Anne Askew and Margaret Fell: Religious Women in Prison And Technologies of the Self

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Abstract

Both British Anne Askew (1521-1546) and Margaret Fell (1614-1702) suffered the political and religious persecution, but they were strong enough to voice their self and truth they valued by means of writing. This paper attempts to examine these two religious women's personal autonomy and religious self-assurance in terms of Michel Foucault's technologies of the self. The main ideas of technologies of self are "Know yourself" and "Take care of yourself." "Writing," writes Foucault, "was ... important in the culture of the care of the self" (*Ethics* 232). According to Foucault, technologies of the self operate on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, and conduct so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. By writing *The Examinations* and *Women's Speaking Justified* in prison, Askew and Fell formed their subjectivity and affirmed their religious truth.

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(DRAFT)

Introduction

Both Anne Askew (1521-1546) and Margaret Fell (1614-1702) were imprisoned and wrote significant writings in jail. In prison Askew wrote *The First Examination* (1546) and *The Latter Examination* (1547); Fell wrote *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures* (1666). The two Protestants' imprisonment indicates not only their struggle for freedom of their Protestant belief but also the government's arbitrary exercise of institutional power over non-conforming women.

This paper attempts to examine these two religious women's personal autonomy and religious self-assurance in terms of Michel Foucault's technologies of the self. The main ideas of technologies of self are "Know yourself" and "Take care of yourself." "Writing," writes Foucault, "was ... important in the culture of the care of the self" (*Ethics* 232). Askew and Fell formed their subjectivity and affirmed their religious truth by writing in prison.

Foucault's technologies of self

In *Punish and Discipline*, Foucault employs an eighteenth-century philosopher, Jeremy Bentham's notion of panopticon, a special designed prison, to explain how the networks of power exercise in everyday life. For Foucault, power is omnipresent because "it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (*History* I. 93). Relationships of power, Foucault further states, exists in "human relations, whatever they are—whether it be a question

of communicating verbally ... or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship—power is always present" ("Interview" 11). "Power is everywhere," writes Foucault, "because it comes from everywhere" (*History*, 93).

Under continuous surveillance, prisoners are objectified to power, affirming the legal obedience and the legitimate right of sovereignty (Smart 78). However, Foucault also maintains that "where there is power, there is resistance" (*History* 95). In the two volumes of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault examines sexuality in Greco-Roman age, and remarks the "possibility of counterattack against the normalizing power." Within the power relation, resistance is rather a change of technology: acknowledging the existence of technologies of domination—the exercise of power—on the one hand and choosing another technology that permit individuals certain possibilities of transgression on the other. Foucault discusses four major types of "technologies" as follows:

> As a context, we must understand that there are four types of these "technologies," each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (*Ethics* 225)

These four types of technologies, Foucault emphasizes, "hardly ever function separately, although each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination" (*Ethics* 225).

Opposite to technologies of domination, in which subjects are objectified and utilized, technologies of the self allows individuals to focus on themselves, trying their best to become their own ideal forms with practices and actions. Focusing on one's relationship with oneself and viewing the self as a desiring subject, Foucault notifies the importance of self-knowledge. The most basic prerequisite for care for the

self is to treat the self as subject. The shift from one's process of objectification to the focus on self-subjectivization is central in Foucault's idea of resistance.

Foucault believes taking care of oneself is associated with constant writing activity:

> Writing was also important in the culture of the care of the self. One of the tasks that define the care of the self is that of taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed.   (*Ethics* 232).

The self is something to write about, a theme or object of writing activity. Contemplation and reminiscence contribute to the justification, clarification and discovery of the truth the soul really wants. Technologies of self, to some extent, become a kind of aesthetic activity.

Anne Askew and technologies of self

Anne Askew came from an old Lincolnshire family and was the second daughter of Sir William Askew, a knight. She was forced to marry Thomas Kyme of Kelsey by her father. After the marriage, problems came because Askew was so intensely interested in religious questions that she passionately studied the Bible. Finally she became a Protestant so her Catholic husband drove her out of the house. In 1545, she was sent to London and she may have served as a waiting woman to Queen Catherine Parr. By June 1545, when she was arrested and examined for heresy concerning the sacrament. Next Year, Askew was subjected to torture in the Tower and was burned at the stake in Smithfield on July 16, 1546. She was twenty-five when she died (Travitsky 168-9). In her resistance to the institutional power, she sacrificed her body yet obtained her soul's rest and peace, and even "immortality" just as stated above, she employed Foucault's technologies of the self, "which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."

Why was Askew executed in the reign of Henry VIII? The reason was that she denied the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (Cressy 32). Transubstantiation was the most controversial theological dispute of the day. As Elaine Beilin explains, this Anglo-Catholic doctrine was that "at every Mass the whole substance of the consecrated elements of bread and wine converts into the real body and blood of Christ" (*Askew*, xxiv.) As a Protestant, Askew denied this doctrine, declaring clearly that the bread was "an only sign of sacrament," or "a remembrance of hi death" (Martin 74).She affirmed that "the sacrament of the altar was either symbolic of a remembrance and the Christ was not really present" (Askew, xxv). She risked a charge of heresy and a horrible death by fire for her faith. Askew recorded the inquisitions in her *The First Examination* and *The Latter Examination*.

The *Examinations* reveal Askew's expressions and actions during the trials. Foucault suggests that writing is a key activity in resistance to power. Askew resisted vigorously the religious and political power by depicting her thoughts and conduct; the subject of self became the focus of her writings. For instance, she described herself as a very voluble woman who eloquently defended her beliefs and often quoted scriptures:

> The bishop's chancellor rebuked me and said that I was much to blame for uttering the scriptures. For St. Paul, he said forbade women to speak or to talk of the word of God. I answered him that I knew Paul's meaning so well as he, which is (1 Corinthians 14) that a woman ought not to speak in the congregation by the way of teaching.   (Martin 63)

Instead of being a silent woman, Askew retorted that she was not to blame for quoting scriptures.

In the beginning of *The Latter Examination*, Askew recorded her conversation with the council:

> ... They with that answer were not contented, but said it was the King's pleasure that I should open the matter to them. I answered them plainly that I would not so do, but if it were the King's pleasure to hear me, I would show him the truth. Then they said it as not meet for the King with me to be troubled. I answered that Solomon was reckoned the wisest king that ever

lived, yet misliked not he to hear two poor common women, much more his Grace a simple woman and his faithful subject. So, in conclusion, I made them none other answer in that matter.   (Martin 59)

Askew made the council silent when they attempted to force her to speak in the name of the King. She cleverly compared the King with Solomon, the wisest king in the Bible. She suggested the King would superior to Solomon if the King could hear her tell the truth in person.

When the Lord Chancellor asked her opinion of the sacrament, Askew answered "I believe that so oft as I, in a Christian congregation, do receive the bread in remembrance of Christ's death, and with thanksgiving according to his holy instruction, I receive therewith the fruits also of his most glorious passion" (Martin 60). Repeatedly, Askew was asked her opinion of the bread and wine at the Eucharist. The main theological issue in *The Examinations* and one of the Reformation's main controversies is "the nature of the consecrated bread and wine at the Eucharist." As Martin notes,

> The Catholic belief, transubstantiation, held that the entire material reality or substance of the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ, while retaining the outward appearance of bread and wine. Protestants rejected this doctrine in varying degrees, Askew's view appears to follow Luther's: the bread and wine are only symbolic of Christ body and blood, which is present spiritually but not materially.   (61)

Askew affirmed her view of transubstantiation, and was executed as a result of her ascertaining the truth.

Foucault thought "writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (*Ethics* 232). He also believed that one of the strategies to resist power is to employ self as a subject to write about so as to achieve justification, clarification and discovery of the truth the soul really wants. Aesthetic activity or writing activity becomes the core of technologies of self. In addition to *The Examinations*, Askew wrote confessions and letters, such as "The Confession of Me Anne Askew, for the Time I Was in Newgate, Concerning My Belief," "The Sum of The Condemnation of Me, Anne Askew, At

Guildhall," "My Letter Sent to the Lord Chancellor," "My Faith Briefly Written to the King's Grace," "The Effect of My Examination and Handling Since My Departure from Newgate, " and "Anne Askew's Answer unto John Lascells's Letter." Through writing about herself, Anne Askew constructed her identity and acquired truth she believed. Her resistance to political and theological power can be examined in terms of Foucault's technologies of self.

Margaret Fell and technologies of self

Margaret Fell was born at Marsh Grange in Fournis in Lancashire in 1614. In 1632 Thomas Fell married Margaret Fell and they lived at Swarthmore Hall. Margaret Fell wrote that the first 20 years of her marriage was spent seeking of the best ways to serve God which included having traveling ministers stay at Swarthmore. In 1652 Geroge Fox, founder of Quaker, first visited Swarthmoor and Thomas Fell was impressed with Fox's belief so he allowed Swarthmoor Hall to be a meeting place and haven for Friends. Thomas Fell died in 1658 and Margaret inherited Swarthmoor Hall. Two weeks after the restoration of Charles II in 1659, soldiers appear at Swarthmoor hall and arrested George Fox on charges of treason. Fox was imprisoned at Lancaster Castle dungeon for 20 weeks. Margaret Fell visited the King and secured Fox's release in 1660. In 1662 An Act to suppress the Quakers passed parliament by which they could be imprisoned for refusing to take the Oath to the King. Again Margaret went to London to intercede with the King who heard her favorably. In 1664, Margaret returned to Swarthmoor and found the Hall ransacked and Fox arrested and thrown into Lancaster Gaol. Later Margaret was also arrested for refusing to take the Oath. In the trials it was clear that the purpose of the Judges was to prevent Quakers from meeting together and to get Fox and Fell to say the Oath of Obedience. She refused; she then spent 6 months in Lancaster Gaol. After which there was a trial on 21 September 1664, at which she was committed to life in prison and forfeiture of her property. Her answer to this sentence was, "Although I am out of the King's protection, yet I am not out of the protection of the Almighty God." Margaret remained in prison for four and a half years (1664-68). In 1669 George Fox and Margaret Fell were married. Margaret died in 1702, her last words being: "I am in Peace."

George and Margaret Fox founded Quaker and built the organization structure of the Friends. The early Quakers rejected "the spirit of worldliness" and popular culture and attempted to combat the harmful influences of the world (Bell 24).

"Quaker grey" refers to their mark that distinguished them from worldly ostentations so they adopted a plain style of clothing (Jantzen 137). The Charles's government tried to stop them gathering together and forced them to take the Oath, showing their loyalty to the King. Margaret, however, like many Friends, would answer, "...this I shall say, as for my allegiance, I love, own, and honor the King and desire his peace and welfare; and that we may live a peaceable, a quiet and a godly life under his government, according to the Scriptures; and this is my allegiance to the King. And as for the oath itself, Christ, the king of Kings, hath commanded me not to swear at all, neither by heaven, nor by earth, nor by any other oath."

During her four and half years' imprisonment Margaret took up the pen, writing religious pamphlets. As Foucault remarked, technologies of self, a form of resistance to power, are characterized by aesthetic writing. Among many pamphlets and letters, the most significant work is her *Women's Speaking Justified*, written in prison in 1667. Her argument is that women should be allowed to preach and prophesy. Her style, as Carole Levin remarked, consists of "interweaving biblical quotations and imitating the Bible" (261). Focusing on female self, Fell claimed that her female gender is no longer a mark of inferiority.

In *Women's Speaking Justified*, Margaret Fell defended women's position as a rightful speaker in the Church. Her egalitarian view of the involvement of women in the Church is underpinned by the texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Although many male ministers objected to women's speaking in the Church, God, insisted Fell, has put no such difference between the Male and Female. The Lord is pleased when he mentions his Church, "to call her by the Name of Woman." So, Fell argues, "the Church of Christ is represented as a Woman." Fell also mentions the story of the Woman of Samaria, whom Jesus Christ met at Jacob's Well and was pleased to preach the Everlasting Gospel to her. The Woman of Samaria "manifested her true and saving Faith, which few at that day believed so on him." The Woman, who came to Jesus with an Alabaster Box of very precious Oilment, and pour it on his Head as he sat at meat, "knew more of the secret Power and Wisdom of God, than his Disciples did." Many Women, Fell continued, followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him, and stood afar off when he was Crucified, and even the Women of Jerusalem wept for him. On the third day, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and other Women cane to the Sepulcher, and the Angel told them to tell the Apostles that Jesus had risen again.

Since women are significant in the Bible, why shouldn't women speak in the Church? Fell concluded: "And this deliverance was by the means of a Womans speaking; but tattlers, and busie-bodies, are forbidden to preach by the True Woman, whom Christ is the Husband, to the Woman as well as the Man, all being comprehended to be the Church; and so in this True Church, Sons and daughters do Prophesie, Women labour in the Gospel" (Trill 220). Let true Speakers of Men and Women speak in the Church. Fell resisted the religious prohibition by being engaged in writing activity to proclaim truth, the core of the strategy of the technologies of self.

Both Anne Askew and Margaret Fell suffered the political and religious persecution, but they were strong enough to voice their self and truth they valued by means of writing. According to Foucault, technologies of the self operate "on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."

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