

# Anne askew: a rhetorical biography



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On July 1546 a crowd watched as soldiers carried a woman, crippled by brutal, extensive torture, on a chair to be publicly executed for refusing to renounce her beliefs or reveal other women who shared her faith. On that day Anne Askew, Protestant reformer and writer, became the first English woman to be tortured and then burnt at the stake. She became an influential rhetor in an era where the Church of England actively sought to rid the kingdom of radical Protestants. State-sanctioned violence was commonly used to terrorize and murder religious dissenters. While imprisoned in the tower of London, Askew overcame her position as a religious minority and woman by constructing an ethos built on ecriture feminine, scriptural exegesis, gender play, a combative tone, and silence. As a result, she portrayed herself as spiritually superior to her examiners while refusing to renounce her beliefs. This quiet yet radical Protestantism so disturbed England's patriarchal authority forced powerful Catholic men to make an example of her.

Askew, born in 1521 to an aristocratic family in Lincolnshire, England, demonstrated her willingness to defy gender and religious norms from her youth. Her father, William Askew, was a wealthy landowner, member of King Henry VIII's court, and Catholic. While few Tutor women received an education, Askew's father arranged for her to be instructed, likely by tutors, in humanist principles. He arranged for his eldest daughter, Martha, to marry Thomas Kyme. After Martha died at a young age, he decided that Anne would marry Thomas in Martha's place. The marriage was brutal for Askew, a devout Protestant who faithfully studied theology, and Thomas, a staunch Catholic. After enduring years of an unloving marriage, Askew continually

refused to denounce her reformed views. She became the first Englishwoman on record to demand a divorce. Even more taboo for her time, she sought the divorce as an innocent party and on the basis of scriptural grounds. The couple was separated when Thomas threw her out of their household due to her refusal to submit to his authority or that of the Roman Catholic Church.

After separating from her husband, Anne moved to London and kept her maiden last name, Askew, rather than her husband's. While in London, she met other Protestant thinkers, continued to study theology, and became a preacher. In March 1545, Thomas had Anne arrested and brought back to Lincolnshire where he demanded that she remain with him. However, Anne soon escaped and continued her preaching career in London where she was arrested for her theological beliefs. Although King Henry VIII had separated from the Church of Rome, making himself as head of the Church of England, he had not embraced the majority of the Reformation's theological tenets. The Church of England still held to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the teaching that the bread and wine used during mass were transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. While imprisoned, Anne argued to her examiners that the Gospels stated that Christ died once for human sin, was buried, resurrected, and then seated at the Father's right hand in Heaven. She argued that to frame the mass as a re-sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ was incompatible with Scripture and negated Christ's salvation. After being questioned she temporarily released. In May of 1546, she was arrested again and became the first woman on record to be tortured in the Tower of London. Her inquisitors demanded that reveal the names of like-minded

women but she refused to do so. Lord Chancellor Thomas Wriothesley and Sir Richard Rich, hoping to receive the names of aristocratic Protestant women such as Queen Katherine Parr, tortured Anne using the rack, a device which stretches one's limbs to the point of dislocation. After refusing to denounce her Reformed theology, Anne was convicted of heresy and sentenced to death on June 18, 1546. The following month, she was martyred in Smithfield, London, leaving behind her memoirs of the suffering she had endured for her faith and solidifying her legacy as one of the first Englishwomen to have her writings published.

While other reformers tended to write in the form of letters, Askew's use of *écriture féminine* grants her readers insight into the torture and intense questioning she faced for her faith. Her first-person accounts vividly recall her suffering at the hands of powerful Catholic clergymen: "Then the lieutenant caused me to be loosed from the rack. Incontinently I swooned, and then they recovered me again. After that I sat two long hours reasoning with my lord chancellor upon the bare floor; where he, with many flattering words, persuaded me to leave my opinion" (Askew). By writing from her own painfully bodily experiences, she creates pathos from sympathetic audiences. She also builds an ethos as a person who was willing to endure severe pain for her theology.

Rather than viewing the Bible as a patriarchal document, Askew reinterprets its passages in order to build spiritual ethos as a woman. By appealing to the Scriptures as a shared authority between herself and her inquisitors, she tactfully uses Biblical allusions in order to portray herself as spiritually superior and her accusers as opposing God's will. For instance, Askew draws

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a parallel between herself and the Biblical figure, Steven. Christopher Dare, one of Askew's inquisitors questioned her about the doctrine of transubstantiation and asked her if she believed "that the sacrament hangynge over the aultre was the very bodye of Chritst reallye?" (Kennedy). Rather than revealing that she did not believe that the sacraments tranformed into the literal body of Christ, she responds with her own question: "wherefore S. [saint] Steven was stoned to death?" (Kennedy). Askew, therefore, avoids incriminating herself and implies a connection between the persecution faced by both Steven and herself. Steven, who was falsely accused by ecclesiastical and civil authorities of claiming that Christ came to destroy Old Testament laws and customs (Kennedy). Similarly, the Protestant reformers sought to rid themselves of the perceived erroneous and unneeded Catholic practices (Kennedy). By comparing her situation to Steven, Askew strategically aligns herself with Christianity's' first martyr and her questioners with those who stoned him. This maneuver places Dare in a position where he cannot respond to her question without first acknowledging this analogy. Furthermore, by comparing herself to both a heroic martyr and spiritual soldier, Askew redefines Christian womanhood being equally heroic and involved in the defense of the faith as her male counterparts. These Biblical allusions grant Askew, a woman and religious minority, with a spiritual ethos even in the face of politically powerful Catholic men.

Askew draws another parallel between those who imprison her and Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. When one of her examiners, the Bishop of Winchester, offered her a false sense of safety and friendliness by requesting

to speak to her “familyarlye,” she responded, “So ded Judas whan he unfryndelye betrayed Christ” (Beilin). Askew’s response aligns her questioners with a betrayer of Christianity and therefore discredits their attempts to appear cordial and approachable. By doing so, she makes it clear that she had no intention of being friendly with those who sought to rid her faith of Reformed doctrine. Furthermore, this comparison also reinforces her analogies which characterized herself as a knight and martyr opposing those who seek to betray her theological beliefs.

Askew uses gender play by metaphorically portraying herself as a knight in order to appeal to both masculinity and femininity. This analogy also presents the Reformist cause as gender neutral. While imprisoned in Newgate, she wrote:

“Lyke as the armed knight

Appointed to the field,

With this world will I fight,

And faith shall be my shield” (Otten).

By referring to herself as a knight, a position historically reserved for men, Askew portrays herself in masculine terms and suggests that women are equal participants in spiritual warfare who can also be “appointed” by God as defenders of the faith. This belief defied the State and the Church of England’s resistance to women publicly articulating their faith especially when their stances contradicted official Church doctrine (Otten).

As the ballad progresses, Askew continues her use of gender play and roots her battle metaphor in Scripture. She portrays herself as embodying the Christian soldier who was commanded by Ephesians 6: 11 to “ put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” ( *New American Standard Bible* ). She describes her ethos as stemming from her faith in God rather than her gender:

“ Faith is that weapon strong

Which will not fail at need:

My foes therefore among

Therewith will I proceed” (Otten).

This allusion to Ephesians further grants Askew spiritual authority by attributing her power to God and suggesting that she will not be hindered her “ foes” who are participating in the “ schemes of the devil.” By portraying herself as a knight carrying out the task of the Reformers by discrediting Catholic doctrine, Askew rebels against gender norms for her rhetorical advantage.

Askew’s oppositional tone rebelled against Tudor gender roles which valed feminine meekness and the dialogue of inquisition. While inquisitions traditionally consist of a questionnaire issues pressing questions in order to establish the heterodoxy of the accused, Askew’s utilization of a combative tone allows her to take control of the dialogue. Her refusal to give incriminating answers, sarcasm, and irony establishes herself as a chief actor. She uses these tactics as a method to undermine the politically

powerful men who are seeking to force either a confession or conversion. Hence, her overall tone establishes an ethos as a female reformer over her inquisitors. For instance, Askew gains the upper hand by responding to her opponents with a scolding voice. For instance, after an archbishop warned her to not read a book by John Frith, a fellow Protestant, she responded with a reprimanding tone (Hannay).

“ Then I asked hym, if he were not ashamed for to judge of the boke before he sawe it within, or yet knew the truthe therof. I sayd also, that soche unadvysed & hayste judgement is a token apparent of a veryde slendre wytt. Then I opened the boke & shewed it hym. He sayd, he thought it had bene an other, for he coulde fyrnde no faulte therin. Then I desryed hym, nomore to be swyfte in judgement, tyll he thoughtlye knewe the truthe. And so he departed” (Askew).

By demanding that the clergyman should her where in the book the author promotes heretical views, she proves that his accusations against a fellow member of her sect were unfounded. Despite being in the position of the accused, Askew’s active, instructive voice places herself in a teacher-like role which caused the archbishop to leave in a state of perplexion.

Askew’s use of combative wit, even under life-threatening persecution, made her inquisitors’ questioning appear foolish. When she was asked if she believed that private masses helped the souls of the departed, she replied, “ It was great idolatry to believe more in them than in the death which Christ died for us” (Askew). When her inquisitors went a step further and asked if she believed that priests present at mass transformed the bread and the



wine into the body and blood of Christ, Anne replied, “ I have read that God made man, but that man can make God, I never read, nor I suppose, ever shall read” (Askew). By stating that she could never find the clergy’s viewpoint in the Bible, Askew directly attacked his authority over her with her biting tone.

Askew also strategically uses sarcasm as a means to avoid giving up the information her accusers desire even when enduring torture and the threat of death. When her accusers attempt to use the Pauline Epistles in order to argue that a woman should not be speaking Scripture to them in public, she avoids their questions regarding Acts 7 because “ it was agynst saynt Paules lernynge, that I beynge a woman, shuld interprete the scriptures, soecyallye where so many wyse and lerned men were” (Askew). Hence, Askew strategically avoids directly answering their accusations and incriminating herself with a more direct answer. She seemingly defers to male authority (“ so manye wyse lerned men”) while simultaneously using this phrase sarcastically. Askew’s witty tone allowed her to avoid their pointed question while subtly undermining their authority.

Askew further avoids directly answering her inquisitors by responding to them with irony and her own pointed questions. She clearly asserts herself as a woman confronting the powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy. After a again bishop rebuked Askew for being a woman who was using Scripture in her arguments against male clergymen, she responded by stating:

“ I answered hym, that I knewe Paules meanyng so well as he, which is, i Corinthiorum xiiii, that a woman ought, not to speake in the congregacyon

by the way of teachynge. And then I asked hym, how manye women he had seane, go into the pulpett and preache. He sayd he never sawe non. Then I sayd, he ought to fynde no faute in poore women, except they had offended the lawe” (Askew).

By inferring that she is more familiar with the passage than the bishop and turning the question back onto him, she builds a spiritual ethos. Her questioning builds up to the last sentence which ironically refers to women as “poore” after she has proved herself to be a woman who is capable of interpreting Scripture and rich in the knowledge of her faith. While she is appearing to submit to her examiners’ authority over her, she is actually actually subverting their authority through the use of irony and pointed questioning.

Askew’s occasional lack of words and responses also allows her to avoid submitting to the clery’s demands and furthers her Reformationist cause. She strategically uses silence as a means to refrain from giving up information which would incriminate her fellow reformers. In the summer of the same year that Askew imprisoned and martyred, a warrant for Queen Catherine Parr’s arrest on the basis of Protestant sympathies was issued by two of Askew’s interrogators, Bishop Stephen Gardiner and Lord Chancellor Wriothesley. Queen Katherine had previously gathered around her a group of ladies-in-waiting interested in theology and furthering their studies of Scripture. One member of this secret Bible study in the palace was Askew. Although the queen avoided imprisonment through tactful rhetorical strategies of her own, many members of the court hoped that Askew’s connections to the Duchess of Suffolk and other aristocratic women

suspected of holding Protestant beliefs would be revealed. When her inquisitors used torture methods in hopes of forcing Askew to reveal other women who shared her illegal beliefs, she did not allow herself to even cry. Askew recalled, “ Then they did put me on the rack, because I confessed no ladies or gentlewomen to be of my opinion, and thereon they kept me a long time; and because I lay still, and did not cry, my lord chancellor and Master Rich took pains to rack me with their own hands, till I was nigh dead” (Askew). Even her lack of language defied her the Catholic establishment and furthered her goal of defending her faith.

Askew justifies her use of silence, which was gendered in Tudor England, with Biblical allusions. Her ability to use silence to her advantage is even more striking considering the cultural beliefs surrounding femininity and quietness. In Askew’s lifetime, masculinity was affiliated with vocalness and strength while femininity was associated with quietness, weakness, and submissiveness (Levin). However, Askew uses this cultural obstacle to her benefit and defends this rhetorical strategy with the Bible. She strategically subverted cultural norms in order to willfully employ silence to maintain control of her inquisition. Throughout her *Examinations* , refuses to disclose incriminating information and only reveals her vast knowledge of Scripture: “ God has given me the gift of knowledge, but not of utterance. And Solomon says, that a woman of few words is a gift of God, Proverbs 19” (Askew). By citing this verse, Askew reframes silence, which was commonly seen as a feminine weakness, as a divine “ gift”. While her captors were using torture methods in hopes of forcing her to reveal incriminating information, Askew frames her refusal to answer their questions as being justified by Scripture.

By doing so, she portrays herself as meekly submitting to Scriptural authority while she is actually subverting the Catholic Church's authority.

Askew's tactful use of *écriture féminine*, scriptural exegesis, gender play, a biting tone, and strategic silence allowed her to leave behind a rhetorical legacy which has lasted long after her martyrdom. This rhetorical legacy and her refusal to exchange safety for the names of her reformist sisters and her theology continues to serve as a roadmap for rhetors who are forced to operate under threatening situations. While she was imprisoned and facing death, she subverted her obstacles and cultural norms to her rhetorical advantage. While imprisoned in the Tower of London, she was persuaded by her fellow Reformers to write an account of her interrogations. After her death, her life and her words were widely distributed by the reformers John Foxe and John Bale. Her unique, first-person accounts of her experiences as a female martyr sold well enough that several editions were warranted throughout the century (Hannay).

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