

The Purpose of Literature in the World: Instruction and Entertainment to the Purpose of Action in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and *The Examinations of Anne Askew* as told by John Bale, John Foxe, and Anne Askew

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In his work *The Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney argues that poesy, or literature, instructs its readers in virtue and entertains or delights them enough that they wish to act according to that virtue. He asserts, "it may be manifest that the poet, with that same hand of delight, doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth" (700-702). Edmund Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene* and John Foxe's and John Bale's respective versions of Anne Askew's *Examinations*, though all influential Protestant writings, approach this idea in radically different ways. *The Faerie Queene* delights readers with its form as both a romance and epic and teaches through its complexity. Bale and Foxe publish Askew's account of the torments the State and the Catholic Church inflict on her and use editorial interventions to make Askew's text persuasive to the masses. Askew's text, when taken on its own, engages the reader in a manner more akin to Spenser's in its use of clever debate-like dialogue to amuse the reader while instructing in virtue both through description of her interrogation and her behavioural example. These texts are all in some measure didactic and attempt to provoke behaviour in their readers that, according to the definitions of each, are virtuous. However, each text is not equally effective, and Askew's text may be the most accessible to readers and therefore the most successful.

Spenser's explicit purpose for *The Faerie Queene* is to teach the readers virtue, which he mentions in a prefatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh: "[t]he general end . . . of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" (818). Spenser does not say that he hopes to encourage virtuous thoughts in his reader, but instead that the reader's "discipline", or judgment and self-restraint, should be virtuous. As Sean Kane mentions in the introduction to *Spenser's Moral Allegory*, Spenser "was middle-class in his origins . . . [he] believed in the

doctrine of improvement through effort . . . As a result, Spenser is inclined to regard contemplation as little more than a temporary withdrawal into the inner world of composing one's soul before re-engaging in active life" (20-21). Spenser explicitly aims to cause a change in the reader's behaviour.

Spenser does take into account the danger of readers misinterpreting his text. To read *The Faerie Queene* and learn what Spenser hopes the reader will require a certain approach and skill on the reader's part. In his letter to Raleigh Spenser briefly explains that *The Faerie Queene* is "a continued Allegory, or darke conceit" (818) and so is meant to be read on several levels beyond the narrative. He even gives examples of his allegorical references, such as part of his meaning for the Faerie Queene herself: "In that Faery Queene I mean glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our soveraine the Queene, and her kingdom in Faery land" (819). Because the Faerie Queene does not mean only Queen Elizabeth but also represents "glory," and because Spenser also represents Queen Elizabeth as "a most virtuous and beautiful lady, [and] this latter I do express in Belphœbe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent conceipt of Cynthia" (819), he is clear that each character and aspect of his text may have multiple meanings, and different aspects of things that have already been represented may be represented again differently. Thus, in anticipation of a continued misunderstanding of his text, Spenser gives his readers a short lesson in how to understand *The Faerie Queene* that they may read it carefully and according to his rules. Because *The Faerie Queene* is difficult to understand, its didacticism may be somewhat obscured.

James Kearney, in his book *The Incarnate Text*, exploits the notes of an Elizabethan reader discovered by Stephen Orgel to show both how Spenser was misunderstood and how Spenser's attempts to shape the reader's understanding and educate the reader may still have been partially successful. Readers who could not access or did not read Spenser's letter to Raleigh clearly did not always read past the immediate narrative. Also, like modern readers, even Elizabethans who may have read Spenser's letter likely had problems understanding his allegory. Spenser also may use his allegorical form to pick his primary audience because, despite the prolific use of allegory in the Bible, allegory was seen as a primarily Catholic tool. Therefore, to read *The Faerie Queene*, the reader must be a moderate enough Protestant to allow allegory. Even so, as Orgel's reader sometimes recoils from Spenser's poem as "idle fiction" and "[decries] . . . [its] obvious idolatry" (Kearney 85), Spenser sometimes edges too close to the line

between Catholicism and Protestantism for his reader's comfort. However, perhaps Spenser has a purpose for using seemingly Catholic icons or images. Perhaps Spenser uses these unnervingly Catholic moments to startle the reader into deeper reading of the text. Kearney argues convincingly that Spenser hopes to "reclaim" the "catholicized" items for Protestantism, such as the "Bead-men" he introduces in his house of holiness (Spenser 904):

Spenser is attempting to redeem "beadsmen" for Protestantism by emptying out the term of its Catholic content and reclaiming it for a different kind of "good work": one that acknowledges that only through faith in the gospel and by the grace of God can one attain salvation . . . One might assume that the linguistic correlation of beads with prayers came about because beads as objects were so often used in the act of praying . . . In fact, the history is just the reverse; the word "bead" meant "prayer" before it ever referred to the "small ball-shaped object" . . . Spenser seems to have been well aware of the connection between the bidding of beads and prayers . . . Spenser's poem attempts . . . [to reclaim] "bead" as prayer. In just this fashion Spenser attempts to redeem all the Catholic elements – beads, penance, works, Saint George – of the House of Holiness. (Kearney 132, 133)

Spenser engages in educating the readers not only in the virtues that his knights attain in their journeys but also in the readers' own history. Kearney also mentions that, while the genre of "legends" was seen as "idolatrous . . . Catholicism" (Kearney 86), Spenser may use the word "legend" as his title genre to return to its Latin root, *legere*, which means "to read" and "to indicate acts of choosing or selection." Calling his books "legends," then, serves a double purpose: Spenser both suggests that actively critical and discerning reading will serve his readers well when judging the virtue of every text, including his own, and reclaims the genre from a strictly Catholic audience. Spenser may be intentionally opaque to teach the reader how to carefully read a text.

To format *The Faerie Queene* in the epic or romance genre also makes it more enjoyable for Spenser's readers than a book of rules or doctrine and therefore more likely to be read. In his very format, Spenser

attempts to both teach and delight. Spenser does, however, alter the genre of the “saint story” to a more Protestant outcome. The traditional “saint story” included a miraculous transformation because of the virtue of the saint. However, the Saint George of Book I of *The Faerie Queene* is markedly more fallible than the heroic Catholic saints. Like the martyrs in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days*, Redcrosse succeeds only through the grace of God, and not his own power. Redcrosse represents internal miracles of learning and faith that transform his soul more than his body. *The Faerie Queene* may be more effective as a romance and epic than as a historical text because Spenser creates a fantastic world and then draws the readers to Redcrosse’s spiritual growth rather than his magical adventures. Even in a fairy tale land of dragons, satyrs, and monsters, the most miraculous encounter is the individual human soul with God.

Because Bale and Foxe were writing at the beginning of the Reformation, unlike Spenser’s period when Protestantism is the “official” religion, their purpose in publishing versions of Anne Askew’s narrative is not to enhance the understanding of existing Protestants, but to shock and anger the reader into militant Protestant conversion. The Protestant Church being, to Bale and Foxe, the true church, conversion would be an act of salvation for the reader. However, since conversion to Protestantism entails danger, Foxe and Bale’s approach does not attempt to clarify Protestant beliefs but to convince readers that conversion is “moral” in an attempt to swell the ranks of their party. Foxe’s and Bale’s editorial additions to Askew’s text drastically change how the reader perceives it and ensure it is understood their way with no misinterpretations. Unlike Spenser’s acknowledgement that misreading of his text is inevitable and his implication that allegedly Catholic icons may prove useful to Protestants, Bale and Foxe mark Askew’s thoughts and actions as unequivocally Protestant and virtuous, “a singular example of Christien constancie for all men to folowe” (Foxe, qtd. in Beilin 192), and her Catholic captors as “blasphemous beasts” (Bale, qtd. in Beilin 143). Foxe and Bale’s “scrupulous handling of source materials” (King 437) and huge quantities of circumstantial evidence reveal their effort to ensure their accounts’ credibility. Their correct factual information lends power to their religious assertions. If Bale and Foxe did not so accurately portray events any other assertions they make would be less persuasive. Because of Foxe and Bale’s clear and persuasive writing styles, John N. King notes that Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, in which Foxe’s version of Askew’s text is

printed, “was the landmark Elizabethan work to appear prior to the literary flowering of the 1580s and 1590s . . . [and] [p]lacement of chained copies . . . in cathedrals in 1571 gave it the location that Erasmus’s *Paraphrases* had occupied alongside the English Bible under Edward VI” (434-435). Foxe and Bale want to evoke anger at the horrific deaths people like Askew suffered because of Catholics, and they specifically want a mob-mentality type of anger. Both Bale and Foxe use Askew’s death, along with the torments of others, to feed an inclusive versus exclusive mindset in their audience. If Bale and Foxe, like Spenser, chose to support any possibly Catholic inflections of theology or icons, they would cause their readers to think past the literal story – the torture of a person in “the reader’s group” – to logic and arguments with gradients of “right” and “wrong.” Any possible distraction from anger towards Catholics would undermine Bale and Foxe’s intent. Bale and Foxe focus their didacticism on the binary of Catholic against Protestant, to the exclusion of any other message.

John Foxe surrounds his version of Askew’s story with his editorial additions in an effort to ground Askew as a corporeal martyr. As Kimberly Anne Coles notes in her essay “The Death of the Author (And the Appropriation of Her Text): The Case of Anne Askew’s ‘Examinations,’ “Foxe evokes her broken body as it is carried to the stake” (539) which, of course, Askew’s own text cannot do. However, Foxe’s motives may go beyond adding what Askew *could not* say to adding what she *did not* say. In counterpoint to the descriptions Askew gives of her mental state throughout her examinations, Coles argues that:

Foxe’s descriptions work to bring Askew’s corporeality to the center. Without a displayed body, Foxe has no means to demonstrate the enclosed sphere of faith; the subjects of his stories must be visible bodies. Askew powerfully denies her body and privileges a private realm of experience in her discourse. As his commentary frames her account, this results in a strange distortion of her appearance in the narrative. (539)

Foxe may also add these graphic details of her physical pain to shock the readers and keep their attention. As Coles notes, his “purpose is to make her available to a popular audience” (539). In order for readers to remember and react to his text, Foxe not only has to make Askew’s story shocking enough for incensed political action to ensue, he also needs the audience to find his text interesting. In the same way that public

executions attract a crowd so do detailed *accounts* of public executions. By recounting that “the daie of her execution being appointed, and she was brought into Smithfielde in a chayre, because she could not go on her feete, by meanes of her great tormentes, when she was brought unto the stake, she was tied by the middle with a chaine, that helde up her body” (191), Foxe grimly adds to the raw entertainment value of her story.

In keeping with Sidney’s purpose of literature, Foxe certainly, although horribly, delights the readers, but does he intend to teach them? It is conceivable that he means for the behaviour of the martyrs in *Acts and Monuments* to be a behavioural example for his readers. He gives some acknowledgement of what Askew did in order to be virtuous, such as “her invincible constancie” (192) and her “faithfull testimonye of the truth” (165), which could be emulated by the reader. Also, in his conclusion to Askew’s story, Foxe mentions that the men who were executed with Askew were, “through the example and praier of her, thei being the more boldned, received occasion of more greater beholding her invincible constancie, but also oftentimes stirred up through her perswasions, they did set apart all kynde of fear. Thus they . . . taried looking for the tormenter and fyre, whiche . . . consumed their blessed bodies in happie martyrdom” (192). Because these men were encouraged through Askew’s virtue, one may assume that readers could be encouraged by her and emulate her “constancie.” Mostly, however, Foxe emphasizes the binary of her death as an evil act and Askew as a wonderful martyr.

For Bale, Askew’s text is one volume on its own and not part of a larger work like Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, so he must make Askew’s story persuasive without the aid of a larger context of texts.¹ For this reason it is understandable that Bale inserts much more extensive commentary into Askew’s text than does Foxe, although this domination of her account perhaps makes the narrative less credible rather than more so. However, by adding so many clarifications to Askew’s text, Bale does ensure that the text is read in the way that he wishes it to be. His continued praise of Askew and degradation of her captors underscores the binary of good and evil, the true Protestant Church and the Catholic Church of the Antichrist, which Askew herself does not often explicitly do. Also, as Coles observes, his “commentary serves to stabilize her meaning in doctrinal

¹ I am not exploring Bale’s *Examinations* in the context of his extensive list of publications on the assumption that each work (Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, and Bale’s *Examinations*) must be effective on its own merit.

terms . . . [and] he writes her voice into the persuasive idiom of the university men who dominated the argument” (533). Bale revises her theology for his purpose. He provides the lines of scripture that she alludes to and translates her voice into the scholastically respected persona of a university educated man. However, by continually interrupting her prose, he reveals that her purposes are quite different from his own. To claim that she is the example of a good Protestant, a “faithful witness and holy martyr of God” (Bale, qtd. in Broadview 139) and yet to edit her account as if she might mislead the reader without his qualifications and explanations, seems contradictory. When Bale uses his extensive editorials to make Askew’s text more persuasive, he may in fact undermine Askew’s credibility as a martyr.

Bale’s text, of the four, possibly adheres least to Sidney’s theory of the purpose of literature. Bale does not highlight many of Askew’s ideas or virtues in a manner that the reader might emulate or learn from. In a few instances he praises Askew’s silence, as when she was asked “whether a mouse eating the host received God or no?”, and she “made them no answer, but smiled” (Bale, qtd. in Broadview 171-174). There, Bale asserts, “[i]s not here (think you) well favoured and well fashioned divinity, to establish an article of the Christian faith?” (Bale, qtd. in Broadview 175-178). Also, he sometimes lauds her deference to scripture, as in, “[p]lenteous enough is her answer here,” and, “[i]n this brief answer, she remembered Solomon’s counsel” (Bale, qtd. in Broadview 250, 312). However, these commendations mainly serve to re-enforce the binary of Askew’s virtue and her interrogators’ sin. Bale’s repetition of Askew’s innocence and her captors’ malevolence serves to transform Askew’s imprisonment into a heroic battle between good and evil. This dramatization perhaps “delights” the reader in a similar fashion to Spenser’s epic and romantic style, as Askew becomes a heroine battling “the serpent of the cockatrice eggs” (Bale, qtd. in Broadview 118), but Bale does not attempt explicitly to teach through this form. Bale also uses grisly physical descriptions to evoke the same revulsion and fascination that crowds experience at an execution. In *The latter examinacyon*, he gruesomely describes Askew’s torture upon the rack: “lyke a lambe she laye styll without noyse of cryenge, and suffered [her interrogators’] uttermost violence, tyll the synnowes of her armes were broken, and the strynges of her eys perished in her heade” (Bale, qtd. in Beilin 129). The detail Bale relates creates a mental picture that goes beyond the factually precise.

Bale's descriptions stir the readers' imaginations, and incite their righteous fury in Askew's defence.

Askew's own purpose for writing her examinations is easily overlooked when faced with the formidable editorial comments of Bale and Foxe, but a closer reading of her text suggests she writes as an act of self-encouragement and perhaps also to inform and encourage similarly faithful actions in her readers. However, she clearly does not mean to be the public spectacle that Foxe and Bale make her into, and her writing style reflects her internal focus. For Askew, faith comes directly from God and his scripture and therefore is a private, individual matter. Askew's behaviour displays her private faith. As Coles notes:

[t]he God of Askew's faith is indefinable, even in oppositional terms. Meaning must be verified by a God whose meaning is beyond human intelligence. Truth is attainable only through a personal engagement with scripture. Askew's written narrative indicates a radical, and radically individual, faith . . . [f]or her, the Bible holds final authority; she sees no reason to do anything but to cite the text. (528,529)

Even when tortured or deathly ill, Askew only makes passing reference to her bodily pain and instead focuses on her faith, for "God is a sprite, and will be worshipped in sprite" (John 4, qtd. in Askew, Broadview 289-291). That she, in reality, did not really *feel* the pain because of her disassociation from the physical is unlikely. Remembering that Askew is, at least in the second examination, writing during her imprisonment, her focus on scripture and faith may be a coping mechanism. Even if Bale and Foxe leave her original text unedited besides their editorial insertions, one cannot read Askew's account and be absolutely certain that all she writes is completely factual. She centres her attention on endurance and perhaps neglects aspects of her imprisonment that she does not wish to consider, or, she portrays herself as unmoved to provoke a feeling of indifference in herself. We do not know that she intends her writing to be published, and, based on the seeming lack of an audience besides the implied "listener" one writes to in a diary, her text may be meant as a venue for self-consolation and encouragement. Even if not all she writes is literally true, that she finds a way to encourage in herself the patience and faith she would like to have is admirable and possibly instructive to others by unintentional example. Furthermore, her witty retorts to her persecutors

more effectively undermine their position than Bale's explanations ever do. For example, in Askew's first examination she both insults her interrogators and shows her knowledge of the Bible in two short sentences: "[w]hereupon he asked me, how I took those sentences? I answered that I would not throw pearls among swine, for acorns were good enough" (Askew, qtd. in Beilin 53-56). Bale's editorial for this section profusely degrades the interrogators and explicitly explains Askew's subtle and intelligent slur:

An ignorant woman, yea a beast without faith, is herein allowed to judge the holy Scriptures heresy, and against all laws admitted to accuse this godly woman . . . Wherefore her answer out of the 7 chapter of Matthew, was most fit for them. For they are no better than swine, that so condemn the precious treasure of the Gospel, for the mire of men's traditions. (Bale, qtd. in Beilin 57-70)

As the over-explanation of a joke steals its humour, so Bale's additions smother Askew's inherent ability to delight the reader and undermine her effectiveness as a teacher of virtue.

However, because her text is so witty and she has likely recently read John Frith's similar text, perhaps Askew does write with the possibility of publication in mind. If Askew does intend her work to be published, then she may be writing partially to teach godly behaviour in the face of a Catholic, repressive state. As Coles remarks, Askew imitates Frith's ideas several times in her narrative. During her second examination, William Paget questions how she can avoid a literal interpretation of Jesus' statement "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you" (1 Cor. 11.24), and Askew answers:

Christ's meaning was there, as in these other places of the Scripture: "I am the door" (John 10); "I am the vine" (John 15); "behold the lamb of God" (John 1); "the rock stone was Christ" (1 Cor. 10), and such other like. "Ye may not here," said I, "take Christ for the material thing that he is signified by." (Askew, qtd. in Broadview 158-164).

Coles notices that Askew's text almost directly quotes one of Frith's, which is possibly the text of his she carries in her first examination:

Her assertions mimic Frith's concerning the same words

in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians: "And as touching the other words that Christe spake unto his disciples at the last soup, I deny not but that he sayd so but that he so flesly ment as ye falsely fain, I utterley deny. For I saye that his words . . . were spiritually to be understooden, and that he called yt his bodie. for acertaine propartie . . . some textes are only to be understood . . . in the waye of an allegorye: As when Paule sayeth, Christ was the stone, and when Christe sayth hym selfe, I am a very vyne I am the doore" (*Frith*, C2v-C3r). (Coles 523)

Because Askew imitates Frith so closely, she may be considering publishing or circulating her own account in a similar fashion to his. Also, her careful listing of examples and explanation that "Ye may not here . . . take Christ for the material thing he is signified by" (Askew, qtd. in Broadview 163-164) suggest that she wishes to ensure the comprehension of her reader. If she never meant to have any readers outside of close friends and herself, she may not have felt a need to explain her statements in her text. As a woman, Askew acknowledges that the Bible dictates she cannot preach, and therefore direct teaching of her beliefs to others is impossible. Also, her idea of faith is built on an unmediated individual relationship with God through the Bible. However, Askew can teach indirectly through her actions. Askew may not think of *teaching* others her beliefs, but she may well hope to encourage similar endurance through her example, and her text still serves this end even if she did not intend it to.

Though each text has its own specific purpose, each conforms to Sidney's definition of poesy. However, Askew's and Spenser's texts may conform slightly more effectively to Sidney's vision than Bale's or Foxe's. Spenser and Askew "delight" the reader in, perhaps, a more didactic manner than Bale or Foxe. *The Faerie Queene* and Askew's text entertain through clever diction and storytelling, while Bale and Foxe's editorial additions evoke gruesome images and appeal to a simple binary of good and evil to rile readers to Protestant frenzy. Both Askew and Spenser attempt to provoke virtuous actions in their readers for their readers' sakes. Sidney's assertion that "poetry ever sets virtue so out in her best colours . . . And what so much good doth that teaching bring forth . . . as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach" (574-575, 628-631) clarifies *The Faerie Queene* and Askew's own text as perhaps slightly more refined than Foxe's or Bale's coarser texts. Also, the more refined text may

be the more effective text. To teach so that readers may understand and imitate freely, rather than shock and irritate readers in order to hold them in a specific group, will likely create more lasting results. Foxe's and Bale's texts are liable to have a more static outcome than Askew's alone or Spenser's. Furthermore, for the common reader, Askew's clarity may be more effective than Spenser's layered allegory. If Askew's text was read for itself, its clear, unobtrusive teaching may have influenced the behaviour of more ordinary Elizabethans than any of the other texts.

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