

John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments: Fire and Ink*

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Early Modern Bibliophilia: A Celebration of the Chrzanowski Collection

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Figure 1: *The death of Thomas Cranmer at the stake, burned for heresy in 1556.* Woodcut. Photo: [Wellcome Collection](#). [Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)

Unruly sinuous forms escape from between large bundles of twigs in the lower foreground of a printed illustration. The scene is crowded with human figures, but we are directed to these incipient flames by the raking diagonal of a torch wielded by the man in the center. Reaching around the burning structure, he leans into his work to light the pyre again. Lines of black ink spiral upward into volutes, their movement truncated from view by the frame that sets the woodcut apart from the letterpress text of the large volume in which it appears. Above the flames, a caption identifies the event depicted in the print, *the burning of Doctor Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterburie*, and the site, Towne Ditch, in Oxford.

The woodcut is one of 60 images that were created for the first English edition of John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*. An ambitious folio tome, it was published by John Day in 1563. This first edition is one of two copies of Foxe's monumental compilation of books given to the Clark Library by Paul Chrzanowski.¹ Illustrations and texts in the *Book of Martyrs*, as this historical enterprise was also

known, describe executions of some 300 protestants that were a part of wider efforts to restore Catholic authority in England during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558). That Foxe and his publisher John Day, both protestants, responded to these deaths with a martyrology, a concept more readily associated with Christian saints, and thus Catholicism, raises manifold questions about the status of the body during the English Reformation, and about the politics and histories of religion.² *Actes and Monuments* exhorts readers and viewers to ruminate on the past in the present, and to become witnesses to what they see, a process that continued with new editions into the nineteenth century.³ My brief remarks touch upon the printed illustrations and the use of fire, an element whose force is difficult to control. Repeated images of bodies being engulfed in serpentine flames of black ink punctuate the text, impressing themselves in the minds of viewers as they turn the large pages of the volume. Often chaotic and moving in unpredictable ways, fire resists the constraints of the printed page, simultaneously illustrating and disrupting the reader's progress through the letterpress text.

The designs, as *The burning of Doctor Thomas Cranmer* exemplifies (Fig. 1), warrant more attention than their relatively straightforward captions assert about how and where the individuals were executed. The illustrator creates dynamic ornamental forms to express elemental forces as wood transmutes into flames that encircle the body of Cranmer. Standing amid the bundles, he extends his right arm into the perilous whorls, a dramatic gesture echoed in the caption above that reports "his hand first thrust into the fire." He raises his other hand in a sign of faith, uttering, as the banderole informs us, "Lord receive my spirit." The Archbishop's principal persecutor in the left foreground is identified by his tonsured head, monastic habit, and by name, as "Frier John." The Catholic friar's outstretched arm iterates Cranmer's, but with a downward movement that portends on-going torments in hell.

Spectators crowd the scene. One of the clerics, who are arranged on the left, is singled out, his draperies rendered to echo the vertical lines of the adjacent bundles of twigs. On the right, the urban space is filled with a throng of spectators, with well-dressed men seated at the front. The right arm of the man in the foreground is aligned with the torch, thereby expressing his authorization of the execution, a role furthered by his left hand, which alights on the hilt of his sword. His body is designed to mirror—with his bent knees, gestures, and collar—the figure of Friar John on the other side of the scene. The theatrical arrangement of the audience, seated and standing for the duration of the act, contributes to the importance of the place of the event, linking the site with the date, March 21, 1556.

Church of England martyrs were contemporaries of Foxe, and thus the designs for the woodcuts, relatively unusual in early printed compilations of sources, were made to order. Note, in this regard, the dangerous blades of the axe and pike that pierce the frame at the bottom of the print. Encroaching on the scene, they supplement the violence underway. These sharp instruments imply that the crowd extends beyond what we see—that is, that we too, like the spectator whose face is sketched on the bottom left, are witnesses and thus implicated in the making of history.⁴ In this vein, consider how these pointed weapons conjure the burin and tools for cutting the wooden matrix from which the image is stamped. The labor of making the print is thereby evoked in concert with reimagining the event in the mind.

Fire plays an important rhetorical role in the printed images. It animates the title page, for instance, which reinvents depictions of the Last Judgement. Michelangelo's painting of the theme from the Sistine Chapel is a notable and unsurprising point of reference, given the fresco's association with the papacy and its circulation in engravings.⁵ On Foxe's title page, the Damned on the right—nude friars with tonsures—are transported by demons to the mouth of hell, which is devised as a Catholic Mass. The Saved, on the left, emerge not from tombs in the ground but from burning pyres. Blowing their horns, these martyrs rise from their crowns of flames that foreshadow scenes to follow, as we have seen in *The burning of Doctor Thomas Cranmer* (Fig. 1).

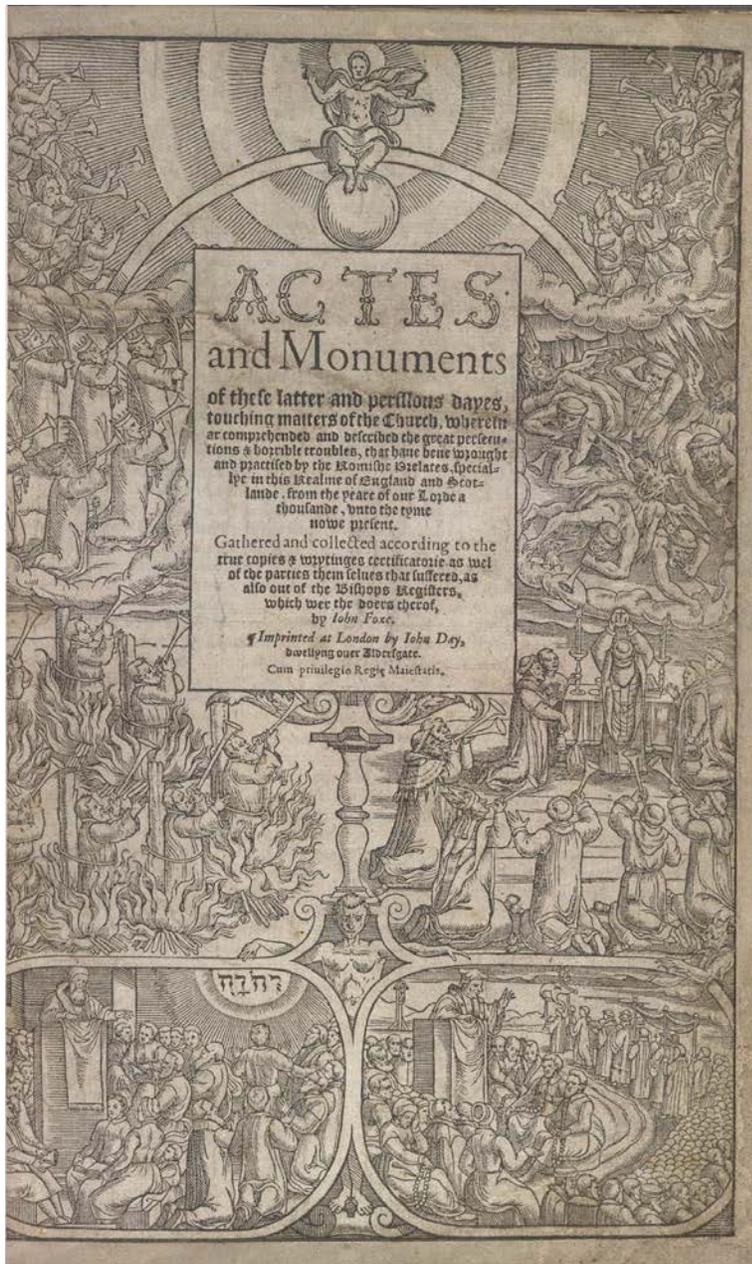


Figure 2. Frontispiece, John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1563. Image: https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/1563_titlepage.jpg

Views of Protestant martyrs proliferate in subsequent editions of *Actes and Monuments*. Woodcuts interrupt the text with views of bodies menaced by flames. Some of the designs, set apart from the text by their thin black frames, seem to perforate the page as if windows onto another infernal world (Figs. 3-5). By distancing us from the scene, these small woodcuts paradoxically intensify the conflagration. Throughout the book, restless flames appear to threaten the page of the text. The impact of pulsating lines of black ink, perhaps calling to mind smoke and charcoal generated by fires, arrest us, furthering the experience of being there and thus remembering the past in the present.

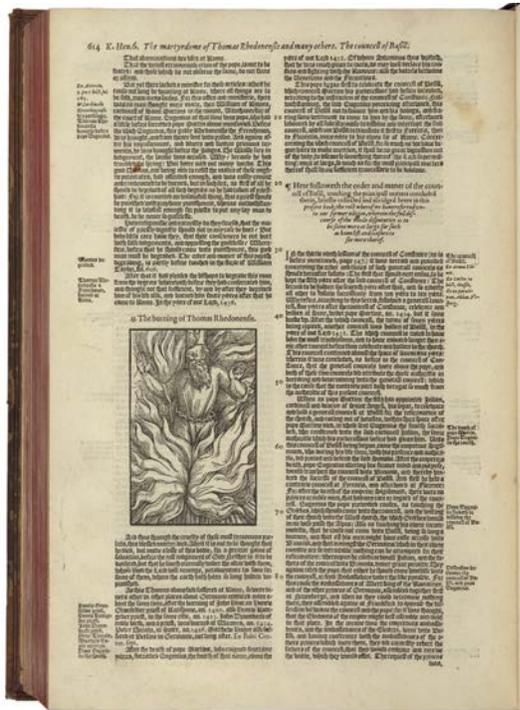


Figure 3, left: *The Burning of Richard Houeden, Actes and Monuments*, 1610, p. 612. (photo: Folger Shakespeare Library, creative commons)



Figure 4, right: *The Burning of Thomas Rhedonensis, Actes and Monuments*, 1610, p. 614. (photo: Folger Shakespeare Library, creative commons)

In her study of portraits of English protestant martyrs, Heather Muckart has argued that the seemingly artless mode of depicting these individuals enabled them to function more effectively as symbols of divine truth. She explains how artlessness was a means of differentiating their bodies from those of Catholic martyrs by eschewing their sensual character. Foxe and others could thereby draw on the tradition of martyrologies and their potential to transform heretical bodies into symbols that “confer religious validity on a denomination. . . . It is not surprising then,” Muckart writes, “that the mid-sixteenth century—the period in which the ritualized violence of the Reformation saw its peak in Western Europe—experienced a boom in the development of various martyrologies.”⁶ Pamphlets, chronicles, and stories were compiled to codify and to authorize martyrs and to write religious histories. Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* was the first of this kind for England.⁷

Actes and Monuments refers to more than a single edition, and together these numerous volumes construct a history for England out of religious dissent. Foxe was living in exile in Strasbourg, where he published his first edition, which focused on the Lollards, in Latin in 1554. These earlier persecutions, under the rule of Henry V (1413-22), became elements of the longer history detailed in later versions. In 1559 an edition was published in Basel with commentary on executions under the reign of Queen Mary—hence the use of the term Marian martyrs for protestants.⁸ The first English compilation, which was published in London, was three times the size of the Latin book. Only seven years later, in 1570, the number of illustrations increased from 80 to 150, and the page count expanded from 1800 to 2300. Two further editions, in 1576 and 1583, were issued before Foxe died in 1587. The editor for the 1641 edition—the second of the two volumes in the Chrzanowski gift to the Clark Library—extended the history to the time of King Charles (reign 1625-1649). *Actes and Monuments* continued to be published into the nineteenth century. Two editions were produced between 1837-41, with fifty-five versions issued during the nineteenth century, largely in response to the surge in Catholicism with Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) and John Ruskin (1819-1900).

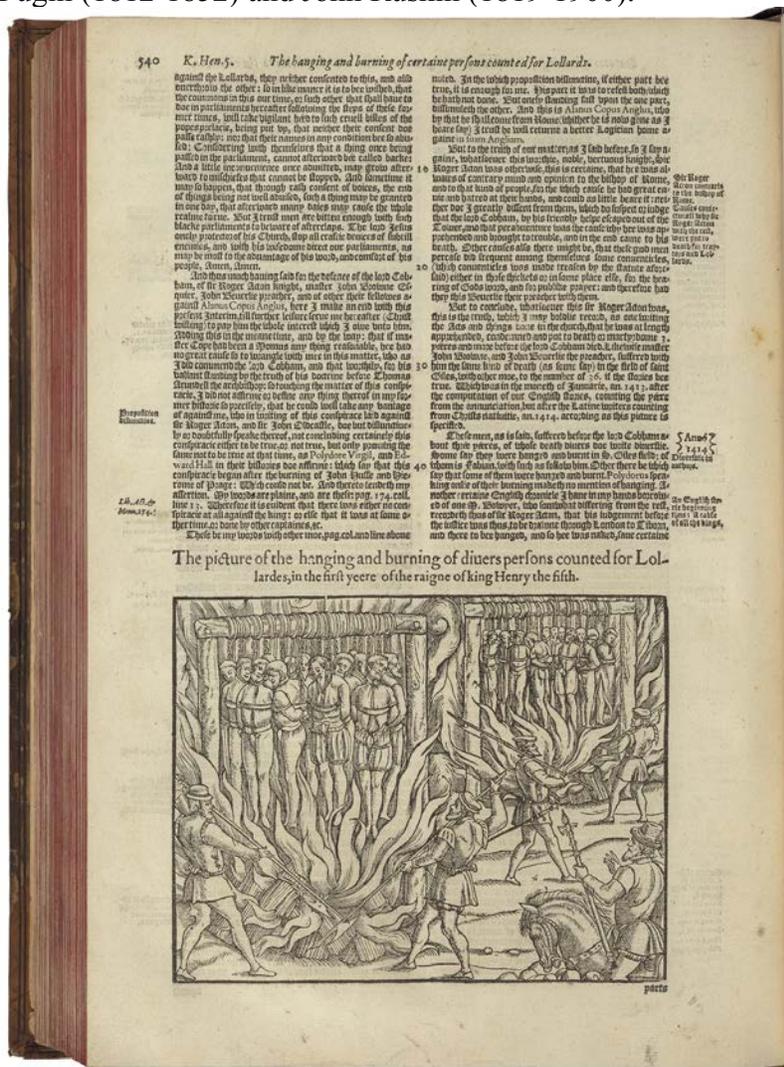


Figure 5, left: *The picture of the hanging and burning of diuers persons counted for Lollards in the first yeere of the reaigne of king Henry the fifth, Actes and Monuments, p. 540* (photo: Folger Shakespeare Library, creative commons)

Foxe's histories explicitly attempt to rewrite England's Christian past as part of a larger narrative of the Reformation. The woodcut of the Lollard executions is a case in point (Fig. 5). Bodies—too numerous to count easily—hang from two gallows above large bonfires. Similar visual strategies noted above—such as the man with a sharp baton on horseback and those who stoke the fire—witness the early fifteenth-century executions as surrogates for observers in the present. The lives and deaths of Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, the Oxford Martyrs, are also rewritten in terms of national history. Their actions and their executions become important historical events that are transformed, through the narrative in the texts and the images, into sites of memory. One strategy for this purpose, according to Muckart, is “revisiting religious antecedents in the form of both early Christian practices and peoples.”⁹

I have been highlighting fire because it plays a crucial, almost cinematic role; it fuels the retrospective character of narrative time by suturing together a montage of recollected images—including, but not limited to, those in the *Actes and Monuments*. Bodies amid flames incite viewers to reflect on a long tradition of saints and imagery. Consider the riveting example of Titian's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, c. 1558, an altarpiece in the Jesuit church in Venice.¹⁰ The early Christian deacon is pinned down by a long prod that is thrust by the executioner on the right, while another stokes the pulsating vermilion fire below. Sensuous surfaces of fabric and bare flesh vie for our attention with the incandescence and otherworldly pairing of flames and divine light at the top of the altarpiece. Titian's painting is an apt demonstration not only of what Reformers rejected—the sensual appeal elicited by the bodies of saints, enhanced by artistry—but also the conventions that remained useful to them.

These elements – actions, tormentors, witnesses, sinuous flames, transmuted into calligraphic and restless lines of ink—reverberate through the *Actes and Monuments*. The details of the English martyrs are recounted chronologically, with their names, dates, and illustrations of their deaths experienced sequentially. Flames in the woodcuts call upon the repositories of images in viewers' minds, the formless chaos of fire conjoining the collective deaths of martyrs to the specific bodies and sites of Protestant martyrs depicted in the woodcuts.

¹ * Chrzanowski 1563f. <https://clarklibrary.ucla.edu/collections/tudor/chrzanowski/title-list/1563f/>

² For example, see Margaret Aston, *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2015); Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600* (London; Hambledon Press, 1993).

³ My brief comments are indebted to Heather Muckart's study, "Absence and Artlessness in Early Modern Church of England Martyr Portraits." (PhD. Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2018).

⁴ See Muckart, "Absence and Artlessness."

⁵ On Michelangelo and other sources for an English broadsheet, see Anne Dillon, *Michelangelo and the English Martyrs* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

⁶ Muckart, "Absence and Artlessness," 17.

⁷ Ibid. 17-18. Also see Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535-1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

⁸ On the Marian Martyrs, see Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁹ Muckart, "Absence and Artlessness," 54.

¹⁰ To view the painting, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Martyrdom_of_Saint_Lawrence_\(Titian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Martyrdom_of_Saint_Lawrence_(Titian)).