Shakespeare en devenir
ISSN électronique : 1958-9476
Courriel : shakespeareendevenir@univ-poitiers.fr

The Reluctant Executioner and Violence in Anabaptist Martyrologies

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Publication en ligne le 15 novembre 2011

Résumé

Cet article examine un personnage qui apparaît dans plusieurs récits anabaptistes : celui du bourreau réticent. Ce bourreau résiste à la violence qu'il doit utiliser comme fonctionnaire des autorités séculaires. Il pourrait demander le pardon du martyr ou jurer qu'il ne tuerait jamais un autre Anabaptiste, afin de se soustraire à sa position de tueur de victimes innocentes. D'un côte, sa réticence ne fait que souligner la piété des victimes, renforçant ainsi la distance spirituelle entre les bénis de Dieu et le bas monde. Cette distance conforte le dualisme théologique et rhétorique de la séparation du monde (Absonderung) qui domine les récits anabaptistes de l'époque. D'un autre côte, cette réticence dévoile une philosophie de la violence qui est complexe et contextuelle. Comme tels, les martyrologues anabaptistes présentaient les bourreaux comme des agents malheureux et humains des mesures juridiques qui leur étaient imposés par l'alliance Constantine entre l'Église et l'État. Ils gardaient leur fureur pour ceux qui pouvaient être identifiés comme responsables : les

prêtres catholiques, les ministres protestants, les juges et la noblesse locale.

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Texte intégral

Early modern Anabaptists bound themselves to the ideal of believer's baptism, the belief that only confessing adults could truly believe in Christ and follow him in the path of discipleship. [1] This seemingly revolutionary idea completely overthrew the medieval notion of Christendom, the widespread assumption that Christianity was a birthright. To the medieval and early modern mind, it followed naturally that Church and State worked together in a Constantinian alliance to protect Christian society from religious deviance. [2] In its place, most Anabaptists articulated an ideal of Christian community based on separation from the world, or *Absonderung*. [3] This was the model of the early Church as most Anabaptists imagined it had been before the Roman Empire adopted Christianity under Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306-337), and they believed that they followed in a long line of Christian martyrs that began in the apostolic period.

Many Anabaptists, following the logic of worldly separation, refused to take civic oaths, pay war taxes, serve in the military, or perform traditional duties such as serving as night watchmen. Constantinian Christian

authorities responded in force against the Anabaptists, primarily because these rulers believed (as did most contemporaries) that these corollary acts of Anabaptist civil disobedience constituted a threat to social order. These rulers believed that it was their pious duty to discipline their populations by making an example of people they considered both anarchists and soul-murderers. [4] Hundreds of Anabaptists refused to abandon their commitments and ultimately died for them. [5] They went to the stake boldly confessing their faith, and refused to compromise with their persecutors. Martyrologists employed a number of theological and rhetorical strategies to highlight the piety and steadfastness of these martyrs, including miracles, expressions of regret by persecutors, temporal and eternal punishment of persecutors, forgiveness of persecutors, shows of Anabaptist piety, and accounts of reluctant executioners.

Figure 1: Execution of thirty-seven Anabaptists at Antwerp. From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press. all images are reproductions of copper etchings done by Dutch engraver Jan Luyken for the second edition in 1685.

This heroic vision of Anabaptist martyrdom in the midst of a demonic [6] world, while inspiring, does not tell the whole story about the Anabaptists' relationship to the violence they encountered during periods of persecution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. [7] I demonstrate below that one strategy in particular undermines this ecclesiological drive to divide the world into a two warring factions. This is the portrayal of the reluctant executioner, the man charged with the physical execution of the condemned. On the one hand, his reluctance magnifies the piety and steadfastness of his innocent victims, thus reinforcing the spiritual distance between God's Chosen and the fallen world. At the same time, however, his reluctance to perform his office reveals an Anabaptist understanding of violence as layered and complex. By recounting martyr narratives in which he appears, I demonstrate that the Anabaptists made clear distinctions between physical violence and spiritual coercion. The worst form of violence imaginable in the Anabaptist martyrological worldview was spiritual coercion by Protestant or Catholic churchmen who desperately wanted Anabaptists to abjure their faith. On the other hand, the most acceptable form of violence was indeed the sword strike or noose of the executioner.

I. Regret vs. Reluctance in Anabaptist Martyrologies

In 1571 the Anabaptist preacher Hans Haslibacher was executed in Berne, Switzerland for his belief in believer's baptism. He claimed to have a dream, wherein it was revealed that he would be executed, but that "he should be given three special signs, whereby his innocence would appear before men." [8] These signs–that his severed head would jump into his hat and laugh, that the sun would turn red, and that the town well would bleed–indeed manifested, thus proving his innocence to his persecutors. Another Anabaptist prisoner wrote a hymn to commemorate his death, and

the account ends with the three miracles and the responses from the crowd:

> Down comes the sword, when lo, the head
> Springs in his hat, as he had said;
> And all the signs were seen-
> The sun was red and looked like blood,
> The town-well shed a crimson flood.
>
> Amazed, an aged sire said
> “The Anabaptist laughs, though dead.”
> Then said another sire
> “If you had let this Baptist live,
> Eternally you would not grieve."
>
> With one accord the people said.
> “Henceforth no Baptist's blood we'll shed.”
> Then said an aged sire
> “Had you not acted ‘gainst my will,
> This Baptist would be living still.”
>
> The hangman too was heard to say
> “‘Tis guiltless blood I've shed today.”
> Then said a yeoman old
> “The Anabaptist's mouth did laugh,
> Which surely indicates God's wrath.”

The climax of this hymn is the three-fold miracle, which announces Haslibacher’s innocence to the crowd. The citation of miracles as proof of the martyr’s innocence before his or her persecutors is a common element of Christian martyr narratives, hymns, and prison letters. Miracles indicate that God favors the martyr and has chosen to display it to both the persecutors and the spectators in the crowd; [9] they encode a powerful counter-narrative into the execution itself, transforming it from a carefully designed public demonstration of social control into a theater of God’s glory. [10]

This hymn employs another element common to Christian martyr narratives that is often associated with miracles: the regret of those who executed the innocent Christian, a regret driven by the fear of divine reprisal on behalf of the pious dead. Above, this regret manifests in the comments from the aged sires and the old yeomen, the lamentation of the crowd, and the hangman's admission that "'Tis guiltless blood I've shed today."

Regret in Anabaptist martyr narratives occurs after the execution of the Anabaptist, and it signals that the persecutors should fear God's wrath for their murder of an innocent, as in the example above. With miracles, this is an effective strategy, as it portrays a world divided into two camps: the true Christians and the servants of the devil. For the Anabaptists, the hope of divine restitution literally written into the fear of the persecutors was meant to comfort potential victims of state-sanctioned violence, as it assured them that they were true Christians. As most Anabaptists (especially after 1535 [11]) were committed to nonviolence and left the reckoning of their Catholic and Protestant persecutors to God, their martyr narratives often recount how their persecutors either repented or met untimely and grisly deaths on their way to hell. Nevertheless, Anabaptists in martyr narratives also prayed fervently for the conversion of their persecutors and asked God to forgive them for their violent acts. [12]

Figure 2: Execution of Jan Smit. From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press.

Sometimes, however, figures in Anabaptist martyr narratives rue what they are doing in the very midst of doing it. Persecutors are not always motivated to repent or change their policies by supernatural displays of God's power, but by the admirable piety and steadfastness of the condemned. This is especially the case for executioners. As the last cog in the judicial machinery of early modern cities and towns, executioners did not condemn Anabaptists to death, but nevertheless had to kill them in the name of the state as part of their office.

In narratives with reluctant executioners, Anabaptists recognize that the executioner is ultimately not to blame for their deaths. As I demonstrate below, they generally direct their opprobrium to the appropriate responsible parties, usually priests, pastors, judges, council members, or local overlords. Anabaptists targeted Protestant and Catholic churchmen in particular, as the spiritual office of these men was to secure recantations in the name of the Church by exhorting the "sinner" to repent. For Anabaptist

martyrs, as for all those sacrificed on the altar of religious violence during the Reformation era, a recantation was a betrayal of one's faith. To the Anabaptists, clerics who sought these recantations engaged in the most pernicious spiritual coercion, [13] because to betray one's faith and one's conscience was to join the ranks of the damned on their way to hell. [14]

This nuanced reading of violence in Anabaptist martyr narratives demands more attention, primarily because the different forms of violence so portrayed are often subsumed under the pervasive dualist discourse of separation. [15] This binary rhetoric has been a defining characteristic of Anabaptism since the beginning of the movement. Michael Sattler articulated the classic Anabaptist positionin Article Six of the Schleitheim *Brotherly Union* in 1527:

> We have been united concerning the separation that shall take place from the evil and the wickedness which the devil has planted in the world, simply is this: that we have no fellowship with them, and do not run with them in the confusion of their abominations... Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are [come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial, and none will have part with the other. [16]

This statement represents beliefs of the early Swiss Brethren in the aftermath of the Peasants' War, (1524-1525) although not all Anabaptists or their sympathizers fully affirmed its vision of the world. [17] The proto-Hutterites and Mennonites [18] who survived the major persecutions in the 1530s and 40s, however, largely did. They built on this polarizing ecclesiology to establish successful Anabaptist enclaves within Moravia and the Netherlands. Because the "sword," that is, the law and its human agents, was "outside the perfection of Christ," they chose to police themselves through the ban, the ritual and physical exclusion of morally wayward members. [19] Of course, both the Hutterites and Mennonites recognized that there was a place for secular authority in the world–to

punish evildoers–but they did not believe it should have much, if anything, to do with their perfectionist communities. [20]

II. Sources

Given the dominance of this dualist discourse within the Anabaptist tradition, especially in martyr narratives, my analysis of Anabaptist martyrologies begins with an explanation of the historical contexts from which they were written. I have chosen to examine the most complete, and arguably most influential, extant Anabaptist martyrologies, two texts written by the Hutterite and the Mennonite Anabaptists, respectively: the *Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, and *The Bloody Theater: Or, Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians: Who Baptized Only upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*of the Mennonite minister Theileman J. van Braght.

Both sources contain narratives that were recorded during times of relative freedom from systemic persecution directed against Hutterite and Mennonite communities, often decades after the actual executions took place. They are based on older stories, eyewitness accounts, hymns, and/or prison letters. Most importantly, they are imbedded within larger narratives. The *Chronicle* is a year-by-year account of Hutterite life in Moravia. Besides martyr narratives, it contains ministerial reports and other notable events in their yearly reckoning. The Mennonite elder Theileman J. van Braght's grand narrative is even more ambitious. The massive *Martyrs Mirror* is the first pan-European vision of Anabaptist martyrdom, as van Braght moves from martyr to martyr in sweeping chronological fashion. [21] He relies on several earlier Dutch and German Anabaptist martyr narratives, and includes stories also found in the *Chronicle*. [22] Both of these texts present the Anabaptists as the true heirs of the early Christians who suffered persecution and martyrdom under the Roman Empire, and later, the medieval alliance between the Church and

the Empire established under Constantine the Great in the fourth century C.E. [23]

The Hutterites began writing their *Chronicle* at the beginning of their self-proclaimed "Golden Years" (1565-1591). Unlike the early sixteenth century, this was a time of peace and prosperity for the Brethren, who were valued vassals for the local lords in Moravia until the trials of the Ottoman-Hapsburg Long War (1593-1606), and later, the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The original scribe, Kaspar Braitmichel, was a Hutterite preacher. He began writing sometime during the rule of the chief elder Peter Walpot (r. 1565-1578), and he wrote entries up to the year 1542 before retiring from his work in the early 1570s. He was followed by at least six other scribes until the year 1665. The *Chronicle* ends that year with a desperate letter for financial assistance addressed to the Dutch Mennonites. [24] The bulk of Hutterite martyr narratives–those recorded in the *Chronicle* from the apostolic Church until the early 1590s–are retrospective interpretations of their martyrs' deaths written from the perspective of relative peace and security. [25]

First published in 1660, van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror* is even further removed from the martyrdoms narrated therein, although it does reproduce numerous hymns and letters from imprisoned and condemned Anabaptists who lived in the sixteenth century. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Mennonites had become a prosperous and tolerated group in the Netherlands despite certain legal restrictions, as their fortunes began to change during the reign of William of Orange (r. 1572-1584). [26] In fact, most of the seventeenth-century narratives in the *Martyrs Mirror* recount the experiences of the Swiss Brethren in Zurich and Berne, where Anabaptists suffered periodic persecution into the early eighteenth century. [27] By comparison, the last Dutch Mennonite martyr died in 1574.

Circumstances of peace and prosperity did not inspire the authors of these texts to soften their commitment to the Anabaptist theological ideal of separation from the world. In fact, they did the very opposite. Both the Hutterite chroniclers and van Braght highlighted the ideal of the "Martyrs'

Church" of a separated, pure people of God who rejected the Constantinian vision of society shared by Catholics and Protestants. Van Braght was especially concerned with the newfound wealth and prosperity of the Mennonites, [28] because he believed that many had blurred the line between their faith and the world around them. He claimed that, compared to the sixteenth century, "these times are certainly more dangerous; for then Satan came openly, through his servants, even at noon-day, as a roaring lion, so that he could be known... but now he comes in the night, or in the twilight, in a strange but yet pleasing form... it grieves us to the heart that we must live to see these times... [29] Van Braght longed for the days of persecution, because at least physical violence against Anabaptists demonstrated Satan's power in a visible way and allowed the Brethren to prove themselves before God. Subtle deceit, on the other hand, was a far more pernicious way for Satan to attack the gathered flock of true Christians. [30]

The Hutterites did not have van Braght's experience with decades of toleration, but the nonetheless articulated their good fortune in dualistic terms. Within the entry for 1569, the chronicler writes: "during these years God gave his people quiet times...for after the Lord had purified his church in various ways, allowing it to experience all kinds of tribulation and poverty for years (as can be found in this book), God granted his people quiet times and rich blessings, as he did devout Job after his temptation." [31] The Hutterites imagined themselves as Job, who was tempted to lose faith but ultimately persevered in his beliefs.

The chronicler reminds his readers that the world was still against the Brethren in a number of subsequent comments. He laments that "in these times many accusations were made and decrees issued by the emperor and the king at the Imperial Diets, as well as in the Provincial Diets." He adds that, "as usual, wherever possible, the tribe of priests kept stirring up the powers that be." [32] Notably, he compares God to the Archangel Michael, the leader of the Heavenly Host, otherwise known as the Army of God. Finally, he claims, "even the unbelievers often had to acknowledge that God refused to let this people be driven away or annihilated." [33] Even in

the midst of his commentary on the good fortune of the Brethren, the chronicler does not forget to remind his readers that they were a separated people of God, safe only because of divine protection.

The problem for these martyrologists was how to articulate a binary world of "Good vs. Evil" in the midst of their own compromising relationships with local lords, urban guilds, and city councils. Within martyr narratives, their theological and rhetorical strategies included the use of miracles, expressions of regret by persecutors, temporal and eternal punishment of persecutors, shows of Anabaptist piety, and reluctant secular authorities, especially executioners. These narrative elements highlight the innocence and purity of the martyrs who bravely refused to recant their faith in Christ while also chastising readers who, according to the authors, were too close to society outside the perfection of Christ.

These martyrologists could never fully accomplish this task, especially in their accounts of reluctant executioners. In their very attempts to showcase Anabaptist piety and purity by pointing to the reluctance of executioners, these writers undermined the assertion that the world and the systems of early modern justice could be damned *in toto*. Instead, martyr narratives with reluctant executioners highlight and destabilize simplistic understandings of Anabaptist attitudes toward the violence of their persecutors. The authors of these narratives demonstrate that the mechanics of Constantinian coercion were more complex than the logic of their theological longings.

III. Reluctant Executioners

Reluctant executioners point not only to the piety of the martyrs, but also to a world of local minions bound to the Constantinian "persecuting society" of early modern Europe. [34] The *Martyrs Mirror* recounts the execution of twelve Anabaptists in 1528 as follows:

> In this year 1528, nine brethren and three sisters were apprehended at Bruck, on the Mur, in Steyermark. They were condemned for their faith, and taken in bonds out of the city, to the place of execution; but they were glad and of good cheer, and said, "This day we will suffer in this place for the word of God, and offer to Him our sacrifice." Rom. 12:1; II Tim. 4:6. They also earnestly admonished the lords of Bruck, that they should know that they rendered themselves guilty of innocent blood. A ring having been formed, they all knelt down (Acts 7:60; 20:36), and earnestly prayed to God; that they might now finish this their evening sacrifice. They then arose and submitted to the sword. The executioner was sad; for he did not like to do it. [35]

Here the Anabaptists announce that their innocent blood is upon the lords of Bruck. The executioner is reluctant to perform his office, and the narrative does not dwell on the physical violence of the sword stroke, but instead on the actions of those responsible. While the reluctant executioner points to the power of Anabaptist piety, and thus to the Anabaptist separation from the evil world, he also becomes a "sad," sympathetic figure within the very legal system that has condemned the Anabaptists.

Figure 3: Execution of Wolfgang Pinder (Binder). From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press.

Sometimes the executioner receives attention for doing something wrong in the ritual of execution, a misstep caused by his hesitance to kill the innocent. The Hutterites record the execution of Wolf Binder in 1571:

> The executioner took him and turned back the collar from his neck, but he did it in fear and trembling. Brother Wolf knelt down and commended his spirit to the Lord his God. The executioner had great difficulty beheading him; he just could not strike accurately. He had to finish cutting off the brother's head on the ground as best he could. He was afraid, and his own life was endangered by the mob. This experience made him say later that he would never execute another brother as long as he lived. [36]

The executioner was so unnerved by Binder that he botched the execution, a failure that almost ended in his own death at the hands of an angry mob. By recounting the reluctance of the executioner, and even his vow never to kill another Anabaptist again, the executioner evokes pity from the readers of this martyr narrative.

The botched execution of Francis of Bolsweert in 1545 also humanizes the executioner as a minion caught up in the violence of a persecuting society:

> After he had openly prayed, "Lord God, receive my soul and guide it into Thy peace," the executioner commenced his work. Having stripped him of his clothes, and fastened hire to the stake, he was about to strangle him with a rope, when the rope broke, and he fell down. This frightened the executioner, and he endeavored quickly to burn him to ashes with much peat and wood; but God manifested His miraculous power, so that the fire lost its natural force, and the body could not be burned entirely; on which account the lords became angry at the executioner, and said that he had not brought enough wood... [37]

While this example recounts an accident (the breaking of the rope) and a miracle (God's dampening of the flames), it also implies that the executioner gave the condemned time to pray, a detail worth noting. The executioner's humanity contrasts with the anger of his superiors. The tone of the text indicates that executioner is not to blame; he is merely a tool for his overlords, and one to be pitied at that.

Figure 4: Drowning of Mattheus (Matthias) Mair. From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press.

In one example, the goodness of the executioner is contrasted with the evil intentions of the Catholic priest who sought to secure recantations from two Dutch Anabaptists. The story of Adriaen Hoedemaecker of Ghent and Mattheus Keuse in 1574 contains the following exchange between the executioner and the priest:

> When they came upon the scaffold, to offer up their sacrifice, the priest addressed several remarks to them, whereupon the executioner said to him, "Attend to your preaching." The executioner then kissed these brethren, and comforted them with the Word of God, hearing which the priest or confessor said to him, "Attend to your office; for preaching is my business." [38]

The executioner wants the Catholic priest to leave the Anabaptists alone and thus scolds him with the line, "attend to your preaching." When he offers comfort to the Anabaptists by kissing them and quoting scripture to them, the priest fires back with his own retort. The hostility between the two parties does not suggest a united front of the world against the Anabaptists, but rather an ambiguous world of disparate interests. [39] The biblically literate and merciful executioner did not want to kill innocent men, much less work with arrogant churchmen who failed to recognize the piety of their victims. [40]

Finally, executioners may beg for forgiveness for their physical violence. In the executions of Lauwerens van de Walle, Antonis Schoonvelt, Kalleken Strings, and Maeyken Kocx in 1561, the account ends with the forgiveness offered by the Anabaptists: "they were brought out with their arms tied together, and coming to the place where they were to be offered up, they fell down upon their knees, and prayed to God. When they had arisen, the executioner asked their forgiveness for what he was about to do, and they kindly forgave him, according to the teaching of Christ. Matt. 6:14." [41] In asking for forgiveness, the executioner admits that he does not believe that

the execution is justified, and that he is reluctant to kill pious innocents condemned by the Constantinian alliance. This Anabaptist rhetoric of forgiveness contrasts sharply with the vitriol that martyrs usually directed at priests and pastors of the Reformation confessions.

IV. Other Reluctant Authorities

The executioner is not the only secular officer reluctant to kill the Anabaptists. The *Chronicle* records the execution of four Hutterite Brethren in 1546 and notes the reluctance of all involved:

> They sang joyfully as they were led to the slaughter block. As was the custom at executions, a circle was made and the brothers knelt down inside it and prayed fervently. The executioner was heavy-hearted and reluctant to carry out his work. The other sons of Pilate, too, would gladly have been innocent, but they had to do it because of the authorities and to protect their own positions. They wished they were miles away. [42]

After noting the reluctance of the executioner, the Hutterite chronicler claims that the "children of Pilate" were merely slaves to their superiors; these men wanted nothing to do with killing Anabaptists. Notably, however, they are not excused from the violence of the system to the same degree that the executioner is. The Hutterite chronicler notes that these men had "to protect their own positions," which points to the motive of self-interest. They are not fully excused from their complicity in the deaths of the martyrs.

The example of Joris Wippe also demonstrates the reluctance of secular authorities. Wippe had been a burgomaster in Flanders before he converted to Anabaptism and moved to Dortrecht to work as a clothes-dyer. When some "enemies of the truth" reported his questionable beliefs to the authorities, Wippe decided to turn himself in to the local magistrates. The narrative recounts the reluctance of everyone associated with his case:

> When he came there, and the lords saw him, they were filled with consternation, and would have preferred that he had taken their summons as a warning to secretly make his escape, since they did not thirst much for innocent blood...
>
> After his apprehension, the lords tried every means to save him from death; he was sent to Gravenhage (that is, to the court of Holland), and there examined; but as he was a resident of Dordrecht, and had been apprehended there, he was sent back thither, and ultimately put to death there.
>
> He left behind him a good testimony as regards his liberality to the poor; for when he was sentenced to death, the executioner lamented with tears in his eyes, that he had to put to death a man who had so often fed his wife and children, and would rather forego his office, than put to death this man, who had done so much good to him and others, and had never harmed any one. Hence he was finally drowned, in the night, in a wine cask filled with water, by one of the thief-catchers.... The day following, several criminals were scourged and banished; whereupon the executioner, after he had executed this punishment, still lamenting the death of Joris Wippe, said "They have crucified Christ and released Barabbas." [43]

Not only do the local magistrates lament Wippe's decision to turn himself in, the executioner also refuses to kill him. Afterward, still distraught over the death of Wippe, the executioner compares the Anabaptist to Christ himself, and the banished criminals to Barabbas, the criminal released by Pontius Pilate. [44] The overriding focus of this narrative is not the cosmic battle between "Good" Christians and the "Evil" world, but the resistance of local secular authorities to their own offices. These men "tried every means to save him from his death," and the executioner simply refused to perform his office. In this case, both Wippe's former office as a burgomaster and his piety may account for the reluctance on the part of these authorities. The narrative presents a world far less evil than the one van Braght imagines in

his preface to the *Martyrs Mirror*. It is a world of local authorities reluctant to prosecute their neighbors simply for the sake of religious orthodoxy.

Figure 5: Execution of Jan Wouterss and Adriaenken Jans. From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press.

One of the most striking examples of this profound reluctance among the secular authorities is the execution of Gotthard of Nonenberg and Peter Kramer in 1558. Like most Anabaptist martyr narratives, this story highlights the steadfast piety of the martyrs. In this case, their piety transforms their persecutors into reluctant officers of their misguided overlords. Their reluctance first manifests in the transfer of the prisoners to the place of execution:

> When brought forth from prison, to be taken to the place of execution, these men were and remained firm and immovable as a wall, and determined to adhere to the truth, and not to separate from the faith. When all saw their boldness, and perceived that they were upright, pious persons, and had to die simply on account of their faith, nearly every one

> wept; the steward, the judges, deputy, and executioner as well as the common people. [45]

The authorities next "approached them with various wiles," but ultimately failed to secure their recantations. Notably, these "wiles" are the only detail of the narrative that paints the authorities in a poor light; these wiles surely did not involve the executioner, who was merely there to perform his job.

Back in the narrative, the steward next delivered the Anabaptists to the executioner:

> The executioner acted with reluctance, and received them with tears; for his heart misgave him. But Gotthard said to him, "How I have longed for this day; why do you delay so long?" When the executioner began to bind them, he said to them, "Dear men, be not afraid; for Christ also was bound innocently." When the steward heard these words he said to the executioner, "You must not speak in this manner." [46]

The reluctant executioner was so moved by the Anabaptists that he compared them to Jesus Christ. This was too much for the steward, who chided the executioner for unveiling their tragic participation in the violence of the Constantinian alliance. It appears that despite his sympathy for the victims, the steward's concern ceases when he believes his execution is in danger of devolving into a riot because of an executioner who might balk at finishing the job.

The martyr narrative concludes with the execution of the Anabaptists. The executioner and the steward display their humanity once again:

> When the time had come for them to die, they rose to their feet, called upon God in heaven, and, as brethren in Christ, and as a token of brotherly love and unity, kissed each other with the sweet kiss of peace, as those that were united with God, and were thus beheaded standing. But since they were executed unjustly, the executioner said with great fear and trepidation, that he should never execute such men again.

> After their heads had been severed from their bodies, the common people began to go home; but the steward called out to them, saying, “Don’t be in such a hurry, but help bury these pious men first; they did not die for any crime; they are neither thieves nor murderers; they were pious of life and conduct; they embraced a faith which the lords and princes could not understand, and hence they had to suffer.” [47]

The executioner claims that he would never execute innocent men ever again, while the steward exhorts the crowd to help bury the Anabaptists, who were “neither thieves nor murderers,” but good and pious men. Perhaps now that the execution is over, the steward can display his humanity once again. Above all, the steward’s comment points to the root of the problem: the fact that the lords and princes “could not understand” the faith of the Anabaptists. As a dutiful servant of his overlords, the steward had to perform his office, as did the executioner. That did not mean, however, that they agreed with the policies of their masters. The humanity of both men, as well as that of the crowd, contrasts with the coercive power of the Constantinian alliance. Nevertheless, the executioner appears in a more favorable light, for unlike the steward, his role in the judicial process was merely physical. The steward’s scolding of the executioner puts him in the same class as those “Sons of Pilate” who acted “to protect their own positions” in the Hutterite example from 1546 cited above.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most famous Anabaptist martyr is Dirk Willems of Asperen, who escaped from prison and fled across a frozen lake while being pursued by a thief-catcher in 1569. The thief-catcher promptly fell through the ice in his chase, while Willems made it safely across. The pious Anabaptist, “perceiving that the former was in danger of his life, quickly returned and aided him in getting out, and thus saved his life.” [48]The story continues

with the disagreement between the burgomaster and the thief-catcher as to what should be done with Willems:

> The thief-catcher wanted to let him go, but the burgomaster, very sternly called to him to consider his oath, and thus he was again seized by the thief-catcher, and, at said place, after severe imprisonment and great trials proceeding from the deceitful papists, put to death at a lingering fire by these bloodthirsty, ravening wolves, enduring it with great steadfastness, and confirming the genuine faith of the truth with his death and blood, as an instructive example to all pious Christians of this time, and to the everlasting disgrace of the tyrannous papists. [49]

Like the executioners and other minions of the State recounted in the examples above, the thief-catcher is reluctant to perform his office. Willems' selfless heroism has inspired him to release the Anabaptist. The burgomaster, however, reminds the lesser minion of his civic oath, which trumps personal feelings of gratitude.

Figure 6: Dirk Willems returns to save the thief-catcher. From *Martyrs Mirror*. Used by permission of Herald Press.

While the story of Dirk Willems has been cited time and time again as an example of Anabaptist piety, it serves my argument here as well, that the Anabaptist theological ideal of separation from the world does not adequately explain Anabaptist attitudes toward violence in their martyr narratives. As these examples make clear, the Anabaptists concerned themselves primarily with and responded most harshly to the spiritual coercion of the Constantinian alliance especially at work through the "tyrannous papists" and pastors of the Protestant confessions. If spiritual authorities received most of their censure, then complicit secular authorities were also to blame, those local lords and princes who sought to rid their demesnes of spiritual deviance. The Anabaptists devoted far less effort to damning local administrators, although these "middle managers" like the burgomaster cited above were not entirely blameless. They could have released their prisoners, but they were afraid of what would happen to their own livelihoods. As for reluctant executioners (and the lowly thief-catcher in the Willems example), the Anabaptists generally regarded them as hapless and pitiable minions of a demonic persecuting society. In fact, the general trend in the examples cited above is that the more physical and local the violence, the less blameworthy the agent(s) involved. Executioners, as the bottom of the judicial hierarchy, never received the censure that priests and pastors did, as evidenced in the Anabaptist condemnation of the "tyrannous papists" cited above.

This layered Anabaptist response to violence problematizes the theological goals of both the Hutterite chroniclers and Thieleman van Braght. Largely written during times of prosperity and toleration, both the *Chronicle* and the *Martyrs Mirror* devote considerable energy to damning the fallen world, and both polarize society into the Chosen and the Damned in their martyr narratives. The authors of these texts were quite nervous about the acceptance and privileges afforded to their groups, for this was the subtle deceit of the devil, who would destroy the Anabaptists by tempting them to join the fallen world. Hence these martyrologists' determined efforts,

through the binary rhetoric of salvation and damnation, to remind their readers that their non-Anabaptist neighbors, co-workers, and friends endangered the salvation of the gathered community of faith.

Yet even within their martyr narratives, this dominant theological and rhetorical ploy is countered and destabilized by the accompanying accounts of early modern society. In studies of early modern Anabaptist martyrdom and violence, it is therefore paramount to specify the kinds of violence the Anabaptists in question experienced (spiritual coercion or physical violence?), how they articulated this violence (was it cosmic and universal or particular and local?), who performed the violence (executioners, judges, bailiffs, clergy, etc.?), and how they responded to it (did they damn it or forgive it?). Spiritual coercion was easily the most pernicious, feared, and hated, for the priests and pastors in the ears of the secular authorities were determined to rob the martyrs of their crowns. Judges and local lords at the higher levels of the justice system were nearly as culpable, while stewards, bailiffs, and other middle managers at the local level were often censured for their misguided instincts of self-preservation. Local executioners, on the other hand, rarely figured in Anabaptist condemnations of violence or the "world" despite their pivotal role in physical execution. This is not only because the Anabaptists distinguished between the high value of the soul's eternal life and the relatively low value of the physical body; this Platonic, Pauline, and Augustinian assumption stands for nearly all early modern Christians. It is also because the Anabaptists clearly understood the judicial mechanics of the Constantinian alliance directed against them. They did not waste their substantial rhetorical or theological ammunition on executioners, who were but puppets on a stage. They condemned the ones who pulled the strings.

Notes

[1] Protestant and Catholic opponents of believer's baptism pejoratively dubbed its adherents "Anabaptists," Greek for "rebaptizers." To these confessions, infant baptism signaled one's entrance into the Christian community, and the denial of that belief was a rejection of the neighborly bonds of Christian society. For the Anabaptists, on the other hand, one could only be a Christian if one made a conscious choice to enter a life of discipleship as part of the true Church. The alternative was to remain an unsaved sinner in the "fallen" world. On the basics of Anabaptist theology and the centrality of believer's baptism, see esp. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson, New York, Routledge, 1996.

[2] By "Constantinian alliance," I refer to the intimate connection between the Church and secular authorities in service of a unified Christian society, as had been largely the case for Western Europe during the Middle Ages and for the Roman Catholic and Protestant territories of early modernity. Within the Christian tradition, Constantine the Great (r. 306-337) is regarded as the first Roman Emperor to embrace Christianity. The Nicene variant of Christianity eventually became the state religion of the Empire under Theodosius I (r. 379-395) in 380 CE. Many Anabaptists regarded Constantine's reign as the symbol of the near dissolution of true Christianity, of which they were the revivers. On this historical vision, see esp. Geoffrey Dipple, *"Just as in the Time of the Apostles": Uses of History in the Radical Reformation*. Kitchener, Ontario, Pandora Press, 2005.

[3] The founder of the Mennonites, Menno Simons, writes, "all the evangelical scriptures teach us that the church of Christ was and is, in doctrine, life, and worship, a people separated from the world," *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger, Herald Press, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1956, p. 679. Likewise, in the section on "Separation from the World" in his *Confession of Faith*, the Hutterite leader Peter Riedemann argues that "God has chosen this church for himself and has separated the members from all peoples, so that they might serve him with one mind and heart, and through the one childlike Spirit," *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith: Translation of the 1565 German Edition of Confession of our Religion,*

Teaching, and Faith, by the Brothers Who are Known as the Hutterites, trans. and ed. John Friesen, Waterloo, Ontario, Herald Press, 1998, p. 123.

[4] Brad S. Gregory reminds us that secular authorities that sought to curtail religious deviance believed they were prosecuting religious criminals, not persecuting innocent Christians. On this important distinction, see his *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 74-96.

[5] Brad Gregory estimates between 2,000 and 3,000 Anabaptist martyrs in the Low Countries and Central Europe, "Anabaptist Martyrdom: Imperatives, Experience, and Memorialization," in: *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2007, p. 478.

[6] The rhetoric of diabolism was common to the confessional conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Anabaptists routinely referred to the demonic nature of their opponents, as it buttressed their claim to be God's Chosen.

[7] On various concrete Anabaptists responses to persecution, including martyrdom, Nicodemism (outward religious conformity), and strategic emigration, see John Oyer, *"They Harry the Good People Out of the Land": Essays on the Persecution, Survival, and Flourishing of Anabaptists and Mennonites*, ed. John Roth, Goshen, Indiana, Mennonite Historical Society, 2000, p. 35-47.

[8] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater: Or, Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians: Who Baptized Only upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660* (henceforth *Martyrs Mirror*), trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 9th ed., Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1972, p. 1128.

[9] On the rhetorical value of miracles in Anabaptist martyrologies, see Sydney Penner, "Swiss Anabaptists and the Miraculous," *MQR* 80, No. 2, April 2006, p. 207-228.

[10] Keith L. Sprunger notes that while secular authorities used public execution of Anabaptists as a warning to other potential deviants, Anabaptists used it to display their piety and steadfastness to the gathered audience, "Dutch Anabaptists and the Telling of the Martyr Stories," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80, No. 2, April 2006, p. 174-176. See also W. Benjamin Myers, "The Stage and the Stake: 16th Century Anabaptist Martyrdom as Resistance to Violent Spectacle," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 2009, http://liminalities.net/5-3/martyrdom.pdf.

[11] The year 1535 marked the fall of the "Kingdom of Münster," the attempt by Anabaptists to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The reigns of the Anabaptist "Kings" Jan Matthys and Jan van Leiden were marred by erratic and arbitrary rule, and they committed violence against all those who opposed them. A Protestant-Catholic alliance finally ended the Münster Rebellion and initiated harsh persecutions of Anabaptists in the Netherlands and Central Europe.

[12] On the tension between the rhetoric of vengeance and that of forgiveness in Anabaptist martyrologies, see my "'They are to be pitied and wept over, not envied': Hutterite Responses to Persecution in the *Chronicle*," *MQR* 83, No. 3, July 2009, p. 403-423.

[13] Broadly understood, violence is the use of force against another or others and it is usually physical in nature. Coercion, or, more strongly, coercive violence, may be the implied threat of violence through verbal or non-verbal pressure or intimidation in order to achieve a certain goal. At its extreme, coercion can also be physical, as in the use of torture to extract information from prisoners of war. This distinction is especially important to my argument, as the Anabaptists were far more critical of spiritual coercion aimed at their consciences than physical violence.

[14] Hans-Jürgen Goertz highlights the influence of late medieval anti-clericalism on Anabaptist thought and practice in Chapter 2 of *The Anabaptists*, "Anticlericalism and Moral Improvement," p. 36-67.

[15] A recent approach to Anabaptist martyrdom that relies heavily on the motor of cosmic dualism is Tripp York, *The Purple Crown: The Politics of Martyrdom*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 2007. For an important critique of this assumed dualism in Anabaptist theology, especially with respect to Anabaptist attitudes toward secular authority, see Gerald Mast, *Separation and the Sword in Anabaptist Persuasion: Radical Confessional Rhetoric from Schleitheim to Dordrecht*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 2006.

[16] *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. and ed. John H. Yoder, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1973, p. 37-38.

[17] A short list includes Thomas Müntzer, Hans Hut, and Balthasar Hubmaier. For example, the prophet Melchior Hoffman, and later his Münsterite followers, longed for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth through the second coming of Christ, who would eliminate the ungodly through his righteous judgment and establish a new millennium.

[18] I use the term "proto-" because the Hutterites and Mennonites did not exist as such until the late 1530s and 1540s, respectively. The Hutterites took their name from their early leader Jakob Hutter (1500-1535), as they recount in *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (henceforth *Chronicle*), Rifton, New York, Plough Publishing House, 1987, p. 146. The Mennonites also took their name from their leader, the former Catholic priest Menno Simons (1496-1561).

[19] *The Legacy of Michel Sattler*, p. 39.

[20] Gerald Mast argues that the Anabaptist rejection of the "world" and the "sword" alongside tacit admission of the sword's basic disciplinary function constituted an unstable "tension between separation and civility" that led to different discursive approaches among the Anabaptists. The Hutterites

usually evinced contempt for secular authorities and employed a “rhetoric of antagonism,” while the Mennonites were more positive, if cautious, about their overlords, and instead maintained a “rhetoric of dualism,” *Separation and the Sword in Anabaptist Persuasion*, p. 232-235.

[21] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, p. 199. Sarah Covington has analyzed van Braght’s use of his paratextual apparatus (title page, index, table of contents, introduction) to establish a unified account of Anabaptist martyrdom in the early modern period, “Paratextual Strategies in Thieleman van Braght's *Martyr's Mirror*,” *Book History* 9 (2006), p. 1-29.

[22] The most influential precursor to van Braght’s compilation was *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, published anonymously in 1562 by Jan Hendricks van Schoonrewoerd. There were eleven editions by 1599. On the complex history of the Mennonite martyrological tradition, see esp. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, p. 215-249.

[23] This historical vision cannot be understated. The *Chronicle* devotes its first section, “Creation to 1517: Pre-Reformation History” to outlining the history of the Church from Genesis to Martin Luther, and include accounts of apostolic, late antique, and medieval witnesses to the truth, p. 1-41. Van Braght’s “First Part” of the *Martyrs Mirror* includes a detailed and lengthy “Account of Those Who Suffered” from the first to the fifteenth century, p. 67-340.

[24] *Chronicle*, p. 792-798.

[25] At the beginning of the *Chronicle*, the Hutterites list “General Events” in Part One of their Register, while Part Two is devoted to a list of Hutterite martyrs recorded in the Chronicle (“List of all those who suffered imprisonment or witnessed with their blood as Christian martyrs for the sake of divine truth by fire, water, and the sword”). Only thirteen martyrs are listed after 1592, and of those, only four were executed.

[26] On the nature and limits of the toleration accorded the Mennonites during the Dutch Golden Age, see Samme Zijlstra, “Anabaptism and

tolerance: possibilities and limitations," in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, eds. R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 112-131.

[27] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 1101-1139.

[28] On the spiritual uneasiness generated by the newfound prosperity of the Mennonites during the Dutch Golden Age, see Karl Koop, "Dangers of Superabundance: Pieter Pietersz, Mennonites, and Greed during the Dutch Golden Age," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 27, 2009, p. 61-74.

[29] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[30] On this point, see also Gregory, *op.cit.*, p. 246.

[31] *Chronicle*, p. 402.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 402-403.

[33] *Ibid.,* p. 403.

[34] On the idea of a "persecuting society," see the work of R.I. Moore. Moore argues in *The Origins of European Dissent*, London: Allen Lane, 1977, that the clerical elite of the eleventh and twelfth centuries helped established heresy as a serious political (not simply spiritual) transgression in order to consolidate their power over their competitors. He expands this vision to include Jews, lepers, Muslims, homosexuals, and other deviants in *The Formation of the Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 1987.

[35] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

[36] *Chronicle*, p. 429.

[37] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 472 ff.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 992 ff.

[39] The execution of Thomas Han in 1592 displays a similar exchange between the executioner and the constable. On the way to his execution, Thomas began to sing and the constable silenced him. The executioner, in turn, told the constable to "let him sing," and later begged Thomas to renounce his faith three times, "for he did not wish to execute him," *Chronicl*e, p. 521-522; cf. *Martyrs Mirror*, p. 1089.

[40] The biblical literacy of the executioner is noteworthy, for the Anabaptists distinguished between the learned, pompous churchmen who presumed to know the Bible and yet did not live its teachings, and those who read scripture with an eye to discipleship, or *Nachfolge Christi*, literally, "following Christ."

[41] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 653.

[42] *Chronicle*, p. 247; cf. Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

[43] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 584 ff.

[44] According to the New Testament passion narratives, it was a Jerusalem Passover tradition for the governor of Judea to commute the sentence of one prisoner based on the wishes of the gathered crowd. See the synoptic accounts in Matthew 27: 15-26, Mark 15:6-15, and Luke 23:13-25.

[45] Van Braght, *op. cit.*, p. 590.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 590-591.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 591.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 741.

[49] *Id.*

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Par Adam W. Darlage, «The Reluctant Executioner and Violence in Anabaptist Martyrologies», *Shakespeare en devenir* [En ligne], N°5 - 2011, Shakespeare en devenir, I. The politics of pain: the epistemology of violence in historical and political narratives, mis à jour le : 27/12/2019, URL : https://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr:443/shakespeare/index.php?id=526.

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