

## Representations of Gender in Early Modern England through the Writings of Anne Askew

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Anne Askew, a staunch Protestant and martyr, presented to Tudor England a lasting legacy through which it could work out new problems it faced as a result of the Reformation. Askew's outspoken voice, and refusal to conform to the 1539 Act of Six Articles (which reinstated a more Catholic position on doctrine), brought her under interrogation for charges of heresy near the end of King Henry VIII's reign. Henry's judicial and religious leaders interrogated and tortured her ruthlessly; attempting unsuccessfully to indict her fellow believers and making her "perhaps the most infamous suffering female body in the English Protestant imagination."<sup>1</sup> Aside from being a fascinating subject in and of herself, the figure of Askew illuminates the complex and confusing social, religious, and ideological changes that occurred in early modern England. Beyond just demonstrating the potency of religious fear, Askew's case illuminates the turbulence that the religious diversity of Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine brought to English conceptions of hierarchy and gender. Her case specifically questions the role of women in private, public and religious spheres, and women's access to religion, scripture and education. *The Examinations of Anne Askew*, her account of her period under trial and torture, had an impact not only on Protestant polemics to come, but also on contemporary negotiations of gender roles in politics, society and religion. John Bale's editing, elucidation and publication of her writing offers insight into the expectations and boundaries imposed upon her sex in Tudor England, and demarcates appropriate and inappropriate female participation and presentation. The discrepancy between

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<sup>1</sup> Suzannah B. Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 212.

Bale's interpretation and portrayal of Askew, and Askew's own self-portrayal, provides a frame through which gender ideologies of early modern England can be observed. An investigation of Bale's and Askew's own representations of herself can shed light on the changes that occurred in sixteenth-century England, including the modes and tactics of communication through which women were allowed a voice.

Askew presented herself through her writings as a strong and learned woman, capable of tactfully and ingeniously negotiating the systems of early modern England to maintain her religious stance and preach her religion to her readers. Her *Examinations* showed her cunning as she fielded accusations of heresy from some of the most powerful men in the country by quoting scripture, using irony, and even questioning her own inquisitors. She answered one of the first questions posed to her with another question, which stumped her inquisitor, Christopher Dare: "Then I demanded this question of him, wherefore St Stephen was stoned to death? And he said he could not tell. Then I answered that no more would I assoil his vain question."<sup>2</sup> Although she did not directly humiliate her inquisitors, or reverse established hierarchies of gender and power, she maintained strength and control throughout her trials. E.V. Beilin, an Askew historian, believes that "The linguistic games Askew plays... conveys her as confident and self-possessed in the face of danger, certainly part of the character she wishes to create for her readers."<sup>3</sup> In order to convey her strength and steadfast nature, Askew used demonstration rather than articulation, by employing a powerful rhetorical device: understatement. Such a device lent her the credibility of a narrator who did not indulge in exaggeration or melodrama. She allowed the shocking drama of her situation to speak for itself by explaining her illegal torture in a terse manner:

Then they did put me on the rack, because I confessed  
no ladies or gentlewomen to be of my opinion, and  
thereon they kept me a long time; and because I lay still  
and did not cry, my lord chancellor and Master Rich

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<sup>2</sup> John Bale, *Select Works of John Bale*, ed. H. Christmas (Cambridge: The University Press, 1849), 148.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 40.

toke pains to rack me their own hands, till I was nigh  
dead.<sup>4</sup>

This stark and emotionally removed account presented to her readers a woman “tough in mind and body, learned and tenacious.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition to presenting her audience with a strong figure, her proficient use of Scripture and her identification with a male saint implied a vision of femininity which is active in the world and capable to contribute and teach. Askew chose “[Saint] Stephen as her model, insisting in the first comment... that she models herself on this martyr-preacher.”<sup>6</sup> Like many early Protestants she identified with earlier Christian figures, and she claimed “as hers the anger and vengeance of those who wrote or speak in the Bible.”<sup>7</sup> Askew’s writing took on an active voice, which taught her readers by informing them in an authoritative manner.<sup>8</sup> Such a strong voice was unexpected for a woman of her society, and, “her dominant tones [were] fervent and ironic – not modes usually associated with gentlewomen in public.”<sup>9</sup> Overall, her *Examinations* revealed that Askew thought herself to be an example of a strong and steadfast believer whose ability to follow and profess her faith was not impeded by her sex.

Her strong personality, voice and tactics revealed “that she saw herself as a defender of the faith, a teacher, a visionary, and a fighter, the spiritual equal of any man.”<sup>10</sup> Although she did see herself as spiritually equal to men, she knew well enough to work within the gender structures of her time, and even use them to her advantage. When discussing Scripture which addressed the segregation of preaching rights for women and men, she appeased her inquisitor using phrases such as “poor women”<sup>11</sup>; yet preceding this phrase, she asked the

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<sup>4</sup> John Fox, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church*, ed. J. Cumming (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), 656.

<sup>5</sup> Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Gwynne Kennedy, *Just Anger: Representing Women’s Anger in Early Modern England* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 145.

<sup>8</sup> Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *Just Anger*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720* (London: Routledge, 1993), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 155.

bishop, “how many women he had seen go into the pulpit and preach.”<sup>12</sup> Her questions implied that Askew was in fact the person who was in control of the discussion and was guiding it where she desired. The discerning reader can perceive that Askew’s conscious manipulation of stereotypes undermine her mien of womanly weakness that she presented to her inquisitors. Askew used existing gender stereotypes to negotiate her dangerous situation, yet her education, wit and wisdom demonstrated that she herself was not the standard meek and placid woman thought to be common to sixteenth-century England.

The character and legacy of Askew became co-opted and transformed in John Bale’s publication of Askew’s *Examinations*. He emphasized her feminine weakness in order to diminish the radicalism that could potentially be interpreted from such a forceful female figure. The purpose of Bale’s appropriation of Askew into his Protestant polemic was primarily to illustrate God’s power to strengthen the weak through faith. In incorporating her into his martyrology, Bale’s task was to tame the radical aspects of Askew’s character and fit her into his Protestant model of femininity that has a voice to challenge religious unbelievers, but not to challenge the male hierarchy in which they operated. He saw his project not as an entire reversal of the Great Chain of Being, but as a conception of the Great Chain where each person, no matter how low his or her station, had direct access to Christ. Askew’s writings were useful for Bale’s compilation of Protestant believers because she presented to his readers a female Protestant who employed cautious tactics and unflinching resolve when encountering her Catholic enemies.

The image Bale painted of Askew was far from her own self-fashioned, empowered and capable self-conceptualization. In his writings “Askew’s comparative radicalism [was] suppressed in favor of her status as a proto-martyr for mainline English Protestantism.”<sup>13</sup> He attributed all her strength to God, and constantly referred to her body as weak and feeble. She was portrayed as “an innocent lamb, a good but defenseless creature,”<sup>14</sup> thus making her a passive vessel for the masculine divine power. In contrast to Askew’s identification with Saint Stephen, the public preacher, Bale described her similarities with Saint

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<sup>12</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, *Just Anger*, 154.

Blandina, a weak slave.<sup>15</sup> Bale argued: “Blandina was young and tender; so was Anne Askew also: but that which was frail of nature in them both, Christ made strong by his grace.”<sup>16</sup> By emasculating Askew’s body, Bale transformed her into a Godly vessel whose victimization incriminated her persecutors. Because of her sex and alleged physical frailty, her Catholic inquisitors were demonized<sup>17</sup> as “cruel bishops and priests, whom Christ calleth ravening wolves, devourers and thieves.”<sup>18</sup> By including Askew in his protestant martyrology as a physically weak woman who operated within the acceptable boundaries of femininity, he at once furthered his argument for God’s divine ability to infuse his true believers with strength, and successfully demonized his Catholic enemies who viciously tortured a delicate woman.

The difference between Bale’s portrayal of Askew and Askew’s own writings illustrates the different projects both writers had in mind. Askew wrote to give a personal and honest account of the unjust treatments she underwent, whereas Bale wrote about her to exemplify God’s strength within the greater canon of Protestant martyrology. Bale’s purpose was “to reconcile the nation and its goals with the relatively simple martyrological framework of conflicts between devilish persecutors and holy martyrs.”<sup>19</sup> Beyond the divergent objectives of each writer, these two descriptions of Askew are a lens through which ideals and boundaries for gender in early modern England can be viewed. Because she was a female, Askew showed what language was available to her as a woman, what behaviour was acceptable, and under what guise transgressive activities could take to induce legitimacy. As a man writing about a woman, Bale’s account of Askew showed the existing fear of female transgression that threatened patriarchal authority, and the importance of female role models in religion. Both portrayals of Askew must be understood in relation to contemporary ideologies because they “participated in the broader cultural production of sexualized identities and gender discourse.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, *Just Anger*, 153.

<sup>16</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> Krista Kesselring, “Representations of Women in Tudor Historiography: John Bale and the Rhetoric of Exemplarity,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 22 (1998): 48.

<sup>18</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 225

<sup>20</sup> Kesselring, “Representations of Women,” 43.

Bale had the insight to see that the English people, having practiced Roman Christianity, relied upon the canon of saints as role-models.<sup>21</sup> The Catholic saints provided encouragement for the English people by example in difficult times and Bale's martyrology sought to do the same.<sup>22</sup> The cult of the Virgin Mary and the female saints provided a special comfort and model for English women, and so, with them gone, Bale attempted to fill the space they left with the example of a good Protestant woman. He garnered Askew's writings of her victimization because they "allowed him to present a moving story of the beliefs, sufferings and death of one of the elect... [and] also permitted him explicitly to include women in the history he had crafted for the Church."<sup>23</sup> Askew was the perfect candidate for his project because she pushed the Protestant agenda and criticized the Catholic Church without directly challenging the existing patriarchal hierarchy. Bale's belief in her martyrological validity emerged in the title he gave to his writings: "The First Examination of the Worthy Servant of God, Mistress Anne Askewe, the younger daughter of Sir William Askewe, Knight of Lincolnshire, lately martyred in Smithfield, by the Romish Pope's Upholders."<sup>24</sup> This title demonized her Catholic persecutors and reiterated her legitimacy and nobility which came from her father's honourable position. Bale thus argued that Askew's enemies were the papists, not the patriarchal authority of England in general. In Bale's publication, her story presented to new believers a vision of femininity that was strong in the new faith, one that fought religious battles without engaging with deeper questions of social hierarchy and patriarchy.

Askew's strong Protestant resolve worked to secure Bale's arguments, but her biography brought up questions of her righteousness and virtue, which Bale worked hard to secure and validate. At the age of fifteen, this strongly Protestant believer was married to Thomas Kyme, a Catholic, and eventually produced children. Askew's quest to be granted a divorce brought her to London, and resulted in her becoming closely involved in circles of the new Protestant faith. Her search for a divorce and her vocalized religious convictions

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<sup>21</sup> Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Kesselring, "Representations of Women," 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 147.

caught the attention of powerful men who sought to bring her, and those like her, down. As the case of Henry VIII demonstrated, divorce was a very serious matter, and Askew's audacity, as a woman seeking divorce, was virtually unprecedented: "Askew's actions leading up to her first arrest set her apart from most early modern Englishwomen."<sup>25</sup> Bale's writings dealt with his concern "that her leaving her husband would (as it indeed did) prompt criticism"<sup>26</sup> of Askew after her death. He was quick to defend Askew's remarkable and radical demands both by highlighting the aspects of her life that made her conventional, and supporting her pursuit of divorce based on scriptural evidence. Bale focused on the fact that Askew performed her wifely duties by bearing children, and he portrayed her departure from her husband's home as unwilling and necessary. He asserted that such a marriage was wrong in the eyes of God and by seeking a divorce, Askew was living up to her duties to God: "She coulde not thynke hym worthy of her marriage which so spyghtfullyes hated God the chefe autor of marriage."<sup>27</sup> Bale's interpretation of Askew's biography attempted to justify the radical aspects of her life through Scripture and the values of the new faith.

Askew's life presented a problem to Tudor England that was representative of the turmoil religious reformation brought to the kingdom: multi-faith marriage. Inter-faith marriage (if this term can be used in such an early stage of Protestantism) was a growing reality in early modern England, and was an issue that emerged again and again in subsequent English history.<sup>28</sup> Writings about Askew's situation brought this unprecedented predicament into English discussion and awareness: "If the husband were an unbeliever, or of a different faith, whom was a wife to obey? Initially, theologians stressed the equality of all believers before God. Individuals were responsible for their own salvation."<sup>29</sup> The idea that each person was responsible to God came out in Bale's defense of Askew, whose writing implicitly argued for an active role and responsibility for both men *and* women in their religious lives.

Because she was a woman, criticisms from Catholic writers were especially targeted at her transgressive nature; this was associated with sexual

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<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, *Just Anger*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 207.

<sup>27</sup> Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 92-3.

<sup>28</sup> Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 68.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

liberalism and misconduct, a taboo in early modern England which was considered immoral and unchristian. Bale defended Askew from Catholic writers who portrayed her as an evil woman, such as Robert Persons who described her as “ghospelling & ghossipinge where she might, & ought not.”<sup>30</sup> These accusations implied that a woman ought not to use her voice in matters of public concern or where she was uneducated. A woman who publicly articulated a distain for existing order was looked upon as a threat, and in the religious realm “female martyrs’ outspokenness could... be read as transgressive, disruptive, and distinctly unsaintly.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in his martyrology, Bale painted a vision of Askew that highlighted her virtue, prudence and sensibility and downplayed any of her radical features. Bale clarified Askew’s nature as characterized by constant devotion and unwavering faith, saying: “The gospel of Christ bare she in her heart, as did the holy maid Cecilia, and never after ceased from the study thereof, nor from godly communication and prayer.”<sup>32</sup> For Bale, devotion to God through prayer and scriptural reading defended a woman from charges of promiscuity.

The very fact that Bale took these Catholic criticisms of Askew’s honour seriously and made efforts to counter them meant that these criticisms did indeed express a fear present in Tudor society: the fear that a female voice, outside of male authority, was dangerous and a threat to the order which many English so vehemently protected. As the historian S.B. Monta suggested, strong feminine liberality in speech and action was often associated in this society with liberality in sexual conduct, which would only add to Bale’s interest in downplaying Askew’s strong voice in order to protect her legacy. Monta asserted that the phenomenon of martyrologists (often male) standing up for a female martyr was not uncommon: “Defending against such easily anticipated charges [of “wantonnesse”], martyrologists sever[ed] the connection between outspokenness and sexual misconduct, sometimes by softening a woman’s words but more often by defending her purity of conscience *and* body, her virginity of spirit.”<sup>33</sup> The reality in early modern England was that a woman’s honour and

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<sup>30</sup> Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 203.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Bale, *Selected Works*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Monta, *Literature and Martyrdom*, 203-204.



value was tied up not just in her mind, but in her body. Bale's defense of Askew's purity and honour in order to instill her into his canon of martyrs, showed the fears surrounding female empowerment and speech in early modern England. Unless securely under the guise of religion, a woman's speech and actions could be construed as potentially threatening to the power and honour of the system from where she came.

Bale's efforts to secure a place for Askew among Protestant martyrs shed light on English fears and changes surrounding femininity in a time when new religion caused a rethinking of most aspects of life. Although Bale's editorial notes worked to smooth over any radical aspects of Askew's story, both Bale and Askew presented a vision of woman which was slightly different for sixteenth-century England. Both writers implicitly argued for a more responsible role for women as believers and defenders of faith. Askew "presented herself independently of current definitions, and in the process, implied an alternate role for the religious woman."<sup>34</sup> In Askew's model, women, as Protestant Christians, had access to scripture and could develop a relationship with the gospel to apply it to their everyday lives. Askew did exactly this when she cited passages from the Bible in her defense, and expressed her voice in and through the established authority of Scripture. In his writings, Bale also "suggests that women must be learned in the Scriptures and unafraid to share by example and word of the light of the gospel."<sup>35</sup> Bale's writings emerged from the Protestant belief that each person had the ability to develop a relationship with God and worship through Scripture, and he extended this ability to female believers who, "as spouses of Christ, can attain a nobility of spirit that makes them worthy of participation in the affairs of the commonwealth."<sup>36</sup> However, the power to act out this ability, and the autonomy needed to engage in meaningful scriptural was not granted to the early modern woman. Askew's demise was an example of what happened to a woman who took on an active voice and role which challenged the religious power in sixteenth century England.

Although she suffered a grizzly fate, Askew did not die in vain; she left a legacy of female strength and steadfast belief. By being radical in both her

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<sup>34</sup> Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Kesselring, "Representations of Women," 49.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

pursuit for a divorce and her mastery of scripture, she projected an image of a Christian woman who was strong, independent and learned. Her *Examinations* left the memory of a woman who embodied these characteristics, yet was cunning enough to work within a system of oppression by appealing to certain gender biases and remaining within certain traditional gender expectations, such as motherhood. The ease with which Bale chose her words spoke to her validity as an intelligent Christian and her subtle approach in transmitting her experience. Askew is known to us today because of writers such as Bale, who saw in her a means to further their Protestant projects. Her patience and flexibility were not only what allowed her to engage with the powers of her era and ensured her place as a woman worth studying for her tactics and story, but were also emblematic of a successful and characteristically English approach to bringing about change.