

# Martyrdom and Sainthood in Tudor England

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This research is derived from my doctoral thesis undertaken at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, which provided the first in-depth comparison of printed representations of Catholic and Protestant martyrdom in Tudor England since the work of McGrath and Dickens during the 1960s. In this article, a martyr is defined as one who bore witness to persecution during the Tudor Reformation (c. 1530-1600), and who ultimately died for his or her beliefs rather than abjure. The main themes discussed were issues of continuity and change: To what extent did Protestant depictions of martyrs draw upon pre-Reformation ideas? Were they a radical break from the past; or did they represent gradual evolution and transition in which some older beliefs were perpetuated, some were reinterpreted allegorically, and others were abandoned and replaced with new representations? Novel contributions to the historiography include the representation of non-martyrs (individuals who failed to gain full recognition in Catholic or Protestant martyrologies), Puritan efforts to supplant pre-Reformation rituals derived from what Duffy termed the cult of saints with abstract Old Testament inspired sermons, and the depiction of persecutors' untimely deaths as evidence of divine providence and the illegitimacy of rival churches. Although firmly grounded in history, my methodology also incorporated elements from other disciplines, especially gender studies, death studies, religion, philosophy, and some aspects of art history. In particular, I have examined the language of inversion, where exceptionally courageous female martyrs were portrayed with the masculine virtues of courage, analytical rationality or self-control, and allegedly negative feminine traits such as cowardice, deceit, treachery, or sexual misconduct were used to shame and discredit clergymen from rival religious groups or sects. This article will focus upon Catholic and Protestant efforts to identify 16th century martyrs with the saints of the early church, either literally or allegorically, with the aim of gaining reassurance from familiar historical patterns, and challenging the legitimacy of rival churches.

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## Introduction

The current historical debate, or historiography, in regards to the English Reformation encompasses a division: Older historians such as Arthur Dickens argued that the Henrician and Edwardian church reforms signified not an "act of state imposed upon a hitherto contented Catholic people" (Dickens, 1982, p. 365), but a progressive, inevitable break with the past involving reformist officials imposing change from above, and lower-ranking religious radicals infiltrating the breakaway church to advance their own agenda. The prevalent school of thought, however, suggests that Elizabethan martyrologies generally represented continuity, especially among Counter-Reformation priests who sought to establish continuity with the pre-Reformation past, in order to uphold Papal claims of infallibility, and Roman Catholicism's claim to be the only pure,

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uncorrupted and universal successor to the early church. Rosemary O'Day, Tim Rosendale and Eamonn Duffy argued that Catholic and Protestant martyrologists co-opted pre-Reformation accounts of the early Christians' austere lives firstly to legitimise recent martyrs as defenders of the current status quo, and secondly to demonise prohibited religious groups or sects (as they were termed in government proclamations) as disorderly (O'Day, 1986, p. 6). These historians deem the Tudor Reformation a "difficult, drawn out process" (Duffy, 2006, p. 721) because, despite resenting clergymen's abuse of power, early modern laypeople were generally conservative and feared upheaval (Rosendale, 2001, p. 1158). Doreen Rosman argues that the Marian and Elizabethan eras were a transitional, unstable time, with a regime seeking to centralise its authority by equating criticisms of religious uniformity with treasonous contempt for the monarch (Rosman, 2003, p. 32). Preliminary reading suggests Catholic and early Protestant martyrologists equated executed religious dissidents with saints (saint being derived from the Latin word *Sancti*), defined as holy men and women who willingly suffered persecution for a greater good, performed a credible miracle, and continued to intercede on behalf of the congregation after their death. Before and after the Reformation, the Catholic Church had a rigid process of approving new saints, overseen by the Pope and his Cardinals; first a deceased holy man had to be Beatified, or declared a Blessed inhabitant of Heaven (and thus capable of answering laypeople's prayers), and secondly they had to be Canonised, or added to the official list of Saints. The last Englishman to gain official Papal recognition as a martyr was 11th century Archbishop Beckett, prompting later post-schism Catholics to look to earlier Medieval martyrologies for reassuring historical patterns reflecting current events. Jacob Voragine's *Golden Legend*, for example, justified vocal resistance to ancient tyrants who had lost their legitimacy by persecuting God's chosen people (the so-called elect), but emphasised the strict division between passively defending one's beliefs, and unlawfully challenging the secular hierarchy (Voragine, 1931, p. 72). Alexandra Walsham theorised that post-schism Church of England, or Anglican, doctrine signified adaptation, where the sacred space of the church, and pre-Reformation rituals like consecration, were given new meanings by reformers seeking to explain contemporary religious innovations, in terms familiar to the collective laity (Walsham, 2011, p. 566). Combining Walsham's concept of adaptation with a comparative analysis of Catholic and Protestant martyrdom inspired by the earlier research of Patrick McGrath, I will argue that Puritan attitudes to sainthood underwent an evolution from literal to allegorical depictions, as Elizabethan martyrologists like the Marian exile John Foxe portrayed ancient saints as ordinary people to distance the Church of England from supposed Medieval corruptions (McGrath, 1967, p. 387). Allegedly papist practises included idolatry – prayers to the saints, transubstantiation and the supposed worship of the Pope rather than Jesus, avarice – the hoarding of tithes or donations, and fornication – the implication that celibacy was a cover for philandering.

### **Post-reformation Catholic Depictions of Sainthood, c. 1530-1603**

Seeking to establish continuity between Pre-reformation Catholicism and the Counter-Reformation mission to re-convert England, Catholic priests claimed a brave death combined with strong faith vindicated Henrician officials who had failed their mission of stopping England's contamination with barbarous heresy (Pollard, 1556, p. 2). As a servant of God and the King, Sir Thomas More could justifiably execute "thieves, murderers and heretics" (More, 1631, p. 149), relinquish authority to patiently endure beheading, and finally leave a reassuring, self-fulfilling prediction of Catholicism's ultimate survival (More, 1533, p.281). Cardinal Pole, royal chaplain Cancellor, and Worcestershire clerk Pollard attributed Henry VIII's execution of the "holy men" (Pole, 1560, p. 18) More and Cardinal Fisher to insanity. Unwilling to alienate Henry's devout Catholic

daughter Mary, priests initially claimed the late King was no murderer or heretic, but a sick man misled and exploited by Lord Cromwell, Archbishop Cranmer, and Queen Anne (Cancellar, 1556, p. 15). This changed after Mary's death when Jesuits John Wilson, William Rastell, Thomas Bailey, and Thomas More's great grandson Cresacre, depicted both Henry and Elizabeth as heretics, because of their alleged cruelty, unjust execution of innocents, and unlawful usurpation of Papal supremacy. Although these priests equated heresy with deviant behaviour (besides erroneous beliefs), most of them initially sought Elizabeth's re-conversion rather than her overthrow, because the open backing of a foreign ruler like Philip of Spain or Mary Stuart risked undermining the Catholic Church's claim of impartial political neutrality, and priests' own claim to be concerned solely with spiritual matters. Deeming Cardinals the earthly successors of Christ's apostles due to their ability to choose the next Pope, Wilson and Colleton compared Henry VIII's beheading of the aged John Fisher on false treason charges with the murder of Archbishop Beckett after his opposition to Henry II's attempt to usurp the powers of Catholic church courts (Wilson, 1670, p. 56). Cardinal Fisher failed to prevent the 1533 schism (culminating in Henry VIII wresting English church-supremacy from the Pope), but gained redemption through beheading alongside More, thus cleansing England's sins, and inspiring future generations to resist errors spread by Elizabethan Puritan successors to the treacherous heretical advisers Cromwell and Cranmer (Colleton, 1620, p. 555). By comparing Fisher to John the Baptist, priests could retrospectively demonise Henry and Anne Boleyn as contemporary counterparts to the Jewish tyrant Herod and promiscuous princess Salome. By extension, this enabled Elizabethan Catholics to draw parallels between the cruelties of Henry and the anti-Catholic discrimination associated with his daughter Elizabeth, and also persuade recusants that it was more virtuous to die for one's beliefs rather than abjure and live with the guilt of dishonouring one's saintly namesake (Bailey, 1655, p. 3).

Unlike moderate lay-Catholics who had martyrdom thrust upon them, Elizabethan Jesuits actively sought death in imitation of Christ dying for humanity's sins, the patriarchs of the "primitive church" (Almond, 1623, p. xiii) facing Caesar's lions, and Spanish priests risking death to convert the pagans in the New World (Anon., 1582, p. 6). Counter-Reformation martyrologists generally wrote in the third person to appear authoritative speakers of the truth rather than polemicists, although they often left a personal message in their preface to thank influential patrons or reassure England's recusants (lay-Catholics who rejected royal church supremacy and refused to attend Church of England services). Thomas Alfield, a Gloucestershire convert to Catholicism later hanged for distributing forbidden books, deemed the relationship between martyrologist, missionary priest, and lay-Catholics analogous to the Gospel writers, ancient martyrs, and the wider early Christian elect enduring persecution (Alfield, 1582, p. 5). Just as the roles of persecutor and persecuted were interchangeable, so too were the roles of martyr and martyrologist; by returning to England from exile and challenging disorderly, deviant Anglican heresy, priests could portray themselves as superior patriarchs to the reputedly cowardly or hypocritical Marian Protestants who fled overseas (Campion & Meredith, 1581, p. 3). Arguing that a worthy cause made a martyr, not a valiant death, Robert Parsons (or Persons) deemed "Foxian saints" (Parsons, 1688, p. 218) (dead Marian heretics) traitors like their lawless Calvinist successors, and accused Anglicans of plagiarism for co-opting saints' days and festivals. Catholic priests, conversely, were considered successors to the "glorious saints themselves" (Wilson, 1608, p. 2) whose good works were perpetually set in printed texts approved by the Pope: the infallible earthly successor to Christ and St. Peter (Anderson, 1623, p. 132). Although Catholicism was impeded by centuries of pre-Reformation tradition which, if dismissed as false, endangered the church's claim of infallibility, Jesuit portrayals of martyrdom were far from backward and

inflexible. Counter to Puritans depicting pre-Reformation saints as ordinary people, Edmund Campion and John Floyd claimed that martyred priests' ability to perform the miracles of consecration and transubstantiation highlighted the pre-Reformation church's authenticity and exclusivity, while their spilled blood on the gallows appeased God and cleansed England of blasphemous ignorance (Campion, 1687, p. 31). Jesuits proclaimed New Testament based Mass superior to Old Testament based Protestant services, because Latin was spoken in Christ's time, and the associated rituals of consecration pre-dated Israel's establishment; Robert Johnson mocked his Protestant interrogators for basing their worship upon an inferior vernacular translation, by asking them "do you think Christ taught in English?" (Munday, 1582, p. 6). Seeking to highlight the continued relevance of Catholic mysticism, priests adapted negative Jewish stereotypes to mock the Anglican confessional state's lack of miracles, to draw parallels between contemporary Puritans and the Pharisees blamed for crucifying Jesus, and also to exalt martyred missionaries as the mystical and rational successors to the original Apostles correcting the Old Testament errors unwittingly restored by Elizabeth's late father and brother (Floyd, 1612, p. 237).

Aware of the female congregation's importance, priests portrayed the abstract ancient Mother Church in feminine terms, to encourage contemporary recusant women to fulfil the vocation of sheltering priests, attending Mass, and producing the next generation of missionaries. Jesuits adapted the pre-Reformation cult of the Virgin Mary to exert greater control over Catholic women, encouraging celibacy to prevent widows living "licentiously and riotously" (Lessius, 1621, p. 232) and instead become role models for their dependents by devoting themselves to religious contemplation (Verstegen, 1601, p. 2). Mass, with its rituals and prayers to the saints, was a useful tool for priests seeking to portray themselves as superior teachers to Anglican authority figures, and depict the contemporary underground church not as the kingdom of the foreign Pope, but as an inherently English institution whose appeal to mothers confirmed its association with order, stability, and family values. Although several recusant women died in jail during Elizabeth's persecutions, only three were executed, and gained legitimisation in print due to their respectability, piety, and veneration by lay-Catholics (Wilson, 1608, p. 201). Like the Virgin Mary, two of these martyrs were widows: Cheshire gentlewoman Margaret Ward was hanged in London in 1588, and Essex convert Anne Line in 1601. The women's admission of guilt before their captors may have been intended to uphold the hierarchy (and thus prove Catholicism's political neutrality), but Irish priest Fitzherbert deemed it a gesture of defiance and distress at the torture of innocent priests, and proof that honest Catholic women were unafraid of the consequences of serving the true church (Fitzherbert, 1602, p. 10). Despite their sensitivity and godliness however, women continued to be considered inferior martyrs to priests who possessed the masculine virtues of preaching, self-control, and preference for hardship and patriarchal leadership roles over sensual, short-term feminine pleasures and comforts associated with the domestic sphere of the household.

### **Protestant Transition and Allegory, 1547-1569**

Literal Catholic style representations of sainthood were initially perpetuated by older Marian Protestant martyrs, who opposed not the veneration of saints, but popish priests' prolonged abuse of power that allegedly rendered the pre-Reformation church beyond reform (Hooper, 1564, p. 138). This necessitated the creation of the post-Marian English confessional state, identified with ancient Israel, in which both church and secular government answered to the supposedly divinely appointed institution of the monarchy (Jewel, 1583, p. 27). Many moderate Anglicans (Anglican being derived from *Ecclesia Anglicana*, the pre-Reformation name for the

Church of England) were aware of Elizabeth's earlier religious conservatism and initial perception of the restored Church of England as the only remnant of "Christ's holy Catholic Church" (Elizabeth, 1684, p. 85) uncorrupted by idolatrous popery (the supposed worship of the Pope and saints instead of Jesus). Seeking to portray contemporary Protestant church-reforms as the culmination of Henry VIII's efforts to restore the early church, many exiled Protestants drew parallels between contemporary preachers translating Scripture into English, and Christ's apostles converting the pagans by verbally spreading the Gospel in foreign tongues (Old, 1556, p. 21). Adapting pre-Reformation accounts of early Christian women choosing martyrdom over submission to a false religion, John Bale deemed Henrician proto-Protestant gentlewoman Anne Askew's departure from her abusive Catholic husband not un-motherly behaviour, but a higher calling befitting a physically weak woman seeking to honour God, the ultimate patriarch (Askew & Bale, 1547b, p. 8). Anne was no outcast, but a travelling scholar who, unconcerned by her public reputation and impending execution by burning, spontaneously challenged transubstantiation and idolatry in anticipation of the Edwardian reforms (Askew & Bale, 1547a, p. 45). Deeming Elizabeth's 1560s religious settlement the culmination of Edward's church reforms, Anglican deacon Brice, Bishop Jewel and ex-Bishop Coverdale supplanted the old calendar of saints with Marian Protestants burned on the same day, while exalting the Queen as the infallible authority on English religious affairs (Brice, 1559, p. 6). Unlike Foxe, who extensively described martyrs' graphic deaths as a means to highlight Marian papists' injustice and inhumanity, Brice used vague, poetic language focusing upon martyrs from high-status and clerical backgrounds (Brice, 1599, p. 3). The concept of a divinely favoured church of the elect was well established by the 1555 burning of London preacher John Bradford, who believed only Protestant "children of God" (Bradford, 1564, p. 46) would be reborn. Other older Anglicans, including martyred Bishop Hooper and John Philpot, identified with ancient leaders like St. Peter and Christ, whose crucifixion on the "Mount of Calvary" (Philpot, 1564, p. 247) not only saved sinners, but liberated his own soul from its earthly bonds (Bradford, 1559, p. 47).

Elizabethan Calvinist Puritans (so-called for their alleged desire to purify the Church of England) initially took a haphazard approach to martyrs and included several pre-Reformation Lollards: anti-clericalist laymen who, influenced by the teachings of renegade priests like John Wycliffe, secretly met to discuss Scripture and criticise papists' alleged corruption. By the 1500s, Lollard (derived from Medieval slang for an idle person) became synonymous with heretic, regardless of whether the individual considered himself a member of one of the new breakaway Protestant sects, or a Catholic seeking to reform the church internally. Deeming the Tudor Reformation a conflict between the enlightened English elect and the damned "shavelings" (Crowley, 1569, p. 156) of the popish antichrist, the Marian exiles Foxe and Crowley included both clergymen and laypeople, whose iconoclasm was equated with the Twelve Apostles testing and defacing powerless pagan idols, and with early Christians defying Roman incitements to worship the tyrants Nero and Diocletian instead of God (Foxe, 2011, p. 783). Eager to appease a conservative readership seeking familiar structures and patterns, Foxe acknowledged the early Christians' godliness and utility as role models, but branded prayers to the saints idolatrous because dead men were in heaven and unable to interfere with the temporal world (Foxe, 1583, p. 682). Fearing Catholic allegations of plagiarism, Puritans like Foxe and Keltridge preferred to highlight the scholarly abilities of early Protestants (including not only the Marian martyrs, but also the dying Edward VI), and portrayed them as both figurative and literal successors to the Old Testament prophets (Keltridge, 1581, p. 8). Henrician and Marian Protestant denunciations of idolatry provided a useful lesson for future generations to destroy any remaining images in churches, while their predictions of divine retribution upon the papists were

supposedly fulfilled by the death of Mary Tudor and the restoration of the Edwardian Church of England under Elizabeth. Unlike Catholics' supposedly fraudulent "prodigious visions" (Foxe, 1570, p. 2270), which often included an alleged visitation by a named saint, angel or other supernatural figure, the prophesies of Marian Protestants like Robert Samuel or Anne Potton were usually depicted as vague dreams about the future, including commands directly from God, realistic images of a "bright burning fire" (Foxe, 1583, p. 1917), and metaphorical, Old Testament inspired ladders to heaven (Foxe, 1563, p. 1339). Foxe, and later preachers like Andrew Willet, depicted anti-clericalist commoners as more rational than supposedly educated pre-Reformation priests with their fraudulent, feminised rituals and image worship. The aim to discredit contemporary Catholic clergymen as lazy, deceitful friars who exploited the people, and to portray Henrician proto-Protestants as forerunners to members of the masculine, rational Church of England defined by their rejection of pagan popish tyranny (Willet, 1592, p. 275). Thus, low-status martyrs were typically represented with a simple godliness, spurning Marian priests' bribes and threats due to internalisation of Edwardian Protestant sermons that portrayed lingering remnants of ritual based popery as devilish, unpatriotic, and alien anachronisms (Foxe, 1563, p. 1597).

### **The Puritan Rejection of Sainthood, 1570-1603**

After the 1569 Northern Catholic Rebellion, Elizabethan Church of England doctrine became increasingly Protestant, and prominent Puritan preachers adapted Foxe's martyrology to equate saints with ordinary people in an effort to exalt martyred heretics, and discredit pre-Reformation mysticism (Birkbeck, 1635, p. 34). Yorkshireman Simon Birkbeck, and Londoner Giles Fletcher, deemed these allegorical depictions a means to assert Old Testament inspired monotheism's superiority over the allegedly polytheistic popish practise of venerating dead saints as lesser gods (Foxe, 1570, p. 2071). Writing to prove Protestantism's continued relevance and exclusivity under King James, Fletcher contrasted popish priests' reputed gluttony, sloth, and drunkenness with Marian martyrs imitating Christ's original instruction to patiently suffer for righteousness and exhibit rational, masculine self-control (Fletcher, 1623, p. 191). In a society that valued puns and allegories, Foxe himself implied that Protestant women were more similar to the Virgin Mary than Queen Mary was, because the previous papist regime failed to serve England's best interests. Norfolk weaver Cecilia Ormes' quoting of the Magnificat: "my soul doth magnify the Lord" (Foxe, 1583, p. 2047) was interpreted not as a pledge of allegiance to the pre-Reformation church, but as a reminder that even the purest and godliest individuals had to remain submissive to God when discrediting popish superstition (Sanders, 1563, p. 1116). Puritan martyrologist Francis Burton believed every subject was duty bound to challenge "traitors, rebels and anti-Christians" (Burton, 1612, p. 2) and spontaneously enforce official church reforms, because these laws were not the whims of an earthly monarch, but derived directly from the Ten Commandments. The aim was to maintain the support of an increasingly anti-clericalist younger generation who admired early Protestants bravely challenging popery, but feared foreign papist invasion, and internal religious schism after the unmarried Elizabeth's death (Wright, 1589, p. 3).

Lastly, mention must be made of Protestant martyrologists' reinterpretation of sainthood to portray papists not as zealous defenders of Christianity, but as antichristian inversions of the idealised English subject whose obedience of the monarch was not only patriotic, but a "Commandment of God" (Leland, 1549, p. 15). Edwardian and Elizabethan Anglicans feared that recusants idolatrously worshipped dead saints rather than God, and used the words of pre-Reformation martyrs to criticise the post-schism regime (Henry VIII, 1533).

When previous monarchs quarrelled with the Papacy, Marian exiles Bale and Foxe used hindsight to depict pre-Reformation saints as villains; Archbishop Beckett, for example, was branded a “thief and murderer in hell” (Foxe, 1583, p. 1053) who earned a violent death in 1170 for spreading lies about Henry II on Satan’s behalf (Bale, 1545, p. 52). These anti-clericalist depictions were useful for later Puritans like Lawrence Humphrey or lawyer Thomas Norton seeking to supplant discredited popish martyrs with outspoken Protestant “soldiers of Christ” (Humphrey, 1588) whose beliefs were not heresy, but Scripture based truths (Foxe, 1576, p. 1226). Posthumously, Norton compared Pole to Archbishop Beckett for both his zeal and his treachery, arrogantly dabbling in politics and posthumously betraying Henry by helping the Spanish enemy take over (Norton, 1569, p. 17). In a radical continental inspired rejection of pre-Reformation saints, Bishops Mey and Bilson responded to papist veneration of executed priests by claiming Catholic angels were demons, and Catholic rituals were irrational, superstitious delusions lacking scriptural basis (Mey, 1597). Eager to discredit Catholic bishops like Bonner as demonic agents, Protestant pamphleteers sarcastically claimed Spanish-backed papist efforts to transform England into a “noble Kingdom” (Anon., 1557, p. 8) rendered it abhorrent to God, because the Pope was actually the Antichrist of Babylon whose deity was Satan, and whose church elders included devils and evil men like the murderer Cain. These depictions were related to later Puritan efforts to highlight the superiority of abstract faith over idolatrous rituals, confirm Elizabeth’s claim of infallibility, and portray Henry’s schism as a prelude to the golden age predicted to follow Satan’s final defeat in the Battle of Armageddon (Downname, 1607, p. 13).

### Conclusion

My source analysis suggests that martyrologists’ efforts to create an illusion of continuity with ancient saints was intended to reassure an audience fearful of religious upheaval and nostalgic for a time of apparent stability. To achieve this, Anglicans, Puritans, and Catholics claimed their goal was not religious change, but restoration of uncorrupted early Christian ideals. The suffering of early martyrs was intended to imply that the Marian or Elizabethan regime was unjust, although martyrologists lacking hindsight often left the monarch’s ultimate fate and culpability ambiguous through fear of compromising Catholic or Protestant claims of political neutrality. There was often overlap between old and new depictions, especially in Counter-Reformation Jesuit sources that exalted saintly scholars, who were not only rational, well-educated, and attuned to the latest Humanist ideas, but also mystical, humble, and pious servants of God duty bound to challenge injustice, before submitting to a trial by secular law courts. Under Elizabeth, a division emerged not only between Catholics and Protestants, or rulers and subjects, but also between radical and moderate martyrologists within the English Church. Although every religious group valued self-control, acceptance of one’s fate, and the power of prayer, Puritans generally put greater emphasis on verbal resistance to unjust commands believed to emanate not from the monarch, but from the Antichrist Pope in Rome. Catholic martyrologies were intended to establish continuity with traditional depictions of sainthood, but Anglican and Puritan models were more complex: not perpetuating, but reinterpreting and adapting models of sainthood as a unifying factor, by exalting loyal subjects while discrediting disobedient papists as villains undeserving of commemoration. Concurrent with Walsham’s argument that the Reformation represented neither unbroken continuity nor radical change, but transition and adaptation, Puritans combined sainthood with Calvinist doctrine not only to discredit Catholic mysticism, but also to highlight early martyrs’ exceptional godliness and thus maintain the support of traditionalists. Subsequently, saints and proto-Puritan martyrs were portrayed allegorically: not as supernatural

miracle workers, but as ordinary people unable to betray their conscience by submitting to an allegedly out-of-touch, reactionary tyrant.

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