

Response to Kathleen Lynch's "How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?"--Lori Anne Ferrell, Claremont Graduate University

"[T]he minds of the godly," wrote John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "are rarely at peace." No surprise there, given what he had to tell them. The *Institutes'* characteristic textual prompts – frequent asides like "we will discuss each as the order...demands," "no anxious discussion is needed," or "this matter...will be discussed later in its proper place" – kept readers in check by keeping them in two kinds of suspense. The first was soteriological, of course, but the second was narrative (at the art of which, over the course of several revisions between 1536 and 1559, Calvin became preternaturally adept). John Calvin's most influential work bore an uncannily symbiotic relationship to the act of reading itself, wherein the maddeningly slow-to-unfold discovery of "the way in which we receive the grace of Christ: what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow" found kinetic outlet in seemingly endless page turning.

Whether they owned and read it, or listened to ministers who expounded it in hand, early modern English Protestants surely must have regarded a book like the *Institutes* as the very embodiment of the doctrine of perseverance. In the late sixteenth century the Cambridge reformer William Perkins developed an approach to that doctrine which placed Calvin's ancillary notion of "temporary" faith at the center of his, and of his many followers', pastoral ministry. Perkins' emphasis on the probability that those elected to eternal damnation might nonetheless feel glimmerings of faith from time to time made efficient use of the energy vigilant believers spent seeking spiritual assurance and avoiding despair. They channeled these doubts and fears – so many anxious feints and parries – into rigorous

practices of self-examination and –expression. Set down in ink on paper, these practices became the basis for such characteristic literary genres as the puritan diary and the printed conversion narrative.

Kathleen Lynch introduces us to an extraordinary version of this last: the 1647 account of fifteen-year-old Sarah Wight, whose anguished conscience drove her to fast unto near-death, as she struggled several months with the terrible possibility that she had fallen into the unforgivable sin of despair – that hopeless, premature slamming shut of one's own book of life that spelled certain damnation in an English Calvinist world built on staying in the game. As she fought through her despondency, a steadily growing throng of witnesses, lay and ministerial, came to visit her and to hear – and in one case, record – the "prophecies" she uttered while in what we would surely now call a serious cachexic depression. In time she recovered herself (a minor medical miracle in itself), finally coming to the liberating understanding that salvation *sola gratia* was true doctrine. A scant month later her experience was published as *The Exceeding Riches of GRACE ADVANCED*. The book subsequently went into multiple editions in the seventeenth century, making this self-described “empty nothing creature” one of the first and most enduring heroines of the printed puritan page.

Wight's account allows Lynch to touch on three well-known aspects of English religious life in a tumultuous decade of civil war: the experiments in semi-separatism after the abolition of episcopacy; the struggles to rein in radical behavior – especially women's – unleashed by unprecedented and apocalyptic events; and the phenomenon of unchecked, uncensored printing. Her considerable

accomplishment is to show the links between them by positing a material and synergistic relationship between religious conversion and the production of godly books in this period. Scholars accept the affinity of Protestantism to print as a given, but Lynch reminds us that a successful relationship could be based on more than the benefits of mechanical reproduction of content.

For the material conditions that, we now know, made early modern printed texts inherently unstable may also have made them most lastingly influential. Although we have not yet been so daring as to declare *all manuscripts are alike* (although a well-wrought batch of thirteenth-century Paris Bibles might tax our vision and our wits in finding out their discrepancies), lately we *have* been tempted to say no two early modern *printed* books were alike. And given stop-press and other "random" effects of this particular workplace, we would not be over-clever to stake the claim. As a matter of course, early modernists now must take into account the fact that dozens of individual copies of the early printed books they now peruse in crisply accurate modern critical editions have already been compared and contrasted by a sharp-eyed, patient (and headache-resistant) editor hunched over a collator; in tribute to that magisterial labor, we now make certain our students neither flip past the *Textual Variants* section of their critical editions nor disdain the significance of the information contained therein. Yet we have had a harder time explaining what, exactly, is significant about such verifiable evidence of textual mutability.

Kathleen Lynch does exactly that, moving away from a now-superseded notion of "the fixity of print" to what she usefully calls "fixation on completion": the

constraints taken on by authors, printers, and print houses facing “the material limits of a print job.” She sketches out these realities of press production neatly, in the language familiar to historians of the early modern book – so many pages to a sheet, so many sheets to a quire, so many quires to a book.

And so many books to interpret an event. When Sarah Wight’s story ended, its life as a reproducible, thus updatable, text began, in which the voices of a shifting cast of paratextual witnesses continued to interrogate Wight, update the reader, and (in Lynch’s words) “expand the applicability” of Wight’s story of perseverance in the face of despair. Through it all, these additions were never allowed to tax the original page count, which gave Sarah’s story in reprint not only a kind of stable afterlife, but also a now-safely enclosed one. Sarah had once promised a second part, after all, but no one, not even Sarah herself, could promise that this new tale would be as inspiring: the seemingly converted were just as liable as any to break bad – a sad fact William Perkins used as observable evidence of the doctrine of temporary faith.

Like social conditions, like Tudor and Stuart dynasties, like English religious identity in this fractious and fast-changing age, print was anything but stable. Lynch concludes her daring essay on a cautious note, reminding us that if the conversion narrative was “born in print,” print also could be marshaled to control it. But perhaps not quite: Christianity has always been a religion that thrived in the interstices between the fixed and the mutable. It traces both its origin and its eternity to a single historic moment, after all; it places its startling, counterintuitive bid for eternal salvation on a god who is simultaneously, indivisibly both fragilely

human and eternally divine. Little wonder, then, that it took to the book, that material reminder of the persistence of human error.