne. The rack and the torture-chamber are things of the past, and the savage laws of Elizabeth can be found only in some obsolete statute-book. Men walk abroad in safety, for England is free!” (265). There is obvious irony at work here, but

Victoria's "virtues" nevertheless model an equally new Protestantism, one which rejects violence and dispatches "savage laws" to the junk heap of discarded law texts. Taylor's Catholicism, *contra* Bray and Holt, co-exists with patriotism; and Taylor's Victoria, *contra* arguments against toleration, will be most glorious when she extends English "freedom" to her still-persecuted subjects.

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