

Response to “How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?” by Kathleen Lynch

Any close scrutiny of a seventeenth-century text and, especially, any text that passed through several printings, yields surprises. So it is with The exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced—a text, I hasten to say, I have not consulted myself, and therefore I am relying on Kathleen Lynch’s careful description of the several versions. A key word in her analysis is “conversion.” Let me suggest an alternative category, the “wonder,” that may suit the text and its materiality in ways that supplement the analysis that Lynch provides. I prefer wonder to conversion in part because Henry Jessey uses that word himself, although a stronger reason for considering it in this light is the nature of Sarah Wight’s experience: a fifteen-year-old girl going without food and almost without water for an astonishingly long period of time is an event so contrary to the natural order of things that it borders on the miraculous. In popular parlance, wonders were often conflated with the miraculous and certainly with the workings of the supernatural. Wonders were where the visible, everyday world and the invisible world of divine (or satanic) power met, the latter intruding on the former in order to reveal or confirm a higher truth or expectation. Here, that truth is the riches of divine grace that relieve Sarah from all spiritual anxiety. Within the realm of the “practical divinity,” a framework for linking formal doctrine with the experience of the work of grace, conversion narratives contain two motifs that are absent in the text at hand: the imperative of repentance for sin in response to “the law” (the “mirror” that enables humans to perceive how unworthy they are and how fully they must confess their inadequacies), and the recurring dialectic of certainty and doubt as the “visible saint” made his or her way through the world. Both of these were lifelong processes, repentance recurring as a premise for the practice of devotion. Absent these elements, the text seems a pitch perfect example of the wonder: how else could Sarah Wight have lived for so long without food, and become so striking a witness to divine power?

Many events or sensations were encompassed by the category of wonder: storms, lightning bolts, unexpected sounds (especially words spoken by the very young), apparitions, comets, showers of blood or wheat, episodes of diabolical possession, unexplained healings . . . As well, the category encompassed the extremes of spiritual experience and religious history: persecutors of the godly who suddenly fall dead and, of special interest in the seventeenth century, stories of despair, as when someone imagined having committed the unpardonable sin and, rejecting every effort to provide assurance and healing, perished in a paroxysm of anguish. The best known of such stories was probably that of the mid-sixteenth-century Italian Francis Spira who, after recanting his Protestantism, underwent extraordinary torments before dying, presumably undone by his apostasy. These “fearful” torments were widely publicized within Protestant circles on the continent and in England, where his story was also turned into a piece of theatre—publicized to such an extent that, in late seventeenth-century Boston, a young daughter of Samuel Sewall came into his bedroom one morning and announced that she was another Spira. Sarah Wight’s fast provides a dramatic alternative to such stories, a narrative of deliverance rather than a narrative of rejection, a deliverance from sin so complete that she defies the logic of her long-term fasting and, instead of dying, becomes a living witness to the Holy Spirit.

Implicitly, Wight is sinless, something that was impossible to accomplish within the framework of the practical divinity but possible within the world view of some of the sectarian groups that emerged in mid-seventeenth-century England. By 1646, episodes of lay men and women (and the rare minister) proclaiming that the practical divinity had it wrong and that being without sin (or perfectionism) was possible were being widely publicized in books such as Thomas Edwards’s Gangranae (1646). It is possible that Jessey and Simpson were flirting with such notions themselves. Or perhaps Sarah Wight appealed to Jessey in the context of his extreme version of Christian or biblical primitivism or restorationism: taken to an extreme, the logic of restorationism is that divine healings are once again

possible, something that was entertained by the early Quakers and practiced briefly by John Fox. In any event, the story of Sarah Wight is intrinsically political, just as all wonders were political, e.g. as evidence to buttress jeremiads against this or that policy or institution or movement—a good example being the “monster birth” attributed to the Boston “Antinomian” Mary Dyer—, and employed in inter-confessional politics. Catholics brandished wonders to prove that God was on their side and Protestants other wonders to demonstrate exactly the opposite.

As a genre, wonder stories often have an apparatus designed to persuade us of their truth. Most, of course, were not. Given the recycling of many of these stories from Antiquity or from the continent, the attempts of booksellers and printers to update them by providing locales and witnesses should be taken with a large grain of salt. (The most thorough demonstration of this recycling and updating is provided by Alexandra Walsham’s Providence in Early Modern England [1996]). Several of the material features of Wight’s narrative may therefore be in keeping with the genre of wonder. And what if the modifications that occurred in the text were Jessey’s response to the uneasiness of readers with the narrative? Witnesses come and go without much explanation, Jessey or the printers able to take for granted that new readers did not have access to earlier printings. As Kathleen Lynch knows, attributing intention to continuity and change in the material form of a book is a tricky business. Certainly she is on good ground in proposing that sheet count matters and that revision had to occur within quite narrow limits. My line of thinking merely adds to the acute analysis she has already provided.

David D. Hall, Harvard Divinity School