

The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535-1603

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Alison Shell

Wars of religion, for so long an embarrassment to humanist agendas within the academy, have suddenly become relevant again. The first years of the twenty-first century have been a chilling reminder that the world has not yet grown out of religious hatred, and they make certain aspects of early modern martyrological debate come sharply into focus. It may be coincidence that Anne Dillon's study, an extensively rewritten version of a much-consulted doctoral thesis, opens with a consideration of the pseudo-martyr debate conducted between Catholics and Protestants in Tudor England; but, published in a time when suicide bombers are seldom out of the news, the topic has a keen relevance to the present day. The debate, epitomised within John Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* (London, 1610), locked the denominations in a battle over definition; one side's martyrs were heretics or traitors as far as the other side was concerned. As the Catholics were fond of saying, *martyrem non poena facit sed causa* [the cause, not the suffering, makes genuine martyrs]. Sometimes, even a martyr's own side had difficulty in categorising him or her. Dillon argues convincingly that the contemporaries of the Henrician martyrs Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher hardly knew how to react to their deaths, and that their recognition as martyrs among the English Catholic community was not an instant unofficial canonisation, but a gradual process, taking place in opposition to the contours of the Reformation as these hardened into shape.

Theatres of death set up for the edification of the bystanders, and executions conducted according to a ritual that reads 'like the fastidious protocol of an antique sacrifice' (in Dillon's memorable phrase) are never

straightforwardly interpretable as an exercise of the state's power upon a hapless malefactor, and become most problematic of all where martyrs are concerned. Even Protestant accounts of Catholic martyrdoms often include a reluctant admission of the martyr's bravery, and for Catholics, these executions were straightforwardly triumphant occasions where the protagonist was accorded the ultimate privilege of treading the *via crucis*. While all martyrs imitated Christ, the implications of this were very different for Catholic and Protestant. It was a traditional assumption that Christ became one with the martyr on the point of death, and Dillon illuminates some interesting sidelights on the 'overtones of Eucharist and sacrifice' that, as a result, permeate Catholic representations of martyrs.

The busy traffic in relics was not limited to those of Catholic martyrs, as the execution of Charles I was to prove after 1649; yet the Catholic theological position on relics ensured that they were not only an awe-inspiring memento, but also a permanent channel for divine grace. The acquisition and housing of relics, and the use of them in prayer, is given only brief consideration here, but this is not a defect in a long and richly-researched book; rather it points the way for future projects. More needs to be written too on the implications for Catholics of being able to pray to someone whose death was very recent -- indeed, someone whom the suppliant would in many cases have known.

Visual evidence is particularly central to this topic, and for once, this is an academic book that is not under-illustrated. Several facsimile plates are included from *Ecclesiae anglicanae trophaea* (first published Rome, 1584), a book of engravings reproducing frescoes in the chapel of the Venerable English College, Rome, which depict past and present English martyrs. This iconographical scheme acted as a means of stirring up the zeal of English seminarians, and has been seen as a Catholic answer to Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. The pioneering Catholic publisher Richard Verstegan, working on the Continent to publicise the sufferings of the English Catholic community, exploited the potential interplay of verbal and visual propaganda of this topic, to address a broader audience of interested parties across Catholic Europe, by producing a number of harrowing illustrations for printed distribution. Following on from Anthony Allison's and D. M. Rogers's bibliographical detective-work in *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the English Counter-Reformation* (2 vols, Aldershot; Scolar, 1989-94), Dillon does valuable work on the art-historical front, clarifying the distinctions between the various incarnations of these images. Simply making the texts and illustrations of these very rare works conveniently available is a service in itself.

The manuscript accounts of martyrdom that circulated among the faithful in England supplemented this type of visual propaganda, sometimes celebrating God's providential workings through accounts of miracles -- though Dillon stresses the importance attached to eye witness, and how this could work against pious accretion. The attitude voiced by the English Catholic leader Robert Persons, that the miraculous had no place in an official text, found echoes in the kind of hagiography which concentrated on a subject's exemplary life and heroic death rather than on miracles posthumously associated with them. This is brought out by Dillon's detailed work on the various manuscript and print representations of the martyr Margaret Clitherow. Clitherow's sheer ordinariness -- as a butcher's wife, mother of four children and well-known citizen of York -- gave her an iconic status as a lay martyr, while her sex enabled her to be portrayed as a Catholic answer to the early Protestant heroine Anne Askew. But on the whole, the ideal type of Catholic martyr was male, clerical and therefore educated, and easy to differentiate from the unlearned riff-raff thronging the pages of Foxe.

Since it was partly through its equation of common man and martyr that the *Acts and Monuments* caught the popular imagination, this Catholic clericalist ideal could have been severely limiting by comparison. But the movers and shakers of post-Reformation English Catholicism at least had the enormous advantage of being able to endorse their new martyrs by reference to earlier ones, whereas Foxe had to rethink the church's calendar. Catholics could capitalise on a groundswell of support by drawing on traditional assumptions and the memory of popular devotion. Dillon identifies as particularly important the Jesuit principle of working with the 'traditional, local community beliefs in the nature of the sacred, and [using] them as a statement against the Protestants'. Although this is not a point on which she particularly dwells, the ballads which commemorated Edmund Campion and other well-known martyrs would also have aided popular penetration of the recusant message. But the *Acts and Monuments* was dangerous to Catholics not only because of its

individual martyr stories, but because, in aggregate, it presented a history of the true church which was alternative to their own. Dillon's last chapter deals with Robert Persons's *A Treatise of three conversions of England* (1603/4), which, she argues, is a Catholic recasting of the *Acts and Monuments*.

It is often believed that the Catholics had no answer to Foxe; Dillon demonstrates that they had several. One could object that none was of the stature of Foxe, and deduce from this a failure on the part of English Catholic leaders. But here and elsewhere, allowances need to be made for those whose access to the hearts and minds of the English people was subject to obstruction and censorship. The case of the King James Bible versus the Douai/Rheims edition is very similar. In both cases the Protestant production was more mainstream, more widely distributed and – in England at least – undeniably more influential; but then, one would expect nothing less from a book that supported the prevailing regime rather than running counter to it. At the very least, Dillon's book can be recognised as giving an account of vigorous, solidly maintained minority activity that it will be impossible for future historians of the period to ignore; and which is furthermore bound to aid the new recognition that English Catholics should be represented with other minorities on undergraduate early modern history curricula.

It is suggestive that Dillon's book comes out so soon after Brad Gregory's *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1999). These are two very different studies, one characterised by breadth and one by depth; Gregory's study discusses Reformation martyrs across Europe, Protestant and Anabaptist ones as well as Catholic, while Dillon's work addresses English Tudor Catholic martyrs in detail. Nevertheless, they share certain assumptions and priorities, of which two are particularly striking. Firstly, both scholars are concerned to draw out the similarities between Catholic and non-Catholic constructions of martyrdom, whether these are to do with defining an exemplary life, or publicising an exemplary death in a manner that inspired ideological sympathisers and challenged the enemy. In addition, they both acknowledge how English activities need to be set systematically in a European context: above all with Catholics, whose exilic residence abroad so often made them both citizens of Europe and passionate Englishmen.

While well aware of the recent fashion for body scholarship, Dillon sits lightly to it; and some will think her book all the better as a result. Where Foucault identified his work on the theatre of death as chronicling the 'human soul under trial', some of his followers have passed over the soul – or at least, a recognition of the martyr as a moral entity capable of choice and bravery – and see the corpse on the scaffold more as an opportunity to dissect an inert body with the scalpel of theory. While this is an understandable reaction to previous generations' unwillingness to acknowledge the bodily dimension to history, it becomes inhumane in the wrong hands, partly because it bypasses the question of how the subject of martyrdom raises ethical questions for the narrator: how far should one go in describing gory details, what attitude should one take to the martyrs and their executioners? In this context, Dillon deserves real praise for the compassionate balance she strikes. Even though her subject is primarily the construction of martyrdom rather than the martyrs themselves, she neither glosses over the details of the martyrdoms nor dwells lasciviously on them. While this may seem a basic courtesy to the subject matter, the English tendency towards irony and unease when discussing religion ensures that it is not universally observed; the present reviewer has sat through more than one conference paper where the speaker has played a martyrological topic for laughs or ghoulish thrills.

Is this attitude better or worse than a piously uncritical rehash of a martyr's life, or just differently unsatisfactory? The answer to this question, more than most, depends on the viewpoint of the observer. But in an age which finds it difficult to resist the deconstruction or undermining of exemplary lives, it is useful to remember how hagiography has been a powerful impetus towards scholarship as well as detracting from it. Anyone writing now on the Catholic martyrs of the English Reformation owes a particular debt to the great denominational scholars of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries who made martyr narratives available: John Knaresborough, Richard Challoner, Henry Foley, the compiler of *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus* (London, 1875-93), John Morris, the editor of *The Troubles of our Catholic Forefathers* (London, 1872-77), and among many others, the early editors of Catholic Record Society volumes. These names illustrate how the subject has lent itself to compilation rather than analysis in the past. Thus Dillon deserves particular praise for a book which is not only a full and satisfying synthesis, but uses

the current interest in techniques of historical representation to advance an innovative and convincing analysis of the material. Her book is not only a splendid achievement in itself, but evidence, in conjunction with Gregory's work, of a tidal shift in academic sensibility.

Dr Dillon is pleased to accept Dr Shell's review and does not wish to comment further.

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