ReFormations
MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN

Series Editors:
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Note on Spelling, Punctuation, and Editions

Although authoritative or scholarly editions have been cited when appropriate, many of the primary materials studied in this volume have not been reproduced in modern editions. In these cases, original editions or manuscripts are cited. The Corpus Christi plays are quoted in accordance with the Early English Text Society editions. For all other early texts, original punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are preserved with the exception of transposed i/j and u/v, the use of vv to signify w, and obsolete abbreviations, all of which have been modernized.
When a nation is powerful, it tells the world confident stories about the future. The stories can be enchanting or frightening, but they make sense of the world. But when that power begins to ebb, the stories fall apart. And all that are left are fragments that haunt you like half-forgotten dreams.

—Adam Curtis, It Felt Like a Kiss
Introduction

Being killed is an event. Martyrdom is a literary form, a genre.

—Daniel Boyarin, Dying for God

Father John Gerard was not a martyr, although the course of his life suggested he might be. Born in Derbyshire in 1564 and educated at Exeter College, Oxford, he left England to pursue the Catholic priesthood, taking Jesuit orders at the English College in Rome in 1588. He returned to England later that year in disguise and under an assumed name, serving the outlawed Catholic mission in secrecy until his arrest for high treason in 1594. In what might well look like incipient martyrdom, Gerard was imprisoned for more than three years under Elizabethan anti-Catholic statutes, during which time he was tortured repeatedly by rack and manacles. He would later write that he withstood the pain by recalling his desire for martyrdom, finding comfort in reminding himself, “you have often wanted to give your life for your Lord God.” He was able to endure torture without betraying other Catholics, fortified as he was with “resignation” and “a desire to die.”

But Gerard did not die. On the night of October 4, 1597, he and a fellow Catholic prisoner escaped from the Tower to the safety of their confederates, who were waiting in a boat below. Why did Gerard choose to escape when he had already endured horrific torture and had only to await his inevitable execution? As his narrative attests, it
was not simply death he initially desired but martyrdom. And although death surely awaited him, martyrdom might not have. Writing in defense of English Catholics in 1582, Cardinal William Allen had complained that Elizabethan law, which made it treason to live in England as a priest or practicing Catholic, brought Catholics “into the slanderous suspicion & obloquie of crimes never thought of” instead of condemning them for their faith and “ma[king] them away for religion without more a doe.” Allen’s remarks point to the troublesome rhetorical disparity between an accusation of treason and an explicitly religious persecution. Like Allen’s polemic, Gerard’s paradoxical narration of both the desire for martyrdom and the unashamed escape from imprisonment and execution reveals a discrepancy between the treason proceeding and its potential for martyrological recuperation.

John Gerard intuited the foundational premise of this book: that martyrdom is not a death but a story that gets written about a death. Like Allen, he recognized the representational dissonance between the terms of his persecution and the structures of the martyrological genre. What awaited him if he remained in custody was a trial that would criminalize his allegiance to Rome and a popular press that would sensationalize his secret life. What awaited him was a barbarous execution that would inscribe on his body a heinous villain’s story. In the rhetorical parameters of 1597, Gerard could not complete the martyrdom narrative he had begun. Unable to inhabit the story of a martyr, he evidently preferred to dislodge himself from the alternative narrative that was being composed for him: the story of a traitor.

The relationship between the paradigmatic martyr story and the unruly exigencies of history is the central interest of this book, which revisits an important body of literary-historical texts to ask new questions about the dialogue between history and literary form. The book posits martyrdom not merely as a narrowly drawn historical construction—a record of what people of the period thought, believed, and did—but as the enactment of a specific discursive protocol, a narrative construction whose potency persists only so far as its story can be told. This book argues that martyrdom is created through the interplay between blood and narrative, between the action of persecution and an always-mediating literary structure. Because the martyr is a retrospectively con-
structured figure created in and through literature, martyrrology exposes the operations of form as much as the events of history or the imperatives of faith.

Traditionally, Christian martyrdom is a repetition of the story of Christ’s suffering and death; the more closely the victim’s narrative replicates the Christological model, the more legible the martyrdom. But if the textual construction of martyrdom depends on the rehearsal of a paradigmatic story, how does the discourse reconcile the broad range of individuals, beliefs, and persecutions seeking legitimation in martyrrology? Through close study of texts ranging from late-medieval passion drama and hagiography to John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and the martyrologies of the English Counter-Reformation to King Charles I’s *Eikon Basilike* and John Milton’s *Eikonoklastes*, this book considers the shifting religio-political rhetoric of Reformation and post-Reformation England, studying the effects of this shift on the capacity of individuals from rival factions to occupy the coveted position of martyrrological victim. The book discovers early modern persecutions, like that of John Gerard, that conventional martyrrological structures cannot successfully accommodate, describing the formal and circumstantial features that force this rupture and tracing its lasting effects on the discourse.

Much has been written on the topic of early modern martyrdom in recent years, an outcome of the “turn to religion” in literary studies. This turn has generated a rich and nuanced account of early modern England’s complex religious climate. For the past two decades, scholars have progressively refined our notions of what it meant to be Catholic and Protestant as the Reformation unfolded, limned the sites where those identities overlapped, and argued persuasively for religion’s significance in political, social, and private spheres. The principal interest of this influential body of work has been the illumination of cultural history, and in this respect, the turn to religion has come to reflect the current dominance of historical and cultural criticism in literary studies. Under the sway of New Historicism, work on religious literature has often sought to elide the difference between literary artifacts and other forms of cultural expression, participating thereby in a broader erosion of the disciplinary distinctions between literary and nonliterary...
modes of inquiry. The Jamesonian imperative “Always historicize!” has evolved into a literary criticism that is often diluted of the formalist investments that would distinguish it from the work of historians.

The antiformalism embedded in much historicist practice limits what can be said about literature as literature, leaving scholars like Stephen Cohen, Heather Dubrow, Mark David Rasmussen, Richard Strier, and Douglas Bruster to call for a return to form. Rather than proposing a break with historicist criticism in a reprised New Critical practice that would isolate and reify the literary text, historical formalism reads form as history and history as form. Cohen writes, “historical formalism neither imposes nor assumes any simple understanding of form, history, or the relationship between them, but instead explores the complexity of their mutual implication. If, generally speaking, form is the set of techniques and conventions that characterize literature and mark its difference from other social practices, those characteristics are neither unchanging, intrinsic, nor autonomous, but historically specific, historically determined, and historically efficacious.” In this model, the text is not reduced to a reflection of cultural values or a site where cultural pressures get expressed. Literary texts are not “anecdotes or synecdoches of the real,” as Bruster has put it. The literature is the thing itself. In ways that are specific to its forms, literature structures the world it describes and organizes the audience’s engagement with that world. The literary form operates as a medium, Cohen argues—the “middle term,” between author and audience and between text and context—and as such, literary forms function “not simply as containers for extrinsic ideological content, but as practices with an ideological significance of their own.” These practices are themselves constituted by history and constitutive of it.

The work of this book extends historical formalism beyond poetry and drama, where it gained its first footholds, to the enormously popular medieval and early modern genre of martyrology. Martyrology presents a unique case study, a junction point between history and form. Its implicit claim to be the unmediated documentation of lived events has logically made it fruitful territory for historicist inquiry. Brad Gregory’s magisterial Salvation at Stake usefully outlines the range of martyr experiences across early modern Europe, for example, but it
likewise exposes the limitations of historicist readings of martyrology that elide the centrality of discursive form to both the performance and narration of martyrdom. Gregory’s aim—to “plumb the living souls of early modern martyrs,” thereby producing a reading that is “intelligible on the martyrs’ own terms”—reads martyrology as a transparent record of early modern Christian belief. In its inattention to the literary structures that order the reproduction of martyrdom, such conventional historiographic studies miss the constitutive pressure that form asserts over historical events.

Martyrology mediates historical events through literary form, a form that itself has a history, a history that the form everywhere self-consciously indexes. At the same time, that form gives shape to what transpires in private devotion, in the courtroom, on the scaffold, and in the close chambers of the Tower. Genre structures the history that the genre in turn narrativizes, and vice versa. To adequately address these relations, we must attend to genre, as Julia Reinhard Lupton reminds us, because genre “situates the work in the matrix of conventions that make up not the context, outside, or prehistory of the work, but the very being of the work in time.” This kind of critical practice introduces questions that conventional historicist inquiry cannot ask, let alone answer. How does the victim’s anticipation of being narrativized—of being recuperated by devotional text and memory—structure the experience of persecution? Can martyrdom ever entirely precede martyrology?

Such questions enable us to think about what Barbara Fuchs calls “the political effectivity of genre—how it not only reflects but creates its ideological context.” The boundaries that have conventionally organized studies of religious literature disable these lines of inquiry, especially those that lead to the critical isolation of Catholic from Protestant and medieval from early modern. By placing the genre of English martyrology on a longer, cross-confessional developmental continuum, this book offers a corrective to the field’s tendency to periodize and confessionalize. Susannah Brietz Monta’s Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England aims “to think about religion and religious habits of representation cross-confessionally,” arguing that Catholic and Protestant martyrrologists employ shared strategies to
create and reinforce interpretive and confessional communities.\textsuperscript{16} By extending Monta’s claim both backward and forward chronologically, this book observes the continuities and ruptures in representational habits that arise when an old genre encounters the new challenges of radical historical change. \textit{The English Martyr from Reformation to Revolution} traces the development of martyr discourse in England from its biblical roots and medieval paradigms through the roughly hundred years of intense religious controversy spanning from about 1550 to 1650. As such, it does not offer an exhaustive study of either the Catholic or Protestant martyrrological traditions, nor does it attempt an account of the broader forms of Christian witnessing represented by figures like the confessor. Rather, it unfolds a dialectic between key martyrrological texts and political, legal, and religious developments to argue that generic shifts have less to do with confessional identity than with the specific rhetorical and historical circumstances of discursive production. In this way, the book works to realize what Cohen has described as historical formalism’s potential for “revealing literature to be not simply a site of ideological conformation or contradiction, but a model of a more multivalent social interaction, and an engine of social and political change.”\textsuperscript{17} Through this lens it becomes evident, for example, that even the seemingly fixed and timeless martyrrological imperative of \textit{imitatio Christi} means something different in 1606 than what it means in 1649, an observation that becomes possible only through attention to the interdynamics of history and form.

The book’s opening chapter describes the model of martyrdom inherited by early modern England by tracing the conventional features of medieval martyr literature through Jacobus de Voragine’s thirteenth-century \textit{Golden Legend} and the Christ figure of the late-medieval vernacular passion plays. By examining the structures by which these texts are organized, the chapter describes the dominant performative and narrative topoi of Christian martyrrological literature: how a martyr behaves, what the transaction between victim and persecutor consists of, and how the martyr’s transcendent status is represented. Although Protestant martyrrologist John Foxe vehemently rejected \textit{The Golden Legend} as a model for his work, the second chapter in this book, on Foxe’s \textit{Acts and Monuments}, demonstrates that both the victims of the
Marian persecution and their martyrrologist necessarily relied on the formulations of Christian suffering popularized by the medieval tradition. The production of early modern martyrdom hinges on the victim's ability to operate simultaneously in two seemingly incompatible frameworks: local and transcendent, or historical and typological. While Foxe's martyrrology documents specific moments in history, its narrative and performative references to Christ's passion and the early martyrs ensure that those moments contain within them the whole of the Christian martyr tradition, effectively transfiguring the victim into a heroic soldier in the sacred struggle of the persecuted church. Indeed, Foxe's martyrrological discourse is the textual site of this transfiguration.

But what happens when history and typology do not coincide—when, rather, historical circumstances produce an event that cannot be absorbed by martyrrological paradigms? This is the question that occupies chapters 3 through 5, which study the martyr discourses of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in England. These chapters explore how the claims of martyrdom made by the Elizabethan and Jacobean Catholic community are frustrated by the rhetoric of treason, which comes to organize both government discourse and compensatory Catholic narratives. Chapter 3 focuses on the 1581 execution of Edmund Campion, the first Jesuit executed in England during the Elizabethan persecution, and the wave of polemical responses it generated, in particular William Allen's *A Briefe Historie of the Glorious martyrdom of XII Reverend Priests and Defense of English Catholics*, and *The Execution of Justice in England* by William Cecil, Lord Burghley. These texts disclose emerging fault lines in the construction of conventional martyrdom—faultlines produced by the discursive structures of the treason trial and execution ritual.

Chapter 4 explores the implications of the treason charge on the reproduction of the martyrrological miracle—traditionally the incontrovertible, external evidence of the victim's sanctity and salvation—arguing that generic fracture becomes visible in this foundational narrative topos. The chapter studies two martyrologies: Father John Mush's *The Life and Martyrdom of Mistress Margaret Clitherow*, the story of a Catholic recusant pressed to death in 1586 for refusing to enter a plea
in her treason trial; and John Gennings’s *The Life and Death of M. Edmund Geninges Priest*, a martyrology of the author’s brother, caught saying Mass and executed in London in 1591. Building on the discursive developments traced in chapter 3, this chapter demonstrates how the textual reproduction of martyrdom is compromised by an internal cleft in the structure of the miracle topos, a development that confessionally-bound and historiographic readings cannot see.

Chapter 5 thinks about these generic and representational fractures in relation to several primary texts connected with the Gunpowder Plot and the Jesuit mission in England, including the trial and execution accounts of Fr. Robert Southwell and Jesuit Superior Henry Garnet, who introduced the doctrine of equivocation into the discourse of Catholic recusancy; Garnet’s *Treatise of Equivocation* and subsequent texts in the equivocation controversy; and *The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest*, Father Gerard’s fascinating account of disguises, coded speech, and invisible handwriting from the period of his imprisonment and escape from the Tower. These texts describe a martyrrological subject in hiding—a compromised figure caught in the paradoxical imperative to both “enclose and disclose.” Despite the texts’ efforts to draw legible parallels to typological martyr models, the reproduction of the genre becomes compromised by the tactics of elusiveness and obscurity, which have no established provenance in the Christian martyrrological tradition.

Having mapped the subtle unraveling of conventional martyr typology, the book then concludes with a chapter on the transformation of the martyr figure in two key texts from the execution of King Charles I: *Eikon Basilike* and Milton’s *Eikonoklastes*. In *Eikon Basilike*, Charles relocates the sacred from exterior to interior—from God and the Word to his own conscience, which becomes sacralized through his death. Conscience thus functions as a formal solution to the discursive fracture traced by the preceding chapters. Reconstituting the site of martyrrological truth, *Eikon Basilike* adopts a radical subjectivity, divorcing the martyr figure from history. In a text that has survived as the antagonistic double of *Eikon Basilike*, Milton’s *Eikonoklastes* rejects Charles’s claims to martyrdom by insisting on martyrdom as a visible, historical event, not the carefully crafted series of rhetorical gestures.
modeled by *Eikon Basilike*. Milton’s text attests to both the representational limitations and the rhetorical potency of Charles’s renovation of martyrdom.

By setting history and form in conversation with one another, *The English Martyr from Reformation to Revolution* describes not only the reformation of one of the oldest, most influential genres of the Christian West but a revolution in the very concept of martyrdom. The title’s reference to Reformation and Revolution thus points to the interrelatedness of its historical and formal investments—to the events that shape and reshape the martyrological form and to literary form as it acts upon events. Rather than the static, embalmed genre produced by readings that bracket literary form, martyrology emerges in this study as deeply nuanced and subtly responsive to historical circumstance. This adaptability is evident in the resurgence of martyr discourse in contemporary representational contests between radical-Islamist violence and secular-Western encomium, as the book’s postscript suggests. From medieval notions of strict typological repetition, martyrdom develops through the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries into Charles I’s defense of individual conscience—an abstracted, metaphorized form of martyrdom that survives into modernity.
Chapter 1

Medieval Models
The Golden Legend and the Corpus Christi Passion Plays

We are confronted with a wondrous play—an iniquitous judge, a bloodthirsty torturer, a martyr unconquered, a contest between cruelty and piety.

—Augustine

Augustine’s summary of the principal elements of the drama of martyrdom illustrates a defining characteristic of martyr literature that will be revisited time and again through the course of this study: its narrative formula. In order for an individual to be inscribed into the transcendent narrative of Christian martyrlogical suffering, his or her story must contain the legible markers of that suffering. These markers, as Augustine suggests, include not only the structural components of the narrative—judge, torturer, martyr, and contest—but a set of organizing behavioral attributes: iniquity, bloodthirstiness, invulnerability. A victim’s death becomes a martyr’s story only when the actors play their parts legibly and follow martyrdom’s paradigmatic script.

This chapter explores the complexity of that script, disclosing the subtle multidimensionality of Augustine’s “martyr unconquered,” the discourse’s complex representations of “cruelty,” and the paradoxical—
even contradictory—modes of constructing martyrlogical “piety.” The chapter studies two strands of the martyrlogical tradition: The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, a collection of stories about the martyrs and saints of the early church, and the late-medieval passion plays of the Corpus Christi drama cycle. Though scriptural accounts of Christ’s suffering establish the imitatio Christi tradition, ostensibly providing the model for all Christian martyrdom to follow, comparison of medieval passion dramas and martyr legends reveals two distinct traditions, both of which will figure importantly in later martyrology. One is the truculent, belligerent, and seemingly unassailable martyr of the early church, who goads the persecutor and feels no pain. The other is the dramatized Christ—passive, suffering, and largely silent. Examining the structures that organize concepts of martyrdom, the chapter describes the dominant performative, narrative, and interpretive mechanisms of Christian martyrlogical literature, mapping at once the complexity and the rigidity of its representational forms.

The Golden Legend

The Golden Legend was written in the mid-thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican monk who held a number of important clerical offices, including the archbishopric of Genoa, before his death in 1298. The volume gained enormous popularity throughout Europe, especially later in the period, as William Granger Ryan notes: “The popularity of the Legend was such that some one thousand manuscripts have survived, and, with the advent of printing in the 1450s, editions both in the original Latin and in every Western European language multiplied into the hundreds. It has been said that in the late Middle Ages the only book more widely read was the Bible.”2 It was one of the first volumes translated by Caxton, whose English edition appeared in 1483, with another eight editions by 1527.3 Publication figures suggest even greater popularity for other European vernacular translations.4 In addition to its own widespread use as a devotional text, The Golden Legend engendered the production of other popular vernacular books of saints, such as Osbern Bokenham’s Legendys of
Holy Women and the South English Legendary, both of which borrow heavily from Jacobus.

Arranged according to the calendar of the church’s feast days, The Golden Legend describes the history and theological foundations of celebrations such as the Birth of the Blessed Virgin and the Conversion of Saint Paul. But the bulk of the text is taken up with some 160 saints’ legends, 93 of which are about martyrs. The martyr narratives are drawn from the Bible and from a range of patristic sources such as Augustine and Ambrose. The extent to which Jacobus exerted authorial liberty in shaping and arranging his source materials has been the subject of some critical discussion. Ryan, for example, calls the volume “basically the work of a compiler,” while Sherry Reames argues for the singularity of Jacobus’s vision and product. The mere popularity of Jacobus’s text ensured that its version of these legends, however idiosyncratic in the range of martyrological works composed throughout the church’s history, became the definitive representation of martyrdom for late-medieval European Christianity.

The Maccabees Model

Christianity’s earliest models of martyrdom originate from the Old Testament story of the persecution of the Jews under the pagan king Antiochus. In the second book of Maccabees, the Jews are forced to abandon the sabbath, to allow their synagogues to be used for pagan debauchery and sacrifices, and to give up adherence to the laws of Moses or suffer torture and execution. This persecution produces the Maccabees martyrs—the veteran scribe Eleazar and a family of seven brothers and their mother. Eleazar, an elderly and important member of the Jewish community, chooses to be executed rather than eat pork, publicly and consciously making an example of himself. Upon Eleazar’s refusal of the pork, his fellow elders suggest that he merely pretend to eat it while actually consuming another meat, but he refuses this charade, claiming, “Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life” and that doing so would give younger generations the wrong impression: “By bravely giving up my life now, I will show my-