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"Straunge and prodigious miracles"? John Foxe's reformation of virgin martyr legends

Over the past three decades, the concept of a “Long Reformation”—of a Protestantism imposed from above on an unwilling, or at best apathetic, English people, one which gained English hearts and minds only gradually and incrementally—has become entrenched among scholars of early modern England. Yet while the Long Reformation is generally accepted, there are legions of devils in the details. How can modern scholars ascertain individual religious commitment? How thoroughly did people have to accept Protestant teachings to be considered Protestants? To what extent, and when, did observance of traditional religious beliefs and practices—such as the veneration of saints—entail a conscious rejection of Protestantism?

Such questions are crucial to understanding the course of the English Reformation, and have implications for early modern English history as a whole. In this article, we undertake a focused examination of the Long Reformation from a novel and, at first glance, unlikely vantage point: accounts of early Christian martyrs written by John Foxe (c.1517-1587) in his ecclesiastical history, the *Actes and Monumentes*.¹ Scholars of the Long Reformation have

¹ John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous days* (first printed 1563; STC 11222). Hereafter *AM* 91563). Subsequent editions of this work published in 1570 (STC 11223), 1576 (STC 11224) and 1583 (STC 11225) will be referred to as *AM* (1570), *AM* (1576), and *AM* (1583). Because of

emphasized messy negotiations, areas of continuity, and slow changes.² Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, with its sharp anti-Catholic polemic and insistence that many medieval religious practices were corruptions introduced by Antichrist, might seem an unpromising place to look for the Long Reformation. The unpromising begins to border on the paradoxical when one considers that the concept of a "Long Reformation," of Protestantism's gradual triumph over traditional Catholic beliefs and practices, is not one that Foxe would have accepted. He acknowledged that Martin Luther (1483-1546) inspired a Reformation of the church which Foxe regarded as miraculous.³ But Foxe would have seen this Reformation as necessarily brief because he believed that the Last Judgement, the triumph of the True Church, and the end of the world were imminent, likely to arrive within his lifetime or that of his sons.⁴ While he would not have recognized a "Long Reformation," Foxe was nevertheless painfully aware of popular resistance to godly reform, the strength of "superstitious" traditions, and the slow spread of Protestant doctrines and practices. In this article, we argue that the strength of traditional veneration for early Church virgin martyrs pushed Foxe into a conspicuously, self-consciously moderate narration of their lives and achievements.

the uncertainty surrounding the biographies of early Christian martyrs, we are not supplying birth or death dates for these figures.

² Lucy Bates, "The Limits of Possibility in England's Long Reformation," *The Historical Journal* 53:4 (2010), 1049-1070. Also see Eamon Duffy's Neale lecture and Patrick Collinson's response in *England's Long Reformation 1500-1800*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (London: University College of London P, 1998), chaps. 2 and 3.

³ *AM* (1570), 993.

⁴ Palle J. Olsen, "Was John Foxe a Millenarian?", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), 600-624.

These narratives and their significance have been overlooked because of two considerable *lacunae* in studies of Foxe's martyrology. First, analyses of the *Actes and Monuments* are overwhelmingly concentrated on those sections that cover the English Reformation; scholarship on Foxe's early church material is comparatively scarce. Second, most analyses of Foxe's text do not compare it with Foxe's sources. Yet such comparisons reveal complexities in Foxe's thought and presentation of the past that are not apparent when reading his words in isolation. Some scholarship has argued for continuities between Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* and the *Legenda Aurea*, the popular late medieval hagiographical collection compiled by Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1230-1298).⁵ But one should not assume that the *Legenda Aurea* is broadly representative of medieval hagiography, nor that it is the most valuable comparative text for examining Foxe's responses to medieval hagiography. Like his reforming Catholic counterparts—Melchior Cano (c. 1509-1560), Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540), Georg Witzel (1501-1573), and Cesare Baronio (1538-1607)—Foxe is well aware of the *Legenda Aurea's* limitations.⁶ He takes a famous swipe at it in a frequently quoted preface, but within his

⁵ See, for example, Alice Dailey, *The English Martyr from Reformation to Revolution* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 55-59, 61 and 65 as well as Fiona Kao, "John Foxe's Golden Saints? Ways of Reading Foxe's Female Martyrs in the Light of Voragine's *Golden Legend*" in *Contextualising Miracles in the Christian West, 1100-1500*, eds. Matthew M. Mesley and Louise E. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 197-228.

⁶ By the early sixteenth century, the *Legenda Aurea* was discredited among many Catholic scholars, as the steady decline of Latin editions after 1490 evinces. See Sherry Reames, *The Legenda Aurea: A Reexamination of its Paradoxical History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin P, 1985), esp. chapters 1 and 2. Recently Morgan Ring has argued that the decline of the *Legenda Aurea's* credibility was neither as sudden nor as complete as Reames has depicted (Morgan Ring, "The *Golden Legend* and the

martyrology proper he never treats it as a precedent worth extensive contestation, and he almost never used it as a source.⁷ By contrast, Foxe studies other hagiographic texts, sifting them for their usefulness as sources; importantly for our work here, he makes that sifting transparent to readers whose critical faculties he tries to inspire. Close comparisons with those sources offer a precise gauge of his desire to reform (or preserve) aspects of medieval hagiography.

Consequently, we take a detailed look at Foxe's work with his sources on early Christian virgin martyrs. Recently, scholars have shown considerable interest in Foxe's narratives of Marian female martyrs.⁸ Much less has been written on his treatment of virgin martyrs from

English Reformation, c. 1483-1625," University of Cambridge PhD dissertation, 2017, 91-96 and 149-58). There is probably a good deal of truth in Ring's nuanced observations, but it cannot be denied that the *Legenda Aurea* was widely discredited among Catholic and Protestant writers by the time Foxe began working on the *Actes and Monuments*.

⁷ See the preface "Ad doctum lectorem" (*AM* [1563], sig. B3v) in which Foxe calls the *Golden Legend* a collection of fabulous, vain fictions. Apart from this, Foxe presents only two further direct criticisms of the *Legend Aurea* in all of the *Actes and Monuments*; both of these were introduced in the fourth (1583) edition. In one case, Foxe referred to Voragine's work as the "legende of lyes" and in the other he related a story of Edward VI (r. 1547-53) mocking the implausible details in the story of St George in the *Legenda Aurea* (*AM* [1583], 1026 and 1419). Additionally, Foxe ridiculed the story of a particular miracle in the *Legenda Aurea*, but his objective was to undermine the credibility of the miracle, not of the *Legenda Aurea*; in fact, Foxe does not mention the *Legenda Aurea* but simply states that the story was found in "Iacopus de Voragine" (*AM* 1570, 174). To the best of our knowledge, apart from this single example, Foxe never used the *Legenda Aurea* as a source. Ring also argues that there was a "kinship" between the *Golden Legend* and the *Actes and Monuments* (Ring, "*Golden Legend*", 143-4). Apart from shared tropes common to numerous martyrologies and hagiographies—many demonstrably read by Foxe—this "kinship" rests on the physical format and size of the volumes, the placement of both works in churches and on display in houses and also on Foxe's preface "Ad doctum lectorem." There is no solid evidence that Foxe was influenced by, or imitated, Voragine's work.

⁸ For a sample of the rich work on Foxe's female Marian martyrs, see Megan Hickerson, *Making Women Martyrs in Tudor England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Patrick Collinson, "What are the

the early church.⁹ But these stories are an important subset of the foundation of the expanded second edition of the *Actes and Monuments*, in which Foxe offers his account of the true church from its apostolic inception through the sixteenth century. Because these virgin martyr legends derive from patristic and medieval hagiographies, they present some challenges for Foxe. We focus on two of their most prominent features: their celebrations of virginity, and the miracles they relate. Foxe's work with these legends evinces some continuity with medieval attitudes. He readily praises these martyrs for their virginity; if his praise is occasionally modified from that in his sources, the correction is mild. With respect to miracles, Foxe's responses are often determined by factors such as his opinion of the reliability of his sources and the didactic and doctrinal lessons the miracle taught. In an approach both scholarly and cautious, one that suggests an awareness of some readers' lingering religious conservatism, Foxe carefully reveals his sources and his assessments of the miracles they describe.

Women Doing in Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'?" in *Women and Religion in the Atlantic Age, 1550-1900*, eds. Emily Clark and Mary Laven (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 15-32; Ellen Macek, "The Emergence of a Feminine Spirituality in the *Book of Martyrs*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19:1 (1988), 63-80; Susannah Brietz Monta, "Foxe's Female Martyrs and the Sanctity of Transgression," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Reforme* 25:1 (2001), 3-22 and Marsha S. Robinson, "Doctors, Silly Poor Women and Rebel Whores: The Gendering of Conscience in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*" in *John Foxe and his World*, eds. Christopher Highley and John N. King (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 235-48.

⁹ Kao, "John Foxe's Golden Saints?" is an exception, though her tight focus on Foxe's supposed connections to the *Golden Legend* distorts her findings (she does not consider biblical precedent, for instance, nor examine Foxe's acknowledged medieval sources closely).

Virgin martyrs were widely popular in the later Middle Ages.¹⁰ But their popularity cannot be read simplistically, for the meanings of virginity are always determined by context.¹¹ Similarly, the meanings of virginity in the sixteenth century were varied. English Protestants did not simply reject virginity in favor of married chastity. To do so under Elizabeth I would have been impolitic, to say the least; Helen Hackett has gone so far as to suggest that Protestants valued lifelong virginity so highly that they thought it restricted to only a precious few who maintained self-discipline-- such as their queen.¹² Foxe is willing to uphold traditional attitudes towards virginity in some instances. The resistant, suffering virgin body may have proved useful for his self-assigned task: the historical recovery of the true, pure, persecuted church.¹³ At the same time, Foxe shares with medieval hagiographers some uneasiness about the often bold, loquacious resistance of virgin martyrs to established authorities, and some hesitation to generalize their resistance beyond martyrdom's stark circumstances.

¹⁰ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 171-77 and Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40-52. For the popularity of a particular virgin martyr see Katherine J. Lewis, "Pilgrimage and the Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England" in *Pilgrimage Explored*, ed. J. Stopford (York: York Medieval Press: 1999), 145-60.

¹¹ Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau, and Ruth Evans, "Introduction: Virginites and Virginity Studies," *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Bernau, Evans, and Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 1-13.

¹² Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

¹³ Compare Bernau: for Foxe, "both the text and the nation's history, in their ideal state, are imagined to be like the prelapsarian, unfragmented body of the virgin" ("Saint, Witch, Man, Maid or Whore?" Joan of Arc and Writing History," *Medieval Virginites*, 214-233, 218).

Foxe's treatment of miracles in his accounts of virgin martyrs is even more complex. Recently, some scholars have sharply contrasted Foxean and Catholic treatments of miracles.¹⁴ The authors of this article have both been accused of eliding miracles, marvels, and providential wonders in Foxe's work.¹⁵ But the trouble is that Foxe often does it for us. In his first (1563) edition, he describes Elizabeth's survival of Mary's reign as "a playne miracle of divine providence"; in the next edition, Foxe celebrates Elizabeth's "miraculous preservation."¹⁶ The wondrous cross Constantine sees in the sky, after which he fights the Battle of Milvian Bridge, is a "miracle"; so is Rowland Taylor's preaching (a "miracle" for our time), Bishop Hooper's patience despite suffering (a "myracle"), and James Bainham's feeling no pain (a "myracle").¹⁷ Foxe comfortably uses the term "miracle" to describe a wondrous or a providential event (the distinction is not consistent) that affirms his ecclesiastical history. Others have been more nuanced in their discussions of Protestant attitudes towards miracles; we take their cues.¹⁸ For despite his famous attacks on the "powdered and sauced miracles" with which medieval

¹⁴ Anastasia Stylianou, "Martyrs' blood in the English Reformations," *British Catholic History* 33:4 (2017): 543-5; complete article 534-60. and Dailey, *English Martyr*, 63-6. Stylianou's declaration that "The *Acts and Monuments* replaces supernatural signifiers with natural signifiers" (544) is, at best, an oversimplification.

¹⁵ Stylianou, "Martyrs," 544, n.1.

¹⁶ *AM* (1563), 1695; *AM* (1570), 2288.

¹⁷ John Foxe, *AM* (1583), 85, 1512, 1521, 1030. Bainham's example is complex. His declaration echoes statements by two saints in the *Golden Legend*, yet Foxe had no qualms in reporting these words. See Thomas S. Freeman, "The Importance of Dying Earnestly: The Metamorphosis of the Account of James Bainham in Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs' in *The Church Retrospective*, ed. R. N. Swanson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997), 279-80.

¹⁸ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Walsham, "Miracles in Post-Reformation England," *Church History* 41 (2005), 273-306 and Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

hagiographers blighted virgin martyrs' supposedly pure stories, Foxe, too, is more nuanced than he might first appear to be.¹⁹

When we trace the *sources* of Foxe's miracles, we see the Reformation in action as Foxe makes adjustments, sometimes quite small, to the material he used. It is critically important to compare Foxe's work to that of contemporaries engaged in similar projects -- the Magdeburg Centuriators above all. The Centuriators, a team of Lutheran scholars, wrote a massive history of the church down to the year 1298. (Because the work was written at Magdeburg and divided into centuries, it was called the "Magdeburg Centuries" rather than by its proper title:

Ecclesiastica historia.)²⁰ While writing his history of the early church, Foxe continually consulted the first four volumes of the "Magdeburg Centuries." Sometimes he repeated extracts from the Centuries; more often, he revised or rewrote them. While Foxe consulted other sources on early Christian martyrs, the "Magdeburg Centuries" were his most important source for this period.²¹ When Foxe differs from the Centuriators, it is almost certainly the result of his

¹⁹ *AM* (1570), 132. In another oft-quoted passage, Foxe, reacting to a monastic hagiographer's account of St. Alban, castigates "monkish miracles and grosse fables wherewith these Abbey Monkes were wont in tyme past to deceive the church of God" (*AM* [1570], 124). Yet elsewhere on the same page, Foxe is more temperate. Although Bede's account is studded with legends which Foxe denounces as "more legendlike than truthlike" he "leave[s] them to the iugement of the Reader, to thinke of them, as cause shall move him." Foxe's reactions to miraculous tales are more complicated than absolute, unthinking rejection.

²⁰ *Ecclesiastica historia*, eds. M. Flacius, M. Judex and J. Wigand, 13 vols. (Basle: Johann Oporinus, 1559-1574) VD16, E218-E238 (www.bsb-meunchen.de/sammlungen/historische-drucke/receherche/vd-16/), hereafter cited as *EH*.

²¹ Almost every scholar has overlooked Foxe's dependence on the Magdeburg Centuries for his accounts of early Christian martyrs. Matthew Philpott is the lone exception, though he does not examine many

conscious decision. Foxe openly names patristic and medieval hagiographers with whom he engages; again, close comparison reveals Foxe's dependencies, omissions, and adjustments. Comparison with contemporary Catholic texts is also helpful: with Alonso de Villegas's *Flos Sanctorum* (first published in Toledo in 1582), for instance, which embraces the populism of the *Legenda Aurea* but shows evidence of Counter-Reformation chastening. Careful comparative work reveals that Foxe is more willing than the Centuriators to include miracles from those patristic sources that, overall, he trusts. His sharpest comments are reserved for medieval writers whose work he finds suspect -- in keeping with his historical narrative about a pure early church whose teachings were corrupted by medieval errors. Yet Foxe sometimes hesitates to excise certain miracles entirely, even those about which he expresses skepticism. Foxe frequently makes his qualifications and hesitations visible. His cautiously moderate presentation of virgin martyr legends may have been a calculated concession to readers' conservatism where these popular martyrs were concerned.

What, then, constitutes a Foxean reformation of a virgin martyr legend? Foxe is not naïve (in the miracles he retains), manipulative (selecting only those that reinforce his beliefs), nor simply dismissive (as an over-reliance on his more polemical moments might lead us to conclude). Neither rejecting his sources wholesale nor embracing them wholeheartedly, he carefully studies and weighs their claims. His hesitations and qualifications suggest the strain of

of the other sources Foxe drew on regularly for what he termed the first ten persecutions of the Christian church (Philpott, *The Reformation of England's Past* [New York and London: Routledge, 2018], 33, 49, 94 and 102-4).

the Reformation historian's work as he stitches together a narrative necessarily reliant on a range of sources from fathers of the Church to monastic hagiographers. Foxe's care in acquiring and evaluating sources on the virgin martyrs indicates the importance he attached to their role in the history of the Church and in his reforming project.

"Unspotted and undefiled": Foxe's virgin martyrs

Foxe's interest in virgin martyrs is evident in his 1570 martyrology's first section, in which he praises "holye maydes and virgines" who suffered under Rome's persecutions.²² An examination of Foxe's work with his sources reveals several tendencies: a reliance, though not absolute, on the Centuriators; and careful study -- not blanket rejection -- of medieval hagiographers. Foxe's interest in the virginity of early church martyrs sometimes leads him to push beyond what the Centuriators offer.²³ In the case of the virgin martyr Theodora, for instance, Foxe went out of his way to research this "example of singular chastity." Foxe likely first read her story in Ambrose's *De virginibus*, a late fourth-century treatise defending virginity (and asceticism more generally). But there, although her story is told, she is not named. The Centuriators, too, do not identify Theodora with the martyr Ambrose discusses. To link Ambrose's anonymous martyr with Theodora, Foxe had to do some careful cross-reading with Ado of Vienne (d. 875) who, in repeating Ambrose's story, added Theodora's name. (Ado was

²² *AM* (1570), 133.

²³ To some extent, Foxe's interest includes male martyrs; a story celebrating male chastity precedes his tale of Theodora, for instance.

the compiler of a martyrology which, because of its apparent verisimilitude, Foxe consulted repeatedly.) Foxe's interest in virgin martyrs, then, went beyond a simple replication of sources; it motivated detailed research. These martyrs may have been of interest for several reasons. Because their popularity lingered throughout the sixteenth century, Foxe may have desired to link his story of the true church to their legends.²⁴ Their stories also offer starkly-drawn, gendered versions of tales repeated throughout the *Actes and Monuments*, tales of vulnerable people emboldened by faith to speak against persecutors.

A vivid example of such a story was the narrative of the martyrdom of Eulalia of Mérida, written by the Christian poet Prudentius (348-c. 405). Foxe's story of the virgin martyr demonstrates his ready acceptance of Prudentius's praise of virginity. Foxe's preamble emphasizes the constancy of "women and maidens" who, during the Great Persecution (303-312), "gave their bodies to tormentes, and their lives for the testimonie of Christ, with no lesse boldnese of spirite, then did the men ... to whom how much more inferior they were in bodily strength, so much more worthy of prayse they be, for their constant standing."²⁵ The strength-

²⁴ Focusing largely on the Virgin Mary, Christine Peters narrates a continuing yet changing veneration towards Mary and female saints (*Patterns of Piety: Women, Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Reformation England* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 207-45). Indications of virgin martyrs' popularity appear throughout the sixteenth century. In 1586, William Camden (1555-1623) observed that young women continued to pray to Katherine of Alexandria and keep fasts in her honor (Lewis, 157-8). Alexandra Walsham has noted a bequest in a 1558 Cornish will to 'St Agnes ys foote', likely a reference to a small shrine at a place on the north coast of Cornwall where the saint's footprint was believed to have been impressed in the rock, as well as the 1612 rededication of a chapel connected with a spring to St. Agnes (*Reformation of the Landscape*, 55, 268).

²⁵ *AM* (1570), 130.

within-weakness paradigm is on display here: women's weak bodies make their constancy all the more admirable.²⁶ This paradigm inflects Foxe's portrayal of Eulalia, "a virgine borne of noble parentage": the "blessed virgine Eulalia" is "modest and discret" but "wittie and sharpe in aunswering her enemyes." Foxe's language is tamer than Prudentius's, who describes her thus: "With her bold spirit she made ready to shatter the violent onslaught, and with the heart in her young breast panting for God, female as she was she challenged the weapons of men."²⁷ In Foxe's account, the command to sacrifice to idols kindles Eulalia's "blessed spirite"; her boldness is triggered by persecution, and will be circumscribed by her death. Still, her bravery is considerable: Eulalia does not shirk persecution, but escapes her family to present herself as a Christian before a Roman tribunal. The result is predictable: she is executed for her faith, first gored by hangmen and then burned. Drawing on Prudentius, Foxe insists that her hair covers her "shamefaste chastitie and Virginitie" while she is in the fire. Like Prudentius, Foxe nevertheless gives a highly eroticized account of Eulalia's death, offering her body to readers' imaginations: "freshe bloud" proceeds out of "her mangled members" "as out of a warme fountain" to "[bathe] her whyte and fayre skinne."²⁸ Her suffering body possesses an alluring

²⁶ Kao, "John Foxe's Golden Martyrs?", slightly misconstrues this paradigm (200-01), in which the outspokenness of a female martyr is surprising -- and valuable -- because of the presumption of her physical weakness.

²⁷ Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, III, lines 34-5. The *Peristephanon* will hereafter be abbreviated as *Pe*. All quotations will be from H. J. Thomson's translation of the *Peristephanon* in vol. II of the Loeb Classical Library's two volume edition of the works of Prudentius (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

²⁸ *AM* (1570), 131.

purity upon which the reader is invited to gaze. The sensuous description suggests one reason that virgin martyrs remained so important to Foxe: they figure in miniature the vulnerable, suffering, pure church whose story he labors to make visible.

In Foxe's martyrology, St. Agnes's story immediately follows Eulalia's. The stories share similar emphases: the purity of the virgin's suffering body and her outspoken boldness in certain circumstances. In most versions of Agnes's tale, she is a young girl, barely of marriageable age. In some versions, she draws authorities' attention because she refuses to sacrifice to idols; in others, she is pursued by a young man but rejects him because she loves a better man -- Christ. Presented before a government official, she is told to sacrifice to idols, and threatened either with rape or confinement in a brothel if she refuses -- which of course she does. In some versions, she is exposed on a public square; only one man dares to look lustfully on her, and his eyes are struck out (sometimes, in response to her prayers, his sight is restored). In other versions, Agnes is dragged to a brothel, where her hair rapidly grows to cover her body and an angel defends her; the young man attempts to rape her but is struck dead, and her prayers revive him. An executioner is summoned, but Agnes remains unafraid. In some versions, she is put in a fire, which refuses to consume her. She is then stabbed in the throat or beheaded, and so dies. The differences in these versions stem in part from the differences between three sources: Ambrose's *De virginibus*, a hymn which is a pseudo-Ambrosian source, and Prudentius's poem (upon which Foxe draws). Like Prudentius and Ambrose before him,

Foxe's challenge is to make the martyr's vulnerable purity and outspoken boldness point to a suffering but orthodox church, steadfast but not unruly.

For Foxe's purposes, Agnes's virginity proves useful, and he emphasizes it more than do the Centuriators.²⁹ At the beginning of her story, Foxe translates Prudentius's description of her -- "primis in annis forte puellulam" -- as "young and not maryable."³⁰ If anything, Foxe goes a bit further than Prudentius in stressing Agnes's virginity. Foxe's Agnes asserts that Christ protects virgins, and will not suffer them to lose "their golden and pure chastity." Here, "pure chastity" would seem to imply virginity; Foxe translates Prudentius's "aureum ... pudorem," and agrees with the modern Loeb translator in rendering "pudor" as "chastity."³¹ Foxe remarks that "Agnes for her unspotted and undefiled virginitie deserveth no greater prayse and commendation, than for her wylling death and martyrdom she deserveth."³² This statement might seem to demote her virginity. But a comparison with Foxe's sources is instructive, for the Centuriators make no such statement. Instead, Foxe closely follows Prudentius, who celebrates both her virginity and her willing self-sacrifice: "A double crown of martyrdom was vouchsafed to her, the keeping of her virginity untouched by any sin, and then the glory of her dying by her own

²⁹ The Centuriators barely mention Agnes' virginity, merely stating that she was 'nobilis Romanae virginis'. Nor do they describe her execution in any detail. Their brief account (about 35 lines long) is devoted to declaring that the hymn about her, usually ascribed to Ambrose, was not by the patristic father and to debunking miracles attributed to her (*EH* IV, col. 1410).

³⁰ Cf. *Pe* XIV, line 11 and *AM* (1570), 131.

³¹ Cf. *AM* (1570), 131 and *Pe* XIV, lines 33-4.

³² *AM* (1570), 131.

will."³³ Foxe's rhetoric builds towards his sentence's second half -- the "wyllyng death and martyrdom." But his parallel doublets -- "unspotted and undefiled virginitie" and "death and martyrdom" -- hint at Prudentius's double crown. While Foxe's emphasis may seem to temper his praise of virginity and elevate martyrdom, Prudentius has the same order: virginity, and then a willing death.

Foxe thus follows Prudentius in praising Agnes's virginity *and* her willing self-sacrifice. He also, like Prudentius, tempers her boldness. In Prudentius's poem, Agnes offers her breast to the executioner -- a "savage, cruel, wild man-at-arms," a "lover" who pleases her -- in sensual language, desiring to be penetrated for Christ. Foxe's Agnes speaks similarly: "This, even this is he I now confes, that I do love. I will make hast to meete him, and wil no lenger protract my longing desire: I wil willingly receave into my pappes the length of thy sword, and into my brest wyl draw the force therof, even unto the hyltes," a consummation that will leave her "maryed unto Christ my spouse" (Prudentius's Agnes describes herself as "nupta Christo" -- Christ's bride).³⁴ But in both Foxe and Prudentius, Agnes's actual execution denies her this consummation. Prudentius substitutes the submissive neck for her bold offering of the breast: "so saying she bowd her head and humbly worshipped Christ, so that her bending neck should be readier to suffer the impending blow."³⁵ Foxe follows Prudentius, though without the

³³*Pe* XIV, lines 7-9.

³⁴ *AM* (1570), 131.

³⁵ In his Agnes poem, Prudentius tames classical literary treatments of Polyxena, a Trojan virgin who escapes slavery and rape through a sacrificial death on Achilles's tomb (*Aeneid* 3.321-4), and denies

emphasis on her humility: "Thus speaking and kneeling upon her knees, she praieth unto Christ above in heaven, that her neck might be the redier for the sword, now hanging over the same."³⁶ In both writers, Agnes invites death-as-consummation but dies in a nonsexualized, relatively submissive manner. For Foxe, as for Prudentius, the maintenance of her virginity is so important that, in the end, it may not be even figuratively contaminated. Together with other virgin martyrs, Agnes must be pure in order to anchor Foxe's history of a suffering, bold, spotlessly faithful church.

"Poudered and sawced"? Miracles in Foxe's virgin martyr legends

Foxe's handling of miracles in virgin martyr legends is even more complex. Foxe is keen to reveal and make intelligible his labors to weigh the credibility of various miracles. He often describes exactly what he's omitting, for instance, and refers readers to sources he has consulted in order to exercise their own judgements. Foxe's work again includes careful assessment of sources -- patristic sources are generally, but not always, deemed more reliable than medieval ones. But Foxe can also be slightly softer in his stance towards miracles than are the Centuriators, and is sometimes willing to retain miracles that they reject.

Foxe's preamble to his account of Katherine of Alexandria is often quoted as representative of his attitude towards miracles. There, Foxe complains about saints' lives that

Agnes the eroticized penetration she requests. See Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The rhetoric of gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995), 25-46.

³⁶ *AM* (1570), 132.

have been "poudered and sawced" with "fabulous inventions of men," so that "few legends" are able "to abyde the touche of history."³⁷ A comparison of Foxe's and the Centuriators' accounts of Katherine, however, reveals that Foxe's attitude towards miracles allegedly performed by early Christian martyrs cannot be accurately summarized so simply. Because Katherine's cult does not begin until the ninth century, there are no patristic accounts of her. The earliest mention of Katherine is in an early ninth century German manuscript; the earliest extant version of her life is in Simon Metaphrastes's hagiography, written in the early 960s.³⁸ What we have in Foxe's statement, then, is a rebuke to medieval hagiographers whose work he often distrusts, not a criticism of miracles *tout court*. In fact, he is less critical of miracles in Katherine's story than the Centuriators are. The Centuriators knew the accounts by Metaphrastes, Petrus de Natalibus, and "Bergomensis";³⁹ they criticize the latter two. Foxe closely follows the Centuriators but also consulted Petrus de Natalibus himself, adding details not in the "Centuries."⁴⁰

³⁷ AM [1570], 132.

³⁸ *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and contexts in western medieval Europe*, eds. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 7.

³⁹ Giacomo Filippo Foresti (1434-1520), from Bergamo, was an Augustinian monk, noted author, and historian. Foxe drew on his *De Claris mulieribus* [On Famous Women] for accounts of early Christian female martyrs. Petrus de Natalibus was bishop of Equillio in northern Italy from 1370 until at least 1400 (he was last mentioned in a document in that year; his successor was installed in 1406). He is the author of a *Catalogus Sanctorum* which Foxe cited frequently.

⁴⁰ Cf. AM [1570], 132 with EH IV, cols. 1419-21 [recte 1420] and Petrus de Natalibus, *Catalogus sanctorum* (Paris: Jacques de Sacan, 1514), 109v.

Katherine was one of the most popular virgin martyrs of the later Middle Ages. According to the so-called Vulgate version of her life, she was martyred in the fourth century. In this version, Katherine refuses to obey the emperor's decree that all in Alexandria must worship idols. She gets the better of him in debate and is imprisoned. He then sends fifty scholars to dispute with her, but they fare no better: defeated, they convert to Christianity and are martyred. The emperor sends more to her -- his wife, the captain of his guard, his soldiers -- but they, too, convert. Finally, he threatens to torture her on a wheel full of sharp knives. But the wheel is destroyed before it can harm her (though it does kill others). The emperor's wife protests her treatment; for her pains, her breasts are cut off and she is martyred, along with the converted soldiers. Finally, Katherine is beheaded; angels carry her body to Mount Sinai.⁴¹

Both Foxe and the Centuriators criticize the "invented nonsense" (Centuriators) and "fabulous inventions" (Foxe) that accrued in Katherine's legends.⁴² The Centuriators mention some of these stories only to dismiss them: that Katherine was converted by a vision of Mary and Jesus, for instance. They accept Bergomensis' account of her refusal to sacrifice to idols and her imprisonment. They then relate the story of an angel comforting her in prison, but with qualification: "this story we leave to everyone's opinion."⁴³ They briefly allude to the stories of her conversions of fifty philosophers, the captain, soldiers, and the empress, but also offer these tales to readers' judgement. Foxe recounts the vision of Mary and Christ in greater detail,

⁴¹ *St. Katherine of Alexandria*, 5.

⁴² *EH*, century IV, col. 1419; *AM* (1570), 132.

⁴³ 'Sed hoc in medio nos relinquimus' (*EH* IV, col. 1421 [recte 1420]).

suggesting that he read Petrus de Natalibus for himself, and ultimately deems the story "impudent." But he handles the angelic prison visitation differently. His angelic visitation anecdote follows a passage dependent on Bergomensis that, he writes, "semeth hitherto not much to digres from truth." His version of what the angel says to Katherine is close to the Centurians': the angel offers comfort and exhorts her to be strong and constant. But Foxe implies that this story is more believable than those he omits -- stories about the conversions of fifty philosophers, the soldiers and the empress. And where the Centurians leave the angelic visitation "story" to "everyone's opinion," Foxe has no such qualification.⁴⁴

Foxe may be inclined to maintain the angelic prison visitation because it has biblical precedent (angels interact with imprisoned Christians in Acts 5 and 12). Katherine's angel is easily reconciled with a biblical text cited in much Protestant writing on angels: "Are they [angels] not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister, for their sakes which shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1:14).⁴⁵ As Walsham and Marshall have shown, angels' biblical credentials gave them a consistent if complex place in the Protestant imagination: an angelology emphasizing protection and consolation thrived alongside persistent older attitudes.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁴ *EH*, IV, cols. 1419-21; *AM* (1570), 132

⁴⁵ Bruce Gordon, "Malevolent ghosts and ministering angels: apparitions and pastoral care in the Swiss Reformation," in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87-109, 106. We cite the 1599 Geneva translation of the Bible.

⁴⁶ Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, "Migrations of angels in the early modern world," *Angels in the Early Modern World*, ed. Marshall and Walsham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-40, 14.

angel story portrays Katherine as a brave, faithful, isolated figure strengthened by God to speak against powerful persecutors – the basic story Foxe repeats throughout his text. In the *Flos Sanctorum*, the angel stresses that God will supplement Katherine's natural wisdom, gained by hard work, so that she may defeat her enemies: "unto thy humane wisdom, gotten by studie and paines, shalbe adioyned wisdom infused, and supernaturall: with which thou shalt overcome those philosophers, and shalt reduce them, and many others to the faith of CHRIST."⁴⁷ Neither Foxe's Katherine nor the Centuriators' has such natural wisdom. In Foxe, the angel promises that God will "geve a mouth and wisdom, which her enemies should not withstand."⁴⁸ Her outspokenness and wisdom are neither natural nor earned in part by study, but given entirely by God. A side note to Katherine's account invokes the category of probability in hagiography: "All thynges be not true & Probable, that be wrytten of saintes lyves."⁴⁹ Here, what seems probable for Foxe is angelic comfort and the direct inspiration of the female martyr's boldness and wisdom.

Given Foxe's return to sources the Centuriators dismissed, and his inclusion of a miracle that they treated with some skepticism, we should not take the preamble to Katherine's account as a straightforward indication of Foxe's attitudes to miracles. Rather, the remark criticizes aspects of his medieval sources. His evaluative work usually demotes medieval hagiographers, though again Foxe is sometimes more willing to draw on them than the

⁴⁷ Alonso de Villegas, *Flos Sanctorum*, trans. Edward Kinesman (Douai, 1614), 445.

⁴⁸ *AM* (1570), 132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Centuriators are. In his approach to St. Agatha, for example, Foxe is not content to follow the Centuriators, who offer only the briefest account, stating that "Bergomensis" records her as a virgin martyr from Sicily.⁵⁰ Instead, Foxe examines "Bergomensis" for himself. There, he finds a story of "an holy virgin" who "is sayd to suffer" a remarkable list of torments: imprisonment, beatings, starvation, racking, rolling upon sharp shells and hot coals, and the cutting off of her breasts.⁵¹ He speculates that "part of the storye may be true"; he mentions some miracles (mostly apparitions of heavenly figures proclaiming Agatha's sanctity) but "doubt[s]" their veracity. Unlike the Centuriators, Foxe does not simply omit problematic passages but makes areas of doubt legible to his readers. Foxe handles St. Cecilia in a roughly similar way. Again, he does not rely on the Centuriators alone but returns to medieval sources: Antoninus, Bergomensis, Petrus de Natalibus, and Ado of Vienne above all.⁵² Foxe includes Ado's wondrous story that "Cecilie the Virgine" was placed in a scalding hot bath for a day and night that felt "as in a colde place."⁵³ He repeats with some hesitation the claim that her head was not cut off after three strikes, and that she lived for three days afterwards -- "as the story geveth."⁵⁴ At the end of her account, he mentions "straunge miracles" in her "history"; these involve visions of

⁵⁰ *EH* III, col. 19.

⁵¹ Compare *AM* (1570), 91 with Jacobus Philippus Bergomensis, *De memorabilis et claris mulieribus* (Paris: Simon de Colines, 1521), fo. 69r-v.

⁵² *AM* (1570), 85. St Antoninus (1309-1459) was an Archbishop of Florence. He wrote a chronicle which narrated the history of the world from its creation to the end of the fourteenth century.

⁵³ *AM* (1570), 85.

⁵⁴ Compare Ado of Vienne, "Martyrologium," in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 volumes (Paris: 1844-64), 123, col. 398. Hereafter Ado's martyrology will be cited as Migne, *PL* 123.

an active guardian angel who protected Cecilia's virginity. Visions of guardian angels seem less plausible to Foxe than angelic prison visitors. Still, Foxe declines to dispute whether these tales "be true or fabulous," notes that their sources are "newe legends" (not patristic sources), and then "refer[s]" these legends "thether from whence they came."⁵⁵ Foxe undermines portions of his medieval sources rather than simply cutting what was objectionable. Unlike the Centuriators, who briefly state that Cecilia was tortured and beheaded for refusing to worship idols, Foxe allows readers to see his hagiographic reformation, to witness what he carries forward (the hot bath that feels cool), what he doubts (Cecilia's resistance to execution), and what he rejects (visions of a guardian angel).

This is not to say that Foxe relies unthinkingly on patristic sources. In several instances, he does not follow a patristic source because the miracle in question would foster the cult of the saints, complete with intercessory prayer, relics, and shrines. In his account of Agnes, Foxe cuts Prudentius's first nine lines, which describe Agnes as an intercessor for Rome's sins; a description of her soul's ascension to heaven; and Prudentius's prayer to Agnes to intercede with God on his behalf.⁵⁶ Similarly, Foxe cuts material from his account of the widow and martyr Julitta that would support the cult of the saints. In his sermon on Julitta, Basil of Caesarea relates that she died peacefully at the stake, that her body was undamaged by fire,

⁵⁵ *AM* (1570), 85.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Pe* XIV, lines 1-9, 92-111 and 124-35 with *AM* [1570], 132.

and that a healing spring rose up where she was buried.⁵⁷ While they draw on Basil for their accounts of Julitta, neither the Centuriators nor Foxe maintains these points. Both follow Basil in writing that, before her death, Julitta offered a moving speech encouraging other women (though Foxe adds a phrase that is pessimistic about women's natural strength).⁵⁸ In Basil's sermon, her body remains intact after she dies in a fire that does not touch her, underscoring her speech's claims about women's strength. Foxe simply writes that Julitta "embraced the fire, and sweetly slept in the Lord."⁵⁹ There is no preservation of Julitta's body in Foxe, while the preservation was paramount for Basil due to the martyr's shrine in Caesarea, and the commemorative celebration for which his sermon was written.

In the case of the virgin martyr Eulalia, Foxe follows Prudentius's account of several miracles in her story, while mentioning others with ambivalence. Both Foxe and the Centuriators rely on Prudentius for Eulalia's story -- perhaps inevitably, as later literature on Eulalia is sparse, despite her cult's popularity.⁶⁰ The Centuriators reprint only the first half of Prudentius's poem, ending their selection just after her death.⁶¹ Foxe closely paraphrases Prudentius's poem, but includes details about miracles associated with her martyrdom, some of which are drawn from the poem's second half. Both the Centuriators and Foxe repeat

⁵⁷ Basil, "In martyrem Iulitta," in *Magni Basilii Opera*, trans. Raffaello Maffei (Rome: Jacopo Mazochio, 1515), fo. 119r. Maffei's was the standard Latin edition of St. Basil's works in the sixteenth century and likely used by both the Centuriators and Foxe.

⁵⁸ Compare Basil, "In martyrem Iulitta," fo. 119r; *EH*, century IV, col. 1407; and *AM* (1570), 132.

⁵⁹ *AM* (1570), 133.

⁶⁰ A.M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 239.

⁶¹ *EH* IV, cols. 1411-13.

Prudentius's claim that Eulalia was accompanied by an "angelicall garde" as she fled from her family in order to proclaim her Christianity publicly.⁶² Foxe stresses the biblical precedent for this wonder: "this godly virgine" enjoys angelic guidance just "as the children of Israell comming out of Egypt, had by the mightie power of God, a cloudye piller for their guide in the day, and a flame of fire in the night." Foxe departs from the Centuriators, though, in listing miracles associated with Eulalia's death: "The said Prudentius and Ado, also Equilinus adde moreover, writing of a white dove issuing oute of her mouth at her departyng, and of the fire quenched about her body, also of her body covered miraculously with snow, with other thinges more, wherof let every reader use his own judgement."⁶³ The Centuriators omit these entirely. Foxe is willing to mention them, along with the claim that at her execution the pyre would not ignite, a claim derived from a seventh-century source upon which Ado and Petrus de Natilibus draw.⁶⁴ Foxe again invites readers into the process of reforming medieval hagiography: "let every reader use his own judgement."⁶⁵ He seems reluctant either to dismiss or endorse miracle stories that Prudentius, Ado of Vienne, and "Equilinus" (Petrus de Natalibus) included.

In Foxe's account of Agnes another complaint about miracles appears: "Some writers make of her a long discourse, more in my iudgement than necessary, reciting divers and sundry

⁶² *AM* (1570), 130, translating the Centuriators and Prudentius: "angelico comitate choro" (*Pe* III, line 48 and *EH*. 1V, 12, col. 1411).

⁶³ *AM* (1570), 131. 'Equilinus' refers to Petrus de Natalibus, the bishop of Equilio.

⁶⁴ That source is the *Cantilena Sanctae Eulalia* (Palmer, *Prudentius*, 239); Foxe draws on Ado of Vienne, "Martyrologium" (Migne, *PL* 123, col. 142) and Petrus de Natalibus, *Catalogus sanctorum* (Paris: Jaques de Sacan, 1514), fols. 9v-10r).

⁶⁵ *AM* (1570), 131.

straunge myracles by her done in the processe of the history, which partly for tediousness, partly for the doutfulnes of the autour (whom some father upon Ambrose) and partly for the straungenes and incredibilitie therof, I omit." The complaint echoes a comment by the Centuriators ("rerum non necessarium").⁶⁶ Both Foxe and the Centuriators reject a pseudo-Ambrosian hymn as a source for these miracles (the *Flos Sanctorum*, by contrast, draws on that source).⁶⁷ But, surprisingly, Foxe includes one of the "unnecessary" miracles that the Centuriators omit. Prudentius's poem on Agnes draws on several sources, including an inscription by Pope Damasus I (r. 366-84), a hymn incorrectly attributed to St Ambrose, and Ambrose's *De virginibus*.⁶⁸ Prudentius relates only one miracle performed before Agnes's death: after she was stripped and placed on a public corner, a man who looked on the naked Agnes was blinded. The Centuriators do not mention this. Foxe, though, includes the anecdote with some fanfare, marking it with a sidenote -- "The incontinent eyes of a yong man beholding Agnes stroken out" -- and dramatically describing the blinding: "One amongst the rest, with uncircumcised eyes beholding the damsel, & that in muche opprobrious wise: behold, a flame of fire like unto a flash of lightning, falleth upon him." Foxe does not shy away from calling this event a miracle: his Agnes praises God for "thys her miraculouse deliverye from the daunger

⁶⁶ Compare *EH* IV, 12, col. 1410, lines 8-15, with *AM* (1570), 131.

⁶⁷ The Centuriators denounce a fifth century *Acta* of Agnes which, in the Middle Ages, was widely but wrongly attributed to Ambrose. See Hippolyte Delehaye, 'Commentarius perpetuus in Martyrologium Hieronmianum,' in *Acta Sanctorum*, 68 vols. (Brussels: Society of Bollandists, 1643-1940), 65, 52-3.

⁶⁸ Palmer, *Prudentius*, 240, 250-3.

and shame of that place."⁶⁹ Foxe's narration is close to Prudentius, with one notable exception: Prudentius never terms this event a miracle.⁷⁰ Again, the preservation of virginity is celebrated; again, Foxe invests in a miracle that the Centurians dismiss.

Skeptical of the blinding story, the Centurians also dismissed the claim that the young man's sight was restored through Agnes's prayers. But Foxe does not consider that claim "unnecessary" either. Foxe records that Prudentius narrates the restoration of the young man's sight and health because of Agnes's prayers. One might discern some distancing in this method of relating the tale. But Foxe never contravenes or undermines it, and in fact underscores it with a side note: "The yong man restored againe to his health by the prayer of Agnes."⁷¹ One might attribute Foxe's retention of this story to its concern with the efficacy of prayer, a concern he evinces elsewhere. A few pages before his account of Agnes, for instance, Foxe draws on Eusebius for a story about the efficacious prayer of the confessor Asyrius, prayer that frustrates a devilish false miracle.⁷² In that instance and in the Agnes account, Foxe trusts Eusebius and Prudentius, two patristic sources; by contrast, the Centurians are more skeptical of Prudentius's Agnes story.

⁶⁹ *AM* (1570), 131.

⁷⁰ See Prudentius: "ibat triumphans virgo Deum Pattern / Christumque sacro carmine concinens ..." (Pe. XIV, lines 52-3).

⁷¹ *AM* (1570), 131.

⁷² *AM* (1570), 106.

In the case of Eugenia -- a fictitious saint supposedly executed in the third century -- Foxe departs more fully from the Centuriators.⁷³ The Centuriators mention Eugenia briefly, identifying her only as a Christian martyr executed under the emperors Valerian (r. 253-c. 260) and Gallienus (r. 253--268). Foxe offers a much fuller account. The chronicle of Antoninus is his main source, along with Bergomensis and Ado of Vienne. As with Katherine of Alexandria, Foxe begins with qualification: "a long history full of straunge and prodigious miracles" has been written about Eugenia by Antoninus and others, "whereof many thinges I wyll cut of, and briefly touche the effect of the story, leaving to the judgement of the reader the credit of myne autors, as he shal see cause."⁷⁴ Foxe again invites readers into hagiography's reformation. He writes that Eugenia flees to a monastery where she disguises herself as a monk; her flight is motivated by her desire either to avoid persecution or marriage to "a Pagane." Her wish to avoid an unequal yoke in marriage, in the Pauline phrase (2 Cor. 6:14), may have interested Foxe, given that several Henrician and Marian women martyrs were married to Catholic husbands. If Foxe includes her partly as an example of a woman defying social conventions in order to avoid a religiously unacceptable marriage, he also stresses her conventional loyalty to her family. In the monastery, Eugenia becomes known for learning, virtue, and, possibly, wonders. As is sometimes his wont, Foxe recounts miracles by stating that he will leave them out: "I omyt

⁷³ Delehaye produced evidence that a Eugenia, martyred in Rome, was venerated by Christians there, but he also acknowledged that her legend was fabricated (*Etude sur le Légendaire Romain: les saints De Novembre et Décembre* [Brussels: Society of Bollandists, 1936], 171-86).

⁷⁴ *AM* (1570), 104.

moreover the myracles done by the sayd Eugenia, in healing the diseases and sicknesses of such as came to her."⁷⁵ This formula of legible omission recurs three times in three sentences, and contrasts with the Centuriators' more iconoclastic approach to medieval sources. Foxe's rhetoric balances a concern to treat sources carefully with his occasional distrust of what those sources relate. His interest seems to lie in teaching readers what should and should not be believed through conditional and mild expressions of disapprobation rather than unqualified denunciation. In effect, Foxe offers, or at least seems to offer, his readers a choice of accepting or rejecting his purging of the traditional hagiography.

Eugenia's true identity is discovered when a woman she heals tries to seduce her; rebuffed, the woman accuses the disguised Eugenia of attempted rape.⁷⁶ Eugenia reveals her identity, is restored to her family, and disproves the woman's accusations. Foxe describes a providential retribution against Eugenia's accuser, a lightning strike like the one in Agnes's tale: "Bergomensis addeth moreover, that the said accuser was stricken presently with lightening." Eugenia converts her family, goes to Rome, and converts a woman who was to be married to a "Pagan."⁷⁷ She is then "assayed with sundry kindes of death," described in one remarkable sentence that moves from seemingly straightforward narration to a conclusion that undermines its own beginning: "First being tyed to a great stone and cast into the Tyber, where she was caryed up from drowning, then put in the hoate bathes which were extincted and she

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ The tale has biblical precedent in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39).

⁷⁷ *AM* (1570), 104.

preserved: afterword by famishment in prison, where they say she was fed at the hand of our saviour, all which legendary miracles to the reader to judge of them, as shall seeme good unto hym."⁷⁸ Foxe exhibits caution with these tales: they don't fall under the proscription of "I omit," and indeed the second miracle -- about the hot baths -- resembles one he repeated without criticism in his Cecilia narrative. The undermining phrase "they say" appears only with a story of direct Christic intervention, one with Eucharistic overtones. Foxe's final categorization of these stories as "legendary miracles" is not just a dismissal but part of an invitation ("judge of them") to share his reformed hagiography.

Indeed, Foxe sometimes allows stories of miraculous resistance to death to stand. Immediately following Eugenia's story is that of Fructuosus, bishop of Tاراcona, and two other martyrs executed along with him. Foxe relies on Prudentius for his description of their deaths: "The kynde of death ministred unto them was fire, wherin they being altogether cast, with their armes bound behinde them, their bandes (as Prudentius writeth) were dissolved, their handes untouched with the fire, and their bodies remaying whole." The fire obeys them "(as is said)": after their bands and manacles are loosened by the fire, they raise their hands, praise God, and pray "that the element which semed to flee from them, might woorke his ful force upon them, and spedely dispatche them, which was after thir request obtayned." Several factors may lead Foxe to accept this story: it relies on the power of prayer, as with Agnes's healing miracle; it underscores the martyrs' willingness to die, for they command the fire to consume them when

⁷⁸ *AM* (1570), 105. These stories derive from Ado of Vienne, "Martyrologium," *Migne, PL* 123, col. 204.

they are ready; and it stems from Prudentius, on whom Foxe often draws. Foxe maintains Prudentius's claim that a nearby soldier saw the heavens open and the martyrs enter; the daughter of the persecutor sees the same thing, and a sidenote underscores the vision: "The favor of God toward hys martyrs openly declared."⁷⁹ Foxe's resistance to "legendary miracles" in Eugenia's story, then, may not have so much to do with the *sort* of miraculous story to which he objects -- the martyr's imperviousness to various execution methods -- as with his differing attitudes towards miracles in patristic and medieval sources.

Conclusion: "The credit of myne autors"

While Foxe's accounts of virgin martyrs send ambivalent messages, then, this ambivalence is planned. There is nothing casual or slapdash about Foxe's narratives. On the contrary, they were well-researched; Foxe consulted a range of sources and carefully weighed them. Foxe's diligent work may be understood as a response to the religious conservatism which prolonged the Reformation. The Long Reformation may be seen in Foxe's revisions of traditional hagiography, provided we read in comparative contexts, across linguistic, temporal, and religious lines. It is true that many Protestant theologians held a cessationist position: no more miracles after the closing of the biblical canon. But Foxe persists in using the word "miracle," is not consistent about the types of miracles he retains (are scalding hot baths that wondrously turn cool believable miracles, or fabulous inventions? are tales of angelic

⁷⁹ *AM* (1570), 105.

interventions trustworthy or fictitious?), and is less willing than the Centuriators to cut some miracles from virgin martyr stories. He is happy to celebrate virginity, because virgin martyrs' outspoken, suffering purity embodies the qualities of the persecuted true church throughout history, the church whose constant presence, integrity, and persistence he longs to demonstrate.

Foxe may also have respected virgin martyrs' continuing popularity. Despite modern scholars' tendency to focus on women martyrs from the periods for which Foxe is a primary historical source, these early virgin martyrs still attracted devotion. Foxe may have thought it better not to challenge his readers too directly.⁸⁰ Instead, Foxe invites them into his process of sifting sources, pointing them towards greater (though not complete) trust in patristic sources, and greater (though not thoroughgoing) skepticism about medieval hagiography. Finally, Foxe's wariness about attacking early church martyrs may have been a result of Catholic criticisms of the *Actes and Monuments*. Through his *Dialogi Sex* (1566), Nicholas Harpsfield (1519-1575), Foxe's most effective contemporary critic, compelled Foxe to make numerous changes to his second edition. Harpsfield repeatedly denounced what he saw as Foxe's irreverence towards early church saints.⁸¹ By putting some distance between himself and the Centuriators, Foxe

⁸⁰ See note 23 above.

⁸¹ Harpsfield, *Dialogi sex* (Antwerp: Christopher Plantin, 1566), 820-2, 833-6 and 844-51. For the impact of Harpsfield's attacks on Foxe see Elizabeth Evenden and Thomas S. Freeman, *Religion and the Book in Early Modern England: The Making of John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 137-9, and Thomas S. Freeman and Susan Royal, "Stranger than Fiction in the Archives: The Controversial Death of William Cowbridge in 1538," *British Catholic History* 32:4 (2015), 451-72.

could appear reasonable in the face of Harpsfield's attacks. Foxe may have carefully and cleverly positioned himself as moderate in assessing early Christian virgin martyrs, while making his own beliefs and reservations clear.

These factors may explain Foxe's surprising combination of reverence towards early Christian virgin martyrs with his reservations about the veracity of some accounts of their miracles. Yet Foxe never allowed his obvious reservations to become explicit condemnations. Such circumspection was unusual for Foxe. As no less an authority than Patrick Collinson has observed, "Only very occasionally was John Foxe willing ... to defer to the indifferent judgement of his readers ... It was fundamental to Foxe's essentially polemical purpose on no account to condescend to historical ignorance or condone false notions about the past."⁸² For the greater portion of Foxe's book, Collinson's assessment is correct. Yet, in narrating the stories of the virgin martyrs, Foxe repeatedly deferred to the judgement of his readers. This atypical circumspection suggests that, at least in the case of the virgin martyrs, strong currents of religious traditionalism ran against his desire to carry his readers across the Jordan into a Protestant promised land where the True Church would flourish and the teachings and customs of the False Church would be abandoned. It is a tribute to the strength of these currents, which prolonged the Reformation in England, that even Foxe's own sharp polemic is an inadequate, or at least incomplete, descriptor of his occasional wariness when confronting the strength of

⁸² Patrick Collinson, "Truth, Lies and Fiction in Sixteenth-century Protestant Historiography," in D. R. Kelley and D. H. Sacks, eds., *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain: History, Rhetoric and Fiction, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46.

English traditional religion. The nuances of Foxe's treatment of virgin martyrs are not apparent without close study; much like the devil, Foxe's relationship with the Long Reformation lies in the details.