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Article

Bewitching Power: The Virtuosity of Gender in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*

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Abstract: This paper considers Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger's play *The Virgin Martyr* (1622) in light of scientific notions of the female body circulating during the period to illustrate how the performance of martyrdom manifested a performance of gender virtuosity, elevating it to the status of the supernatural or divine. Like well-known female martyrs from the period, such as Anne Askew, the protagonist, Dorothea, takes on characteristically male attributes: she assumes the role of the soldier and defies scientific understanding of the female gender by sealing her phlegmatic "leaky" body and exuding divine heat that defies her cold, wet "nature". The theatricality of gender reversals in the play, from Dorothea and other characters, illustrates how the act of martyrdom could be interpreted not only as a miraculous performance, a "witness" to the divine, but one built on sensational, seemingly impossible performances of gender.

Keywords: martyrdom; gender; drama; early modern; Jacobean; masculinity; virgin

1. Introduction: Lyke a Virgin—and the Armed Knight

The title of this introduction borrows from the opening line of a widely circulated ballad of mid-sixteenth-century England, which reads, "Lyke as the armed knyght appoynted to the felde with thys world wyll I fyght and fayth shall be my shielde". Although the song gained wide reception, with its lyrics published widely just the following year, only the select few in attendance at the ballad's one and only public performance would have recalled its tune. This performance would have taken place at Newgate, just outside London, on 16 June 1546, before the singer was carried off for a final performance at Smithfield. Those familiar with London's history will understand this cryptic anecdote: Smithfield was the most popular site for public executions during the period. The "knyght" in question is Anne Askew, one of the most well-known female martyrs of early modern England, and this ballad was allegedly the dramatic swan song she performed before she was burned at the stake for her steadfast commitment to her controversial religious beliefs.¹ Later, in 1624, Askew's ballad, *I am a Woman Poor and Blind*, was entered in the Stationers' Register, a copyright-like practice that presumably occurred not long after. This ballad, as with the one from 1546, also illustrates a soldier-like fortitude embodied by a "poor and blind" female figure: "For such as the Scriptures saith that will gladly repent and follow thy word: Which I will not deny whilst I have breath, for Prison, fire, Faggot, nor fierce sword" (Beilin 1996, p. 197). These Askew martyr ballads draw on a Christian fortitude that recalls Paul's command in Ephesians to take up the "shield of faith" (6:11-18), while at the same time they draw on traditional masculine imagery, illustrating the performance's inherently paradoxical nature: the female

¹ For the original ballad, see: "The Ballade whyche Anne Askewe made and sange whan she was in Newgate", stanzas 1-4, Bale (1547). For a modern version, with additional Askew writings, see Beilin (1996).

martyr encases a characteristically masculine representation, the “armed knyght”, within the idealized feminine form of the chaste virgin.²

This paper will turn to an early modern Jacobean play, Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr*, to explore how contradictory early modern conceptualizations of gender are played out on the gendered body to spectacular effect. The play, which was revived within a year of the printing of Askew’s ballad in 1624, involves a series of characters, both virgin martyrs and male counterparts, challenging early modern scientific concepts. Their gender reversals, the masculinizing of the virgin and effeminizing of the soldier, defy perceived limitations of the male and female body. These theatrical displays, I will argue, perform a type “gender virtuosity”, by which wonderous, affectively charged feats of gender defiance are played out, while highlighting the virtuous movement of the divine or the bewitching power of the supernatural.³

Dekker and Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr* was first licensed for performance at the Red Bull in October 1620, the play being published in early 1622.⁴ The play is the only known collaboration of Massinger, known primary for his Caroline dramas, and the elder, Elizabethan playwright Dekker. Set in Caesarea in the fourth century A.D., its plot is drawn from the tenth and final persecution of the Christians in the reign of Diocletian. The play seems to have been popular during its day and age; the published title claims that it “hath bin divers times publickely acted with great applause”, and though this could be a mere marketing tactic, its four quarto publications and its later reintroduction on the Restoration stage testify to the play’s acclaim (Dekker and Massinger 1958, p. 365). While the appearance of a saint’s play might seem strange within post-Reformation London, the Red Bull audiences of Clerkenwell in north London were known for their affinity for medieval performance styles during the Jacobean period.⁵ Anne Lancashire has also detailed how the London Clerkenwell play (or *Skinner’s Well* play) marks a roughly 400-year tradition of multi-day biblical performance in in region of the Red Bull that dated up until the mid to late sixteenth century.⁶

Thomas Moretti presents another cogent account for the play’s appearance and resounding popularity. His article explores how the production carefully balances its religious sentiment to appeal—“via media”—to the widest cross-section of Jacobean London, excluding only religious extremists on either end (Moretti 2014). The spectacular effects of gender, which this article will detail, provide a complimentary reason for the play’s popularity when considered in light of contemporary theories of affect in performance. Nicholas Ridout’s *Stage Frights* describes the commercial theatre as a virtual affect-machine (Ridout 2006). The mechanism of this theatrical machinery, its “tools”, are what Erin Hurley calls “feeling-technology”, which collectively work to satisfy theatre’s central preoccupation: “making, managing, and moving feeling in all its types (affect, emotions, moods, sensations) in a publicly observable display that is sold to an audience for a wage” (Hurley 2010, p. 9). The Red Bull was notoriously known for its “drum and trumpet” repertoire and low-brow appeal. Their audience members were often critiqued by early modern playwrights for their lack of sophisticated taste.⁷ The action-packed gender reversals in the play, which I will later describe, frontload wonder, disgust, even violence and humor to help drive its popular appeal. Dekker and Massinger’s version of

² Thomas Nashe makes reference to “the ballet of Anne Askew” by quoting the first line in *Have With You to Saffron Walden* in 1596.

³ The idea of a gender virtuosity, although a stretch from its usual contexts and associations with musical performance, looks to capture both a theatrical quality and an extraordinary nature.

⁴ A new scene was licensed for *The Virgin Martyr* in 1624, indicating a revival of the work, probably by a different, as yet unknown, company.

⁵ Examples include: Rowley’s *A Shoemaker Gentleman* (1618), Shirley’s *The Martyred Soldier* (1619) and *The Two Noble Ladies* (c. 1619–22), see Munro (2006).

⁶ While few records exist, for a detailed analysis of these performances, see Lancashire (2006).

⁷ Red Bull had a low number of published plays and the ones that were published often failed to credit the name of the theatre, which was common practice during the time. The overall low number of published plays could suggest a more illiterate audience at Red Bull. Not acknowledging the theatre in publication could be a conscientious attempt to avoid association with the illegitimate theatre, but it could also be evidence that the play moved theatres, see Griffith (2013, pp. 255–56). For more on the company’s reputation, see Munro (2006).

Dorothea's legend can, following Moretti, appeal to a large base with moderate religious views, yet its popularity could be driven, as well, by its reversals of gender, which offer spectacular effects/affects, while failing to challenge normative ideologies.

Since the plot of the play remains largely unknown to contemporary readers, a summary may serve useful. The governor's son, the soldier Antoninus, has fallen in love with the virgin Dorothea, although he has already been betrothed to another, the Emperor Diocletian's daughter, Artemia. In despair, Antoninus attempts to court Dorothea, professing his love for her, yet the virgin remains steadfast against his advances. During this exchange, however, the couple is spied on by Theophilus, Rome's chief persecutor of heretics, who consequently learns of Dorothea's Christian faith and has her arrested. To convert her to Paganism, Theophilus calls upon his two daughters to persuade her: this attempt backfires as Dorothea converts the daughters to Christianity instead. When Theophilus orders the virgin to be tortured and raped, she remains protected by mystical powers and is unable to be harmed. While this is taking place, Antoninus falls ill from unknown sources, and when Dorothea is ultimately beheaded, he dies as well. The play's fifth act traces the later conversion of Theophilus (Greek = "lover of God") to Christianity influenced by Dorothea and her extravagant reappearance from beyond the grave.

Julia Gasper's scholarship has pinpointed several potential sources that Dekker and Massinger could have used in crafting their plot, including Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, as well as a few Catholic martyrologies, such as Caxton's translation of *The Golden Legend* and Edward Kinesman's translation of Alfonso Villegas's *Flos Sanctorum*.⁸ The legends of two relatively obscure fourth-century martyrs, St Agnes and St Dorothy, were conflated to create the central martyr character, Dorothea.⁹ The playwrights hereby allowed themselves freedom of construction, not limiting themselves to maintaining historical accuracy built around a single, more recognizable saint. The aptly named Dorothea (derived from the Greek *doron* or "gift" and *thea* "of God") becomes a clearly idealized character based on but not limited by these historical women. By considering the issue of adaptation in *The Virgin Martyr*, Susannah Monta has illustrated how the play alters its martyrological sources to highlight religious competition, consequently "intensifying the resistance of the female martyr so that her purity may facilitate the separation of true from false religion" (Monta 2005, p. 196). Dorothea's gender reversals demonstrate this "intensifying resistance" and purity, which as this paper will later explain, is also highlighted by several of the male characters and their gender conversion. Most of the available scholarship on the play addresses the play's hagiographical or martyrological function, while often arguing for the play as either Catholic or Protestant propaganda.¹⁰ Jane Degenhardt and Julie Pickett's scholarship, however, has operated on the assumption that "critical interpretations that stress only [the play's] relationship to England's Catholic-Protestant controversy seem inadequate", stressing instead the contemporary political relevance of the play in the 1620s; Degenhardt relates the play to the contemporary threat of Islam, whereas Pickett illustrates the play's ability to comment on the inherent theatrical nature of conversion during the period.¹¹ Monta argues the play uses allegory to veil criticism of James I's foreign policy in the early years of the Thirty Years' War, which some Protestants believed accommodated Catholic aggression (Monta 2005, p. 194).

Although *The Virgin Martyr* is in some ways untraditional in its appearance as the "only post-Reformation saint's play in post-Reformation London", it is rather traditional in the way that it plays off of the presumably weaker female sex in order to heighten its power as martyrology (Logan and Smith 1978, p. 99). Monta contextualizes Dorothea among the lineage of early modern female martyrs, observing that the martyrs of lower social status became valuable partly because of

⁸ For details on the play's sources, see Gasper (1991). For more on Saint Agnes and Saint Dorothy, see Winstead (2000).

⁹ For Louise George Clubb's argument that the play serves as Catholic propaganda, see Clubb (1964). More recently, Julia Gaspar and Susannah Monta have each argued for the play as Protestant propaganda. See Gasper (1991) and Monta (2005).

¹¹ For more on the play's contemporary political relevance, see Pickett (2009) and Degenhardt (2006), for specific quote, p. 93.

their violation of expectations, thereby making their testimony even more powerful. Quoting from Foxe and Kinsman, Monta shows how female martyrs, “frayle by nature”, are praised for acting “manfully”, allowing the female martyrs to evince sanctity, since “only God could inspire such constancy and zeal in otherwise unremarkable people” (Monta 2005, p. 197). This essay adheres to Degenhardt’s advice to explore beyond the Catholic/Protestant debates over the play, while building upon Monta’s previous investigation. It looks to demonstrate how gender transformation, of both virgin martyrs and their male counterparts, offers virtuosic theatrical events that bear “witness” to spiritual transformation.¹²

2. Onward Christian Soldiers

The play’s reversal of gender is readily apparent in the martial terms used to describe the characters. Like the image of Askew taking up arms for battle, throughout *The Virgin Martyr* pagan and Christian faiths are posed in stark opposition, as two armed forces locked in battle, with conversion representing a successful military strike. The play expands on its martyrological sources to establish the Roman religion as a threatening religious system that idealizes masculinity and stoicism (Monta 2005, p. 201). The character Harpax, secretary to Theophilus, uses terms of warfare to depict the threat of Dorothea’s religious fervor: “a Firmament of Clouds being fild with Joves Artillery, shot downe at once to pash your Gods in peeces, cannot give with all those Thunderbolts so deeps a blow to the Religion there, and Pagan lore as this” (II.ii.58), and at the climactic moment at the end of the play, occurring only moments after his conversion, Theophilus’s final words before his martyrdom read: “I die a souldier in the Christian warres” (V.ii.233).¹³ The heroic martyr figure exists in—but is also defined by—a landscape of war-like imagery, which creates an ongoing drive to be inwardly armed against external spiritual forces.¹⁴

The female martyrs in the play are also described by masculine, martial language. By combining the soldier image with an idealized female form, Dekker and Massinger draw upon a motif of Roman stoicism. Set in fourth-century Caesarea, the story lends itself to Roman allusions that might not otherwise fit in Jacobean London. Monta has argued that this helped to strengthen the play’s political resonance.¹⁵ Theophilus’s virgin daughters, Calista and Christeta, “sufferd with Roman constancy” when they were splayed on the rack and fell victim to the hangman’s whip (I.i.177). Dorothea similarly evinces a Roman stoicism in her lack of fear in the sight of death and forthcoming torture: “The visage of a hangman frights not me; The sights of whips, rackes, gibbets, axes, fires are scaffoldings, by which my soule climbs up to Eternall habitation” (II.iii.166). Her stoic demeanor is consistent with accounts of female martyrs in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* by which “God masculinizes his elect” (Moretti 2014, p. 260). The play contrasts the female martyr’s soldierly disposition with the effeminacy of a real soldier, Antoninus. The strongest example of this is when he develops a mysterious lovesick illness and lies in bed alone crying out in torment for Dorothea to “deliver him” from his pain. His father and friend, making jest about his ill-fitting behavior, claim Antoninus can only be cured if a midwife will “deliver him” (IV.i.20). The sick soldier is given the opportunity to claim Dorothea’s virginity, which is described as the best remedy for his illness, yet he is unable to go through with the act. His father chastises him, “a souldier, and stand fumbling so”, heightening the contradiction between Antoninus’s

¹ I use the word “martyr” in terms of its Greek origin meaning “to witness”. This and all other citations from the play are drawn from *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, v. 3, edited by Fredson Bowers, see Dekker and Massinger (1958).

² The view of Christian faith in martial terms falls into the reading strategies of the early modern audience, a group already primed to view spiritual forces of good and evil as in direct, continual opposition. Brad Gregory’s *Salvation at Stake* highlights these reading strategies of the early modern audience, and makes a valuable point that the symbolic value of the martyr figure could actually be more real to the early modern interpretative community than their temporal reality, see Gregory (2001, p. 10).

³⁴ Monta argues that the play’s work as political allegory could in part be based on the easy connection between classical Rome and the “newly revived Roman (and, in Ferdinand’s hands, threateningly Catholic) Empire on the continent”, see Monta (2005, p. 199).

militant strength, role as masculine soldier and “penetrator” and his inability to go through with the sexual act (IV.i.98).¹⁶

Significantly, Dekker and Massinger use early modern rhetoric of the body to conceptualize Antoninus’s reversal. The father ridicules the lovesick soldier further, explaining the emasculation of his son by specifically drawing upon the Galenic model and classical humoral theory:

Cold, Phlegmatike Bastard, th’art no brat of mine,
One sparke of me, when I had heate like thine
By this had made a Bonfire: a tempting whore
(For whom th’art mad) thrust even into thine armes,
And standst thou puling!

(IV.i.111)

Early modern scientific accounts, such as those detailed by Thomas Laqueur and Gail Kern Paster, emphasize the porous, penetrable, cold, and essentially weaker nature of the female body. Laqueur’s study of gender and anatomy identifies a one-sex model of gender, largely driven by heat in the body. He describes this model as follows:

It is to begin with, the sign of perfection, of one’s place in the hierarchical great chain of being. Humans are the most perfect of animals, and men are more perfect than women by reason of their ‘excess of heat’. Men and women are, in this model, not different in kind but in the configuration of their organs; the male is a hotter version of the female, or to use the teleologically more appropriate order, the female is the cooler, less perfect version of the male.

(Laqueur 1986, p. 5)

The female sex is characterized as inadequate or lacking, with heat—the perfecting agent—typically being bestowed upon the male, the dominant sex. Antoninus’s father refers to the coldness of his son, equating this with weakness. He describes how “when I had heate like thine”, presumably a reference to his own virile younger years, “one sparke” would create a bonfire. This claims a fiery libido for himself that—with the one-sex model—is associated with the male sex.

In her study “The Unbearable Coldness of Female Being”, Gail Kern Paster questions the teleology of the Galenic model, yet confirms the importance of heat to the conceptualization of early modern gender. She takes into account the classical humoral theory of the four temperamental categories (melancholic, choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic), which were based on an excess or lack of the four bodily fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Paster recognizes the key “ideological blindspots” built into a model that “inscribed the sign of woman as normative in only one of its four categories—the cold, clammy, humor dominated by phlegm” (Paster 1998, p. 422). By incorporating humoral and Galenic rhetoric, Sapritius describes his son as taking on a phlegmatic disposition that lacks even one spark of heat, characterizing the soldier’s transition as not mere lovesickness, but as an emasculation of that challenges natural order. The language of the body used in the play offers a way to both describe and dramatize spiritual transformations via gender transformation, as well as the movement of power along hierarchical lines.

Dekker and Massinger also present a miraculous reversal of gender through the theatricalization of Dorothea’s “shield of faith” and the display of her impenetrability on stage. Paster observes that the female was characterized not only as cold in early modern conceptualizations but also as a leaky

¹⁶ Similarly, in Dekker’s *The Honest Whore*, Part II (coauthored with Middleton), the character Hippolito is subject to fits of love sickness resulting in extremely melancholy (see Comensoli 1989). Additionally, Massinger’s *The Picture* (1629) shows a striking reversal of gender as sexual indulgence emasculates the King, allowing him to take on a “disturbingly subservient role to the queen”, see Hila (2016, p. 72).

vessel (Paster 1998, p. 420).¹⁷ Dorothea defies the preconceived notions of the soft, porous, and easily penetrable female body; the virgin becomes solid and impenetrable through supernatural means, creating a theatrical representation of supernatural proportions, framed here as a divine agency that can be harnessed to empower the female sex. During her climactic torture, and despite incessant beatings, Dorothea remains unscathed:

SAP.Strike.

Strike at her: Angelo kneeling holds her fast.

THEO. Beate out her brains–

DOR. Receive me you bright Angels

SAP.Fasterslaves.

SPUN. Faste: I am out of breath I'am sure: if I were to beate a bucke, I can strike no harder.

HIR. O mine armes, I cannot lift 'em to my head.

DOR. Joy above joys, are my tormentors wearie

In torturing me, and in my sufferings

I fainting in no limbe: tyrants strike home

And feast your fury full.

(IV.ii.85)

The virgin martyr accepts her fate in a characteristically stoic fashion; rather than fighting back, she turns to the heavens and cries to the angels to receive her. The beating becomes a physical manifestation of her spiritual fortitude: Dorothea is protected by a literal force field of her own faith, assisted by her guardian angel, Angelo (the allegorical “Angel-o”), who “holds her fast”. Dorothea’s body, and her beauty, is unharmed, despite the efforts of the punishers who exhaust themselves in their attempts to beat her.¹⁸ The pagans take turns trying to attack her to no avail, marveling that, “these bats have power downe to fell gyants, yet her skin is not scar’d” (IV.ii.105). This personifies Katharine Eisaman Maus’ account of Renaissance women whose “moral worth was inevitably involved with the fate of her vulnerable body” (Maus 1996, p. 205).

Additional attempts to “penetrate” Dorothea’s body are also thwarted by supernatural means, further representing a defiance of the female body. When Antoninus is unwilling to rape the young virgin, his father, furious, calls upon a slave to do the deed to humiliate his feeble son further. The slave first has his masculinity questioned to ensure his readiness to claim Dorothea’s virginity. In a comic scene that would have resonated with London’s Clerkenwell audience, the slave’s British heritage is said to make him more than up to the task, since “of all Nations our Romane swords ever conquer’d, none comes neere the Brittain for true whooring” (IV.i.133). In a fiery speech, the slave describes the extreme lengths he would go to in order to gain his freedom, which includes fighting naked with a lion, shaking off his chains, and jumping off a rock ten pyramids high in order to battle to the death (IV.i.135). He clearly describes for the audience his extreme masculine potency and unquenchable desire for freedom, and yet when he is told he will gain freedom by raping Dorothea, in a surprising turn, the slave scorns to do it. The play heightens his presumed masculinity, only to thwart it, reflecting another uncanny protection of Dorothea by a supernatural source. The virgin martyr credits the slave’s complete reversal to the work of “that Power supernall on whom waites my soule, is Captaine ore my chastity” (IV.i.162). Once again, wondrous gender reversal marks a performance of the divine, while also appealing to an audience preoccupied with what G.E. Bentley describes as “violence and vulgarity” (quoted in Munro 2006, p. 100).

The play enacts a gender virtuosity of supernatural proportions, built off popular early modern concepts of the weak, penetrable female and the strong, “penetrating” male. Dorothea’s impenetrability

¹ For more of Paster’s analysis on the female as “leaky” vessel, see Paster (1993).

⁷ The inclusion of various types of miraculous displays was common in early modern female martyrologies. Several accounts of Askew’s martyrdom, for example, remark on the “divine sign of thunder”, see Beilin (1996, p. xxxvii).

and soldier-like fortitude creates a stark contrast to the emasculation of the male figures in the play, who are particularly emblematic of machismo and a masculine “heat”. The “soldier” is redefined as a performative, with the outward appearance of the imposing military man proving less powerful than the inwardly soldierly disposition acquired through faith. Consequently, power is dramatized through gender reversals, with the spiritual or supernatural trumping the outward display of arms and steel.

3. Divine Fire, Holy Tears, and Celestial Rays

Dekker and Massinger find further ways to theatricalize the androgynous female martyr defying her bodily limitations in physically “impossible” ways. One way is how Dorothea claims the “fire” or “heat” typically associated with male agency. When Harpax speaks of Dorothea and Antoninus’s possible relationship, it is a “fire of love”, driven by sexual desire, contrasting with divine heat (II.ii.50). Harpax defines women as cold, insisting that they rely on a man through the passionate “fire of love” for access to heat. However, Dorothea, as a virgin, refuses this source, relying instead on holy fire for heat that has an atemporal source. Within the play, this spiritual fire is also described as the means by which she defies penetration (in multiple senses). Antoninus specifically warns her to “quench not out the holy fires within you” to avoid death during her persecution (II.iii.190).

Dekker and Massinger also use heat to dramatize conversion through gender transformations. This technique is used for Dorothea, the other converted female characters, as well as several males. Antoninus describes this phenomenon, as he gains heat, or the more “perfect” condition, in the moment of his conversion to the Christian faith: “I feele a holy fire, that yeelds a comfortable heate within me. I am quite alterd from the thing I was” (IV.iii.160). By this stage, Antoninus has already transformed from the masculine “hot” soldier to the “cold” and “phlegmatic” ill-struck lover. Divine heat offers the miraculous cure to his early gender reversal, by which he previously lost power. Similarly, following his own conversion, Theophilus redefines fire not as a means of torture, but as a means of purification:

I stand
 Accomptable for thousand Christians deaths,
 And were it possible that I could die
 A day for every one, then live againe
 To be againe tormented, twere to me
 An easie pennance, and I should passe through
 A gentle clensing fire.

(V.ii.178)

This newfound stoicism parallels Dorothea’s use of the hangman’s tools as “scaffoldings by which my soul climbs up to an eternal habitation” (II.iii.166). The blaze at the scaffold, converted into a “gentle clensing fire”, becomes a way to theatricalize spiritual or supernatural conversion.

Similarly, Dekker and Massinger present tears, associated with the “leaky” body, as the potential by-product of a holy purification as well. In the first scene of the play, Theophilus establishes the common understanding of “womanish teares”, as a derogatory sign of feminine weakness (I.i.59). Yet when tears are placed within the discourse of Christian martyrdom later in the play, their meaning is altered; as with the sensation of the “holy fire”, they become a theatrical representation of spiritual transformation. When Dorothea converts Theophilus’s daughters to Christianity, tears become a divine representation of the spirit:

Youweepe,
 Oh tis a heavenly showre, celestiall balme
 To cure your wounded conscience, let it fall,
 Fall thick upon it, and when that is spent,
 Il helpe it with another of my teares.
 And, may your true repentance prove the child
 Of my true sorrow, never mother had

A birth so happy.

(III.i.192)

Tears become an additional way to perform divine purification: a “celestial balm”. They also offer a source of rebirth for the virgin. She becomes a surrogate mother figure, and her tears recall the popular iconic representation of the crying Virgin Mary. Just as the hangman’s tools are reframed as a scaffolding to heaven, tears as a sign of weakness are similarly inverted: the display of feminine weakness becomes a sign of spiritual—and masculine—strength.

Angelo tells Dorothea that if she remains strong in her faith she will wear sunbeams on her head as a sign of victory (II.iii.194). The sunbeams, a spiritual crown, become representational not only of divine light but also divine heat emanating from the virgin, characteristic of historic martyrs from the period. Dekker and Massinger can theatricalize the resurrection of Dorothea in a triumphant return to the stage at the end of the play, wearing such a radiant crown. In this epiphany, she is described in the original stage direction as appearing: “in a white robe, crownes upon her robe, a Crowne upon her head” (V.ii.218). She represents a complete embodiment of divine victory, dressed all in white, and covered with crowns literally from head to toe.

To return, briefly, to Anne Askew, likely the most famous virgin martyr from the period, the title page of John Bale’s testimony of her trial, *The first examinacyon of Anne Askewe* (1546), offers a depiction of what the appearance of the virgin martyr in her literal and figurative glory might have looked like. As with Dorothea, there are sunbeams, a celestial halo, emanating from around her head and they both appear in white robe to reflect their purity (see Figure 1). Askew’s divine victory is further represented by her palm branch and the proud display of the holy scriptures as her only weapon.



Figure 1. Image from the title page of John Bale’s edition of *The first examinacyon of Anne Askewe* (1546). Female martyrs, such as Askew and Dorothea, were often associated with this type of spiritual crown. The antichrist, commonly depicted as a dragon, sits at Askew’s feet. His defeat is clear by his pope’s tiara and submissive stance. Photo credited: Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Dorothea also represents an idealized beauty and a serene response comparable to the image of Askew. The virgin martyr’s beautiful appearance, despite her torment and physical assault, offers a further way to theatricalize the miraculous. Dorothea’s resurrected body, as with Askew’s, takes on a

beautiful and unscathed form, rather than a martyred, seemingly grotesque body. Beauty becomes a prerequisite for the virgin martyr; in the opening of the play, Theophilus's daughters are described as "faire ones, exceeding faire ones" (I.i.165) as well as "beauteous virgins" (I.i.195). The two daughters, it is discovered, previously underwent severe physical punishment in a successful attempt to convert them to Paganism. Realistically, these daughters would have been scarred and battered, with their bodies dismembered, yet they remain whole and seemingly unscathed despite the severe abuses they endured on the rack.¹⁹ The daughters's perfected appearances sets them up as exemplary figures for their conversion to Christianity and subsequent martyrdom. Similarly, Dorothea not only retains beauty during her arduous torture at the stake but paradoxically gains attractiveness, with Theophilus commenting that "her face has more bewitching beauty than before" (IV.ii.95).²⁰

The play further theatricalizes the miraculous through Dorothea's serene emotional response and even joy in the face of brutality. The emotional life of Dorothea, strengthened by her spiritual fortitude, is a clear contrast to notions of the overly emotional early modern female. Theophilus comments that not only does her face have more "bewitching power", "it smiles". (IV.ii.96). Later, when she is facing the scaffold, Antoninus remarks again that, "she smiles, unmov'd" (IV.iii.66).²¹ Her surprising affective response becomes a further reflection of the supernatural or miraculous at work. Relating back to Askew's ballad from the introduction, similarly, the act of singing marks an act of triumph.

Both martyrs, through two different mediums, the theatre and the ballad, can be remembered for rejoicing in the face of persecution. Conversely, it is the emasculated soldier, Antoninus, who displays morose and "effeminate" emotions by falling into a melancholic sickness when denied Dorothea's love.

Dorothea also provides an example of how women can and even should oppose their "natural" temperament by assuming a traditionally masculine anger. When Theophilus's daughters attempt to convert the virgin martyr to the pagan faith, she has an outbreak of fury that runs in opposition to her own typically serene emotional response and "maidenly" behavior. She justifies women acting against their own emotional disposition in the name of religion when she chastises Calista and Christeta:

DOR. Have you not cloven feete; are you not divels?
Dare any say so much, or dare I heare it,
Without a vertuous and religious anger?
Now to put on a Virgin modesty,
Or maiden silence, when his power is question'd
That is omnipotent, were a greater crime,
Then in a bad cause to be impudent.

(III.i.101)

Dorothea forges a space by which anger in the name of the Christian faith is more than acceptable: it is a necessary response. A "vertuous and religious anger" are accessible to women as an extension of divine power and moral goodness. Dorothea's speech suggests a brazen passion as she reprimands the women for their "maiden silence", which would likely be embodied as well in performance. The other martyr women learn from Dorothea's lesson, demonstrating an outbreak of their own virtuous anger in the following scene. When they are called to kneel and make vows to Jupiter, the stage direction reads, "they both spit at the Image, throw it downe, and spurne it" (III.ii.53). Consequently, they too

¹⁹ This correlates with Katji Altpeter-Jones's findings that "didactically oriented texts that attempt to teach appropriate gender role behavior focus more consistently—and for obvious reasons—on gestures of female submission and a portrayal of immutable, closed bodies", see Altpeter-Jones (2008, p. 44). Karen Bramford in her analysis of sexual violence in

²⁰ Jacobean drama uses this play as an example of the "pornographic emphasis on the body as the object of male anger and desire", see Bramford (2000, p. 46), Bramford emphasizes how the body must remain beautiful and desirable to provoke arousal (pp. 47–48). Positive or calm emotional displays in the face

²¹ of gruesome persecution are also cited amongst the accounts of actual female martyrs during the period, with some crediting this disposition to the Holy Spirit, whereas others see it as possession by a

"merry devil", see Gregory (2001, p. 338).

theatricalize a transgressive emotional response, a performance of gender virtuosity, that runs contrary to the modest virgin prototype.

4. Gender and the Martyr Paradox

Dekker and Massinger illustrate how a dual reception is formed around the virgin martyr's gender transformation, resulting in two concurrent opposite interpretations: the virgin as martyr and witch. Consequently, Monta has argued that the play longs nostalgically for a "a searingly clear conflict between right religion and damnable falsehood" (Monta 2005, p. 195). The playwrights show how the performance of gender can work as a theatrical tool to strengthen—if not make—a persuasive and affectively engaging martyr legend. There may even be ways by which the play's audience members could have gained critical insight, allowing them to view and understand martyrdom as inherently an act of interpretation.²² Through the theatrical medium, the audience is able to see the resurrection of Dorothea's body made manifest and hear the extraordinary "celestial music" that begins to play at Dorothea's death.²³ Yet the audience sees different characters perceive this moment in contrasting ways: whereas some hear "heavenly music", others hear "illusions of the devil, wrought by some witch of her religion, that fain would make her death a miracle" (IV.iii.189). The simultaneous process by which both the martyr and the witch are concurrently made is called into question.²⁴ Significantly, in both cases, the female martyr's power is inherently paradoxical: it is either characterized as witchcraft or divine spirit, but what remains clear is that the virgin's agency, her source of "heat", is never quite her own.

Through the martyr/witch dichotomy, the play offers insight into the relationship between the performance of female martyrdom and early modern patriarchy. Significantly, Dorothea is first characterized as a witch not simply for her display of supernatural powers, but because of her ability to control the men around her and resist control herself. Her defiance of domestic hierarchies and gender norms is a primary factor in her demise, and not solely her transgressive religious beliefs. The impetus for critical attack against Dorothea stems from the fact she is not viewed as the ideal wife for Antoninus. In the opening scene, the emperor's beautiful daughter Artemia is given the opportunity to select her own husband. It is decided before she picks her partner that any man she chooses will have to be beneath her rank, with some potential suitors uttering prayers to "Gods of Love" in the hope of being selected (I.i.312). When she selects Antoninus, who shies away and blushes at her advances, a precursor of his emasculation, he is admonished by his father to "welcome, foole, thy fortune, stand like a blocke when such an angell courts thee!" (I.i.320). This fortune is quite literal since Artemia is the daughter of the emperor, making her undoubtedly one of the most powerful and wealthy women of Caesarea. This union would raise Antoninus's class, turning him from a subject into a lord, while even making it Artemia's duty to honor him (I.i.338). Antoninus's friend Macrinus tries to make sense of his lack of interest in the emperor's daughter, but Antoninus has defiantly bestowed his love on Dorothea already (I.i.413). Consequently, the virgin is formulated from the opening of the play as enemy primarily because of her ability to threaten the social system and thwart Antoninus's economic, political, and social aspirations. The driving force behind the later witch hunt that develops against her begins before Dorothea's religious beliefs are even known. Similarly, Anne Askew's Protestant beliefs, for example, officially characterized her as a heretic, but this cannot be easily separated from her defiance of proper gender roles. In particular, Anne was canonized in her maiden name Askew, rather

²² Myhill argues that this appears in the shift of the play's genre, which turns from a drama towards a more traditional saint's play in the final two acts, moving the play from more representational to more presentational, see Myhill (2004, p. 25).

²³ Moretti reads the final line at Dorothea's death, "she lived a virgin, and a virgin dies", as a double entendre that eludes to mystical sexual union with God, an abrupt return to her chaste female body in death, see Moretti (2014, pp. 262–63).

²⁴ Marla Carlson illustrates how the virgin martyr's body occupies a dialogical position, "silent and obedient as the church and society would have her but also a figure for the mystic who transgresses and exceeds those limits through her embodied imitation of the Passion", see Carlson (2010, p. 164).

than her married name Kyme, which reflects a transgressive denial of the patriarchal social order of early modern England.²⁵

Antoninus's immediate lack of interest in marrying the emperor's daughter drives his father, Sapritius, into a fury. His father, of course, has much to gain from this strategic union. Sapritius develops into the play's biggest critic of Dorothea, largely because of her "bewitching" powers over his son:

She's a Witch,
A sorceresse Theophilus, my sonne
Is charm'd by her enticing eyes, and like
An image made of waxe, her beames of beauty
Melt him to nothing; all my hopes in him,
And all his gotten honours, finde their grave
In his strange dotage on her.

(III.i.3)

He characterizes Dorothea, once again, as harnessing defiant powers, exemplified by "beames of beauty", a fire that will "melt him to nothing" and emasculate his soldier-son. Here the characteristic "beams" of the martyr, a signifier of attractiveness, is strategically reframed. Sapritius illustrates the dual reception of the virgin martyr/witch. Antoninus's "strange dotage" on Dorothea defies logic; her transgressive sway over Antoninus makes him act against his masculine nature and his own economic best interest.

5. Conclusions

Dekker and Massinger show how martyrdom, as a performance act, uses the gendered body to represent spiritual shifts, conversions, and miraculous feats. Within the play, rhetoric of the body contrast Dorothea's subversive inner-masculine nature with the complete emasculation of surrounding male figures. She takes on characteristically male attributes by assuming the role of the soldier, sealing her "leaky body", and exuding heat and sun beams that defy scientific understanding of her sex. Elizabeth Castelli describes in *Martyrdom and Memory* how gender plays a particularly important role in martyrdom since it "has to do foundationally with competing ideas about the character and legitimacy of different systems of power", with gender operating not only as a way of perceiving sexual difference but also as a way of signifying relationships of power (Castelli 2004, p. 4).²⁶ Since the female martyr creates a depiction of a female figure that opposes the general presumptions of woman's physiological/psychological nature, the figure could become a stronger example of spiritual fortitude than her male counterpart. At the same time, Dekker and Massinger's play suggests a further reason the actual performance of female martyrdom might have been such an effective rhetorical tool: her ability to defy her own body in "impossible" ways, reversing "feminine weakness" into "masculine strength", could turn the act of public execution itself into a display of the supernatural or, for some, the miraculous.

Dorothea represents a paradoxical figure on multiple fronts. Her access to agency and power, as illustrated through the performance of various "divine" reversals, are framed outside the possibilities of the female sex, reflecting a power beyond herself, whether interpreted as evil or divine. Additionally, what we know of the female martyr's swan song has always been posthumously forged, for it is through death that this idealized, androgynous female martyr is ironically made and unmade; it is only through death that her legend, one that defies temporal explanation within early modern

²⁵ Monta points out that Askew's martyrologists tended to downplay the fact that she left her husband for fear this would cause criticism (Monta 2005, p. 207).

²⁶ Castelli draws the relationship of gender and systems of power from Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, see Scott (1988, pp. 28–50).

conceptualizations, is able to “exist”. Of course, on stage in *The Virgin Martyr*, Dorothea’s transgressive power was not even embodied by a female, after all, but by the representation of a boy player, created by male playwrights, drawing upon martyrologies written by men.

During the early modern era, as Monta claims, “a martyr’s religion, not his/her gender, was the foundational analytical category” (Monta 2005, p. 197). Certainly, the road that leads the female martyr to the grave entwines the controversial implications of her faith system with the implications of her gender and her defiance of gender norms. However, *The Virgin Martyr* foregrounds how the performance of gender and, moreover, the virtuosic performance of gender reversal, could raise the act of martyrdom to spectacular theatrical heights.

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