

Narrating Religious History in Anne Askew's *Examinations*: A Postmodern Reading

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ABSTRACT

Although a private account of the religious history of the years of the Reformation in sixteenth-century Henrician England, Anne Askew's *Examinations* bear a characteristically postmodern feature, namely, the democratization of the production of knowledge, more specifically historiography. Askew, an imprisoned Protestant woman in the Tower of London, who was neither a theologian nor a historian but rather a dissident, creates her own record of the religious, social, and political changes of her time. Consequently, the history which *The Examinations* relate is not restricted to the official narrative of the social, political, and religious center of the time but is also the other narratives of those located on the periphery and shared the same historical context of the center.

Keywords: Anne Askew, *The Examinations*, Periphery, Postmodernism, Protestantism, English Reformation, Production of Knowledge, Historiography.

Introduction

During Henry VIII's fury on Protestantism in sixteenth-century England, many Protestants and reformers were persecuted, examined, tortured, and burned at the stake on account of their religious beliefs. John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563) records the stories of hundreds of martyrs in the years of the English Reformation, mainly under the reign of Henry VIII and, later, under the reign of his daughter, Queen Mary (Abrams & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 551). Anne Askew (1521-1546), the main concern of this paper, is one among the Henrician martyrs. Askew, who was examined, tortured, and finally burned at the stake, relates her suffering as well as her theological convictions in two autobiographical accounts: *The First Examinacyon of Anne Askew* (1546) and *The Latter Examinacyon of Anne Askew* (1547). The two accounts were published as *The Examinations* by reformer John Bale, and they were later incorporated into John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which proclaims Anne Askew as a Protestant martyr.

As a historical account of the religious turmoil of Henrician England, Askew's *Examinations* bear a characteristically postmodern feature. The historical narrative which *The Examinations* provide is testimony to an early attempt at democratizing historiography. The theological, social, and political histories which *The Examinations* recount are the production of the margins rather than the centre. Narrated by a Protestant woman who is neither a theologian nor a historian but rather a prisoner of faith for challenging the political, social, and religious authorities of her time, *The Examinations* are an example of the subaltern who speaks truth to power. Furthermore, the accounts constitute an instance of the celebrated postmodern democratization of the production of knowledge since the history which they relate moves away from the exclusive narrative of the social, political, and religious mainstream and acknowledges the other traditionally overlooked narratives of dissidents, subalterns, and the marginalized.

In his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in which he explores the nature of knowledge in postmodern societies, Jean-Francois Lyotard observes that the most distinctive aspect of postmodern societies is their contestation of metanarratives (1979, p. xxiv). Metanarratives—theories or ideologies that provide a comprehensive account of experiences, events, or any other historical phenomenon: political, socioeconomic or

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religious—are characteristic of the previous decades of modernism to which postmodernism is a reaction. Metanarratives are propagated by the governing body, or the centre, and are themselves a corroboration of its authority. They are master ideas that acquire legitimacy through association with the social, political or religious mainstream. And in the *Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, Fredric Jameson identifies “the effacement of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (2009, p. 2) as an aspect of the postmodern that the academic circles would find most concerning as it challenges their role as the mainstream arbiters of taste and knowledge.

In 1546, Anne Askew was convicted of heresy and was sentenced to be burned alive. She was first imprisoned in March 1545 and then rearrested in June 1546. There is also the view that she might have been rearrested a third time on June 13, 1545¹; however, *The Examinations* only recount the March 1545 and June 1546 imprisonments (Coles, 2002, p. 517). Before becoming a Protestant reformer, Askew was a wife and a mother of two. Her marriage was an unhappy one; she was forced to marry Thomas Kyme, a Catholic, as a replacement for her dead sister. Later, she fled her household in Lincolnshire and moved to London seeking divorce on scriptural grounds, arguing that her marriage was false because her husband was an unbeliever (Beilin, 1996, p. xix).

Askew was outspoken in her theological convictions, which was probably the reason that led to her examination and persecution. *The First Examinacyon of Anne Askew* shows that she read the Scripture to herself, and that she believed it was more fruitful “to read five lines in the Bible than to hear five masses in the temple” (2000:548). Making use of her reading of the Bible, Askew attempted the traditionally patriarchal clerical role of publicly expounding the Bible; she would explain in gathered congregations what she believed the meaning of the word of God was. *The First Examinacyon* records her examiner, Christopher Dare, saying in reference to Askew that “there was a woman which did testify that *I should read*² how God was not in temples made with hands. Then I showed him the seventh and the seventeenth chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, what Stephen and Paul had said therein” (2000:548; italics mine). Indeed, one of the charges laid against her was “the uttering of the Scriptures,” an offence for which “the bishop’s chancellor rebuked me and said that I was much to blame for uttering the Scriptures. For Saint Paul (he said) forbade women to speak or to talk of the word of God” (2000:549). The reason why the bishop’s chancellor’s argument should present a theological problem for Askew was that women of both the Catholic and Protestant churches were not allowed to preach as they were not allowed to be ordained. So how did a devout believer challenge the Scripture which informed her convictions? Upon which premise did she found her argument? In her account of the theological debate with Dare, Askew challenges received patriarchal interpretations of Paul’s injunction; she argues that “a woman ought not to speak in the congregation by the way of teaching” (2000:549), that is, women ought not perform the actual act of going into the pulpit and preach. “I asked him how many women he had seen go into the pulpit and preach? He said he never saw none. Then I said, he ought to find no fault in poor women, except they had offended the law” (2000:549). Accordingly, she argues that forms of commenting and expounding the word of God other than the pulpit ought not be considered preaching. Askew challenges an extensive and liberal definition of the concept of preaching and adopts a more restricted and literal sense which allows her to assume an unorthodox, and apparently not yet acceptable, religious role in English life.

Whether Askew preached or not is a matter of technicalities. If the definition of preaching is restricted to going into the pulpit and speaking in congregation, then Askew never preached. Yet, even without her ascending the pulpit, she did express her beliefs and theological convictions publicly, and she often invoked scriptural verses in support of her understanding, as is evident in her writings. Whether her answer to her examiner was a rhetorical manoeuvre to

¹ In “The Death of the Author (and the Appropriation of Her Text): The Case of Anne Askew’s *Examinations*,” Kimberly Anne Coles mentions that Charles Wriothesley, the Windsor Herald, records a third impressment in his *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors: from A.D. 1485 to 1559* published in London, in 1875.

² Abrams and Greenblatt observe that “I should read” translates to “would teach” (2000, 548, note 7).

preserve her life or, most probably, the result of true ideological conviction and reasoning, Askew came to assume a role that was untraditional for women in Henrician England. Unlike the women of her age, she performed a religious role that was predominantly exclusive to male clerical figures. Not only was she a woman who attempted the explicating and teaching of the Scriptures but also a self-educated believer: her knowledge of the Scriptures and Faith was based on her own readings and interpretations, for women did not study theology at universities then. In fact, the education of women during the Renaissance, even amongst the advanced humanists, was tailored to enhance their abilities and virtues in the domestic sphere as wives and mothers. The focus of their upbringing and education was on such virtues as domesticity, silence, chastity, obedience, and self-effacement:

While some few wealthy noble women held some power during this time, even most upper-class women had very limited roles in society. Legitimacy of heirs being important, the women's sexuality was intensely regulated—chastity is once again virtually mandated—and male comfort being important, women were taught to be charming; they were to be dressed elaborately, also, so that they were both pleasing to look at and a statement about their husbands' or fathers' social status. (Radek)

Clearly, Askew presents a different Renaissance female figure. In *The Examinations*, she narrates the incidents of her imprisonment and examination in the first person, thus giving herself a voice of her own, the voice of a dissident Henrician female reformer tried as a heretic. The self-effacement, silence, and domesticity which were expected of a Renaissance woman, let alone a religious one, Askew perceives as social constructs which must be challenged. Furthermore, *The Examinations* assume a confident and authoritative religious voice which, historically, has been characteristic of educated male clerics. She answers her examiners by frequently quoting the Scriptures, revealing substantial knowledge of her Faith and its holy book, as well as emphasizing her right to interpret by citing verses to support her arguments on controversial issues.

Although the authority of the female voice in *The Examinations* is a matter of bibliographical disputation³, the historical significance of the two autobiographical accounts is not. Megan L. Hickerman argues that:

If the published Examinations cannot be trusted accurately to reflect either her interrogations and prison experience (their declared subject) or her distinctly female voice, they do, nevertheless, have their genesis in a historical time and place, one in which Askew existed, was persecuted, seem to have written something and was burned....The Examinations seem a plausible exercise in evangelical self-presentation, and in this they have a great deal to tell us about what was happening when they were produced. (2006:52-3)

Although this 'exercise in evangelical self-presentation' is not entirely Anne's, and both Foxe and Bale are probably involved in the process of production, Askew's role must not be undermined. The original manuscripts are hers, and despite changes, her voice and experience are the essence of the text and are maintained there.

There is singularity to the vantage point from which Askew contributes her narrative of the history of the Reformation in England under the reign of Henry VIII. Her narrative is not that of the historian or cleric; instead, hers is a populist narrative which comes from an ordinary Protestant woman, a subaltern suffering oppression because of

³ It is believed that the female voice in *The Examinations* is not uniquely Askew's. Scholars argue that John Bale, first editor of *The Examinations*, who stated that he had received the autobiographical account in Askew's own handwriting, most probably tampered with the account by adding some changes (Coles, 2002, p. 515). In addition to that, Megan L. Hickerman argues that by means of editing and commentary Bale appropriated the text and imposed a reformist male voice on it (2006:51). Scholars argue that "as texts of which no autograph manuscripts remain extant, they (Askew's accounts) can neither be accepted in their surviving form as Askew's nor read apart from her two first editors' commentary and shaping: Foxe and, more importantly, Bale, must be considered not just as conduits of, but also as collaborators in, *The Examinations*' production" (Hickerman, 2006, p. 52).

her beliefs. It is also the narrative of a socially nonconformist woman who lacked the protection of her husband, and who defied the conventional role of a woman and a mother by leaving her husband and children and seeking divorce on account of her religious convictions. An act of social and religious rebellion such as hers can be problematic even today; one can only imagine how socially appalling it must have been then. Furthermore, Askew was not a theologian, but an enthusiastic and outspoken self-educated believer, her understanding of the word of God was not obtained in the university; thus, her religious endeavour lacked the authority and prestige that comes with a university degree.

Askew was deprived of the authority of religion having joined the underprivileged sect, she was deprived of familial and social support having openly defied accepted gender roles, and she was deprived of the authority of gender being a Renaissance woman in a predominantly patriarchal society. From a postmodern perspective, Askew's narrative is the narrative of the marginalized; it is not the narrative that is received from the authoritative powerful centre. The growing recognition and close examination which her accounts receive from scholars concerned with the complexity of English history during the Reformation is in line with postmodernism's emphasis on less recognized sources of knowledge, sources in which the experience of the subaltern finds articulation.

Askew's historical account is significant from a postmodern perspective for it realizes postmodernism's inherent assumption that all are entitled to narrate, that the recounting of history is not the exclusive prerogative of the centre, the powerful, or the authoritative, but that everybody is entitled to tell his/her own story. R. G. Collingwood's influential work, *The Idea of History* (1946), suggests that the narration of history, even by the historian, is eclectic; consequently, it bears a degree of subjectivity that deconstructs the myth of one authoritative narrative of history. What is astounding in the case of Askew is that she appears to be aware of the social and religious limitations to her telling of a different religious history, yet she speaks truth to power and records her own understanding of the dramatic changes that were taking place then, changes in which she was directly involved. Consequently, her account is not only a record of imprisonment and torture in the Tower of London, but is also an articulation of the ideological makeup of a marginalized group in Reformation England. Women and men who shared the same theological convictions as Askew also find a voice in her account.

Although Askew's historical account bears postmodern features, it, nevertheless, draws on the spirit of the Reformation movement, both the English and the European. The greatest religious transformation which Protestantism brought to the Age of Renaissance is probably the enhancement of the laity's active involvement in church and Faith. Protestantism changed the mindset of people and transformed religion from a scrupulous practice into a passion. Luther's "we all are consecrated priests through baptism" (Rivers, 1994, p. 96) and the availability of the Bible in the vernacular encouraged the Christians of the Renaissance, amongst whom was Askew, to approach their Faith with a newly found sense of curiosity, passion, and salvation.

Even though the Reformation in England fought its bloodiest battles between the 1530s with Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church in Rome and the 1660s with Charles II's restoration of Anglicanism (Rivers, 1994, p. 88), the movement traces further back in English history. Isabel Rivers identifies three different forces as having influenced the Age of Reformation in England: "native Lollardy (the Wycliffite movement), continental Protestantism, and the constitutional conflict between Henry VIII and the church" (1994:90). The Wycliffite movement, named for Wycliffe, the fourteenth-century English Doctor of Divinity at Cambridge, anticipated many of the doctrines of the Reformation. In the Middle Ages, Wycliffe contested the laity's limited and indirect access to the Bible, which usually took the form of homilies and sermons preached by clerics, and advocated their right to direct access to the Bible; therefore, he completed a translation of the Bible into Middle English in 1382 to make available for English speakers (Shepherd, 1974, p. 285). In the continent, influential reformists, Martin Luther and John Calvin, shared similar convictions. Both argued that authority in the church and Faith originates only in the Bible, and that the laity should be able to read the Bible directly.

In England, Cambridge humanist scholar, William Tyndale (ca.1490-1536), also came to believe that salvation can only be sought through direct access to the word of God, hence the urgent need to make the word of God attainable in

the vernacular. Tyndale became interested in the translation of the Scripture as well as scriptural interpretation which he explains in *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1527). He argues that the literal sense is the only source of judgment: “the Scripture hath one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all” (2000:543). Nevertheless, the language of the Scripture is characterized by the use of “proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do” (p. 543-4), which are used to clarify the literal sense. Language, with all its elements including rhetorical devices, constitutes the medium that carries the literal meaning, and the literal meaning is the end that believers aspire to meet: the literal sense of the religious text “which thou must seek out diligently” (p. 544) is ever contained in that vessel of language. Works like Tyndale’s not only encourage believers to read the word of God in the vernacular, but also guide readers in their attempt to understand God’s message first-hand. In addition to diligence and close examination, Tyndale guides readers to apply the rhetorical elements and examples which the Scripture invokes to matters and incidents in their everyday life: “when we have found out the literal sense of the Scripture by the process of the text, or by a like text of another place, then go we, and as the Scripture borroweth similitudes of worldly things, even so we again borrow similitudes or allegories of the Scripture, and apply them to our purposes” (p. 544). Such was Askew’s involvement in the religious text and the production of religious meaning that her responses to her inquisitors drew heavily on scriptural verses, as Tyndale advises.

However, Tyndale adds the caveat that where allegory signifies a sense that cannot otherwise be supported by direct text, the meaning loses its value and is no longer a source of judgment:

allegories are no sense of the Scripture, but free things besides the Scripture, and altogether in the liberty of the Spirit. *** This allegory proveth nothing, neither can do. For it is not the Scripture, but an ensample or a similitude borrowed of the Scripture, to declare a text or a conclusion of the Scripture more expressly, and to root it and grave it in the heart. (p. 544)

Tyndale attempts to enlighten the laity on the act of interpretation so that God’s intended meaning is accessible. Although such proposition subjects the religious text to the risk of free and subjective readings, it allows readers to contribute in the production of religious meaning. It also emphasizes that whereas interpretation on the public level requires recognized and authoritative voices who are collectively involved in mapping the principles and value of this acquired intellectual activity, individual believers retain a close connection to the religious text and to the production of meaning; faith, essentially, is one’s intellectual property.

The Examinations are the product of the sixteenth century, they relate major historical events of the years of the Reformation and reflect the age’s intellectual and social composition whilst in the making. On the other hand, *The Examinations* are postmodern in their approach to the narration of history, an approach that finds its roots in the English Reformation movement of the sixteenth century and the Lollards of the late Middle Ages. They are also postmodern in that they challenge the metanarrative of the governing body of the time, both religious and political, and relocate the production of knowledge in the periphery.

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سرد التاريخ الديني في الاستجابات لأن أسكيو: قراءة ما بعد حداثة هند فؤاد (شاهين هندي)

هند فؤاد (شاهين هندي)*

ملخص

على الرغم من كونها وصفاً ذاتياً للتاريخ الديني في سنوات الإصلاح من القرن السادس عشر في إنجلترا تحت حكم هنري الثامن، تحمل *الاستجابات* لكانتبتها أن أسكيو سمة ما بعد حداثة مُمَيَّزة، هي سمة إضفاء الطابع الديمقراطي على عملية إنتاج المعرفة، تحديداً عملية تدوين التاريخ. حيث تقدم أن أسكيو في *الاستجابات*، ولم تكن مؤرخة ولا عالمة لاهوت، وإنما كانت امرأة بروتستانتية سجيبة في برج لندن، توثيقاً للتحويلات الدينية والاجتماعية والسياسة في عصرها. وعليه فإن التاريخ الذي تسرده *الاستجابات* لا يقتصر على الرواية الرسمية التي تبنتها مراكز القوى الاجتماعية والسياسية والدينية في ذلك الوقت، وإنما يشمل كذلك الروايات الأخرى التي تبناها أولئك المدفوعون نحو الأطراف، أولئك المُقَصَّون والمهمشون الذين عاشوا في ذات السياق التاريخي الذي عاش فيه أصحاب مراكز القوى.

الكلمات الدالة: أن أسكيو، *الاستجابات*، الأطراف، ما بعد الحدائة، البروتستانتية، الإصلاح الإنجليزي، إنتاج المعرفة، تدوين التاريخ.

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