

WITNESSES

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, letters from prison became a favored medium of religious testimony and cultural resistance, continuously composed, circulated, preserved, collected, and disseminated in print. The social circumstances in England that prompted this literary phenomenon are not far to seek. Beginning in the reign of Henry VIII, an acrimonious debate contested the relationship of Christianity to the political order. Throughout this long era, the consensus of English and European thought presumed that no society could survive and flourish without a common understanding of human nature, destiny, and conduct; that religious consensus was an essential support for social stability; and that religious deviance would unleash anarchic forces within the commonweal. Conventional wisdom further assumed that the institution charged with inculcating this common understanding was an established church, whose rituals, doctrines, and ethical norms lent moral prestige to the state and were, in turn, protected by the force of the state.

But, despite widespread agreement on the social necessity of an established and enforceable religious uniformity, the reformations of the sixteenth century clashed over the authentic form of religious community, and the appropriation of revised religious rites and practices developed slowly and unevenly, especially at the local level. In England each Tudor monarch from Henry VIII to Edward VI to Mary to Elizabeth exacerbated this halting process of change by overseeing sweeping revisions of the liturgy, doctrine, and polity of the established church. Despite the justification of each governmentally mandated change in the name of scripture, tradition, and ancient English custom—indeed, because of such exalted justifications—successive religious

changes pursued in the interest of centralizing Tudor authority transformed customary Christianity into a cultural battleground. During an epoch of reformations and wars of religion, both transnational and English forms of religious community competed with the established church for the allegiance of English subjects. These contending communities included broad international connections among not only Catholics, Lutherans, or Reformed Protestants but also Puritan ministerial associations, Catholic religious orders, separatist conventicles, immigrant congregations, and fluid networks of exiled intellectuals and religiously convicted printers and merchants. Multiple communities engendered powerful loyalties that challenged not only common allegiance to the national church but also the continuity of more intimate religious loyalties to family, neighbor, and geographic parish.

When successive generations of dissidents were confined in jail because they refused to be confined by the boundaries of the officially established church, they took up pens and enunciated their resistance from their cells. Although these prison writers were a tiny minority of the English people, they collectively displayed a remarkable diversity, from queens and archbishops to socially obscure men and women. Theologically trained and rhetorically gifted clergy composed artful letters that became models for succeeding generations of prison writers. As time passed and regimes changed, these resistant prisoners became an increasingly varied lot: country weavers, Puritan lawyers, London apprentices, Baptist lay preachers, and Quaker women circulated politically and theologically freighted letters from prison that extended the scope and vitality of the genre. One and all, they wrote with determined urgency. They used pen and paper when they had them, but if not, they took no little pride that lumps of coal and scraps of cloth would suffice. With innovative daring generations of prisoners successfully thwarted governmental and ecclesiastical officials who intended, with scant success, to muffle voices of opposition behind prison walls. The early evangelical John Frith, writing from the Newgate Prison in the week before he was burned for heresy at Smithfield in July 1533, articulated the rhetorical question implicitly posed by hundreds of English prison writers who would succeed him. Why, asked Frith, should one side have “all the words” and “the other be put to silence?”¹

Frith’s demand that words of resistance break free from the constraints of enforced silence underscored the permeable boundary between speech and script throughout this era. When his letter appeared in print, it called particular attention to the communications revolution brought about by the establishment of printing houses in early modern England and in the urban

commercial centers of Europe.² Print did for letters what it did for texts of all types: expand and accelerate dissemination, even as it provided new means for collection, preservation, and comparison. But the interaction between print and the epistolary form was distinctive—and distinctively important. The form of the familiar letter recast the political, religious, and economic realignments of the English Reformation as a personal dialogue between prison writers and their readers, and this epistolary dialogue underscored the correspondents' mutual accountability for the communal commitments and interior deliberations that undergirded a decision to stand against sovereign authority.

Michael McKeon has proposed, with respect to the origins of the English novel, that genres provide conceptual frameworks for formulating and debating a society's central cultural issues. This suggests that significant experimentation with a genre opens a window onto alterations in the culture in which that genre functions. In the case of the letter from prison as a literary form, one crucial cultural debate concerned loyalties and standards of ethical conduct that situated individuals and groups within the hierarchy of early modern social institutions, ranging from fealty to the monarch to solidarity with one's family. The letter from prison provided a distinctive framework for debating both the institutional and the interpersonal dimensions of this crisis of allegiances by employing direct, first-person address as the rhetorical means of persuading the reader that the message was truthful and the writer trustworthy. Epistolary communication thereby replicated in literary form the social networks of affiliation that were debating issues of allegiance and community. The prison letter's persistence as a prominent genre down to the 1680s not only attests to the scope of England's institutional transformation during this century and a half but also registers, in McKeon's phrase, "a major cultural transition in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative."³

The central religious characteristic of the letter from prison is the act of testimony: bearing witness that enduring truths and pivotal events must be remembered if individuals and communities are to retain or pursue their authentic identities. When it takes the form of a letter from prison, testimony capitalizes on imprisonment's dramatic potentialities by using first-person narrative to point through specific events toward their wider implications and meanings. It uses the precarious extremity of a specific person's imprisonment to exemplify single-minded devotion to a cause and thereby establish a norm of conduct by which to critique both society and the self. Through the persuasive artistry of these rhetorical strategies, the letter imaginatively conveys

the prisoner out of prison and into the reader's presence as a messenger telling "the truth in narrative" about the course of history and the character of human life. As Nadine Gordimer has written with respect to the various modern forms of witness literature, the prisoner's letter interprets not simply an event but "the *event beyond the event*, its past and future."⁴

Testimony, considered at its most general level, is an act of communication in which a hearer forms a belief based on a speaker's statement. It is an inherently social act. Although testimony begins when a witness communicates what has been seen or experienced, the crucial step belongs to the listener, who must evaluate whether to trust the witness and believe what the witness has declared. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid argued that, although trust in what they were told was fundamental to children, adults gradually acquired life experience from which they developed a more critical attitude. Still, according to Reid, humans depend throughout their lives on "borrowing light from testimony" and "find good reason to rely upon it with perfect security, in our most important concerns." This reliance on testimony, Reid added, is buttressed by "the character, the number, and the disinterestedness of witnesses" whose concurrence in their testimony gives it an "irresistible strength." The cultural influence of testimony thus arose from a relationship of trust created between the witness and the listener and the capacity of this reciprocal relation to generate a community of respondents who interpret, appropriate, and act on the testimonial narrative.⁵ Rhetorically, the letter from prison pressed its readers to decide which allegiances determined their social behavior and, more broadly, which values shaped their lives.

The religious climate of early modern England generated a storm around this very question of the trustworthiness of the witness. The consolidation and development of the letter from prison in early modern England thus established not only a literary tradition of social criticism but also a culturally constructed image of the critic: the prisoner of conscience. Although it is difficult to state a legal definition of the *prisoner of conscience* or the *political prisoner*, these overlapping terms refer broadly to persons who have been imprisoned because they have expressed ideas that powerful elites perceive to be a threat to the existing social order. They represent a challenge to the established regime and are presumed to deserve punishment whether or not they have also violated any codified laws. The perception that an individual or group may communicate ideas that excite social disruption often prompts, therefore, governmental acts of suppression. As Barton Ingraham commented, "How the act is viewed *symbolically* is often more significant than how it may be

viewed as to its effects from a disinterested or abstract point of view.” The designation *prisoner of conscience* implies commitment to an ethical principle or a cause that transcends the immediate self-interest of the dissident and that contests the authoritative norms of the surrounding society, while neither condoning nor advocating physical violence.⁶

When a prisoner claims to be a prisoner of conscience, this self-portrayal therefore entails a set of ethical claims for both the truth of the prisoner’s statements and the prisoner’s moral character. Across the centuries the task of appraising the credibility of testimony has received vivid representation in scenes of legal judgment. A court requires testimony from witnesses because events are in doubt and the narrative connections among events are in question. Contending interests elaborate alternative interpretations from differing points of view, and a judge, a jury, or an arbiter must make an appraisal and arrive at a decision.⁷ English letters from prison during the early modern period dramatically portrayed such scenes of interrogation and courtroom testimony, in which prisoners bore witness regarding contested facts. As employed in early modern English law, the term *fact* generally meant an action with legal significance. The use of witnesses to establish facts in this sense had begun in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and became a regular feature of common law proceedings over the course of the sixteenth century. Alongside the eyewitness, documentary evidence played an increasingly important role in determining the facts, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the combination of witness and document created a field of understanding that encompassed not only the law but also the chronicles of historians, the empirical observations of scientists, and the news reports of emergent journalism.⁸ The letter from prison participated in this conceptual field, with its evidential and juridical connotations, in which eyewitness testimony and original documents presented patterns of behavior and sequences of events to persuade listeners or readers of the rightness of a cause.

The narrative of the courtroom implies that testimony takes place in a public forum. But, since the government intended imprisonment to squelch allegedly dangerous speech, prisoners responded by using letters to portray direct knowledge of facts that they claimed would otherwise be papered over by official justifications, censorship, or silence. The prisoner’s testimony thus acquired a singular, irreplaceable quality. Urgent and profound matters were at stake, and, if the facts were to be known, the prisoner had the obligation to disclose them. One mid-sixteenth-century letter, thrown from a window of the castle of Canterbury, declared that prisoners “for God’s truth” were

being starved to death by their keepers, who refused to deliver the food, clothing, and money that friends had brought to the castle for the prisoners' use. Even though four prisoners had already died, the letter's authors insisted that they did not write to save themselves from being "famished for the Lord Jesus' sake." They wrote, instead, to ensure that their keepers, "having no law so to famish us in prison, should not do it privily, but that ye murderers' hearts should be openly known to all the world."⁹ This tone of urgent, solitary obligation to make hidden facts public has persisted as a feature of witness literature into our contemporary world. "If someone else could have written my stories," Elie Wiesel stated, "I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify."¹⁰

Early modern prison writers further complicated the notion of the witness to facts, who spoke from personal knowledge, by combining it with the scriptural idea of the witness or martyr. In both Christian antiquity and fifteenth-century England, the term *martyr* identified the person who gave unwavering witness in both speech and conduct to foundational convictions. The death of the martyr presented culminating evidence of the witness's unconditional commitment.¹¹ Identifying the witness in this way extended the concept of testimony beyond the courtroom's attention to the delivery of accurate facts and emphasized the principled trustworthiness of the witness. When a letter told a distinctive, personal story in a form that identified the prisoner with traditional religious language of bearing witness, the intent "to tell the truth in narrative" entailed an overarching, recurring narrative. Early modern prison epistles used ancient letters not simply as models but as typological forerunners to their own circumstance. By means of this narrative device, prisoners wrote themselves into a much longer literary lineage, and they traded on the religious authority of the epistolary form to claim authenticity for their testimonies. This martyrological dimension to prison testimony made a truth claim that was neither simply empirical nor propositional in form but instead presented the truth embodied in a way of life. Testimony was an action or, as Paul Ricoeur put it in one of his several studies of testimony, "the movement of a life" insofar as it constituted "the mark and the living proof" of a person's devotion to a cause.¹²

Bearing witness, in this sense, embodied and fulfilled words within deeds. According to this portrayal, there was a fate worse than death, which marked a moral and spiritual line that the witness would not cross. Testimony drew the line; death confirmed the martyr's loyalty to it. Building on the traditional religious understanding of the martyr as one who bears witness, early

modern prison writers accentuated an expansive notion of personal experience, which included not only the experiences of interrogation, torture, or solitary confinement but also the numinous backdrop to these experiences, in which a divine presence confirmed the truths confessed and strengthened the prisoner for the impending ordeal. Testimony included a prophetic dimension in which the course of human events appeared to hang in the balance and portended dramatic new deeds of God. In this sense the letter from prison claimed to offer testimony that, in Ricoeur's phrase, did "not belong to the witness." It originated "somewhere else" and proceeded from "an absolute initiative." In bearing witness to the convictions of conscience, the letter from prison simultaneously claimed to be testimony of the Absolute.¹³

The prisoner's narrative thus focused on the urgency, indeed, the ultimacy of the decision on which the prisoner's life would pivot, and the prison letter aimed to convince the reader that the religious practices and moral virtues codified in the life of the prisoner represented the true way of life in the world at large. Over the course of the sixteenth century, prisoners and their readers, supporters, and interpreters collaboratively constructed a widely recognized image of this imprisoned witness: faithful suffering had purged and purified the prisoner, thereby deepening spiritual wisdom and heightening the prisoner's capacity to discriminate between the ways of God and the ways of the world. The patient endurance of incarceration had elevated the prisoner beyond partisanship and opened matters of eternal importance to the prisoner's sight. The estrangement of the cell had provided a vantage point, from which the prisoner cast a distanced, critical gaze on society's regulative institutions.

On the face of it, this portrayal did not seem to comport with the facts. The prisoner had engaged in speech or behavior that challenged governmental authority, issued highly polemical documents from the prison cell, and appeared to be a source of unsettling change rather than a remedy for it. In a contest about social change—its nature, rate, and direction—the prisoner who had resisted the official interpretation of those changes was clearly a partisan in the contest and not, as the prisoners regularly insisted, an independent voice, speaking from above the fray. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this apparent contradiction represented a central rhetorical challenge for the letter from prison. A convincing witness required a certain distance or withdrawal from ideological battles, since as Horace Engdahl has remarked, "one cannot be a debater and a witness to truth at the same time."¹⁴

To overcome this contradiction, the letter traded on irony, attributing authority to messengers who had been repudiated, truth to messages that had

been rejected, and virtue to those deemed criminals by the state. In early modern England, the prisoner's letter of testimony thus wielded unlikely persuasive power by attaching itself to classic religious tropes of redemptive irony. It justified unpopular or illegal speech and conduct by means of well-worn ideas about a witness whom the state punished but God approved, ideas accumulated in a long cultural history, sufficiently flexible to be organized in different ways and sufficiently independent to be selectively deployed.

The letter from prison became a genre, in the sense of a socially recognizable literary pattern, when prisoners organized this collage of ideas to mobilize communities and exert political influence from just beyond the boundaries of established power. By employing conventional ideas to argue from an unconventional social position, prison letters pilfered the authority of church and state in order to resist it. They dramatized both the voice and the location of the prisoner, portraying an incarcerated witness who felt morally compelled to communicate but was denied public speech. Whatever was distinctive about the letter from prison, therefore, consisted less in the promulgation of novel religious or political theories than in the establishment of a literary pattern that distinctively personified resistance against established authority in the name of a higher law. This pattern is the subject of this book: how the letter from prison underwent an important generic consolidation in early modern England, how different social groups used it to religious and political advantage, how print delivered it into the public arena, and how changing political circumstances and internal contradictions challenged its claims to authority but also how the generic pattern of the letter from prison could be adapted to new situations of cultural resistance and thereby continuously reconstitute its rhetorical potency.

THE LITERARY INHERITANCE OF TUDOR PRISON WRITERS

When prison writers in Tudor England crafted the letter from prison into a distinctive genre, they appropriated and adapted features from a variety of earlier literary forms. These various elements began to be interwoven in epistolary prison writings during the clashes over religion and regime set in motion by the religious reforms of Henry VIII, but they would not approach their literary maturity until Protestant leaders poured forth a stream of prison letters during the 1550s, protesting Mary Tudor's reconciliation with Rome. Nonetheless, the pervasive influence of earlier literary traditions remained evident throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The religious and philosophical literature of antiquity had included a powerful current of writing from exile or imprisonment, which lent Tudor prisoners the prestige of its cultural authority. Biblical texts carried especial weight. Sixteenth-century prison writers presupposed the traditional interpretation that Paul had written letters from prison to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Timothy, and Philemon. They had studied the accounts of imprisonment and martyrdom in the Acts of the Apostles, and they took varied lessons from Revelation, as a visionary letter from exile during a time of persecution.¹⁵ In addition to these scriptural examples, the letters of early Christian martyrs such as Polycarp offered models for emulation and adaptation, wrapping English prisoners in the mantles of the martyrs, especially as these were recorded in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, and thereby placing themselves and their immediate community in continuity with the historic witnesses of the church.

Beyond scripture and early Christian hagiography, a continuing tradition of prison writing also instructed Tudor prisoners. Early in the sixth century, Anicius Manlius Boethius had depicted a visitation by personified wisdom overcoming a prisoner's despair in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The text enjoyed something of a vogue among the literate classes of late medieval England and survives in more than one hundred manuscripts in England and Ireland. Medieval commentators had augmented the *Consolation* with lives of Boethius, which presented him as an honorable public servant and Christian martyr writing from prison. In what might be termed the Boethian model of prison writing, a sudden fall from power overturns the world of a wronged but worthy person who, guided by an interior dialogue with personified Philosophy, recognizes in prison the vanity of mortal pomp and attains self-composure through disciplined meditation on the permanent and the true. Even when their writings did not directly cite the *Consolation of Philosophy*, this idealized representation of a reflective quest for self-transcendence provided a compelling narrative for aristocrats and civil servants enduring the vicissitudes of political turmoil in fifteenth-century England. To take a single illustration, George Ashby, a loyal Lancastrian whom Henry VI had appointed in 1437 as a clerk in the royal signet office, found his fortunes turning for the worse in the 1460s, as the Yorkists ascended and consigned Ashby to the Fleet Prison. There, in 1463, Ashby composed "A Prisoner's Reflections," a poem framed in the epistolary formulas of naming the date and location of its composition. In Ashby's poem suffering was overcome by the virtue of patience, and this Boethian lesson in the acquisition of virtue through adversity would become a staple of prison writing throughout the ensuing centuries.¹⁶

Peter Marshall, in his overview of “reformations before reformation,” observes that Lollard criticisms of orthodox popular religion together with Sir John Oldcastle’s failed rebellion against Henry IV “established an association between Lollardy and political sedition,” which led to prosecutions early in the fifteenth century and again toward the century’s end. Imprisoned Lollards composed epistolary reports of their interrogations by the authorities. In one a priest of the diocese of Hereford, Richard Wyche, wrote to a friend during three months of imprisonment in 1403, lamenting ailments, conveying his respects to relatives and friends, and describing the circumstances of his examination for heresy by Walter Skirlaw, bishop of Durham. Another document, the *Testimony* of William Thorpe, recounted Thorpe’s questioning by Archbishop Thomas Arundel at Saltwood Castle in August 1407. More artfully composed than Wyche’s letter, Thorpe’s manuscript testimony circulated widely in England and abroad and is preserved in both English and Latin copies. In the Lollard style, epistolary reports of imprisonment and interrogation shifted attention from the writer to the message. Indeed, as Christina von Nolcken has observed, the Lollards actively cultivated a certain sameness in demeanor, dress, and writing style that focused attention on their *collective* testimony.¹⁷ Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, prisoners continued the Lollard practice of composing detailed, frequently dramatic narratives of their interrogations. By representing their verbal exchanges with ecclesiastical and governmental officers as, in effect, disputations in which they matched and defeated the authorities, prisoners transformed an interrogation into the formal parity of a debate, a dramatic scene of theological conflict that emphasized both the prisoner’s agency and the legitimacy of the religious position the prisoner advocated.

Fifteenth-century antecedents to the Tudor letter from prison thus shaped testimony along two rather different but complementary lines, one pursuing the discipline of self-examination and the other dramatizing the trial of judicial examination. Letters composed on a Boethian model tended to emphasize the unanticipated turns of the wheel of fortune, by which power and influence could suddenly be lost and transferred to others. Fate had delivered the writer into imprisonment, where writing became a spiritual practice. Unanticipated events provoked an inner, meditative journey through which wisdom cured the prisoner’s soul of a false sense of self-worth, personal agency, and pride. The Lollards’ disputational model, while recognizing the power of circumstances beyond personal control, emphasized that the prisoner’s own conscience forbade conformity, pardon, and release. Principled action was the

reason imprisonment had begun and continued; having been apprehended, these prisoners chose to become protagonists. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century prison writers would extend and amplify this Lollard strategy, reinterpreting the prison from a place of ignominy and humiliation to a site of fiercely argumentative contest against “principalities and powers” both temporal and spiritual.¹⁸ To simplify a complex literature, the Boethian model focused on the transformation of the self, while the Lollard style emphasized collective advocacy and penitential adherence to divine teaching. Narratives of the prisoner of conscience, as they consolidated in early modern prison letters, constantly renegotiated these tensions between fate and agency, personal salvation and social faith, the witness as person and the witness as message.

In addition to these philosophical meditations, verse epistles, and interrogation reports, a broad repertoire of classical literary forms without direct connections to the circumstance of imprisonment also influenced prison writing in general and the letter from prison in particular. Several important influences on prison writing came from late medieval spirituality, notably the *ars moriendi* tradition, which provided a guide to the “art of dying” for parish priests and laypeople engaged in visitation with a dying person. By the end of the fifteenth century, the printing houses of William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde were publishing widely circulated versions, which included woodblock illustrations of deathbed temptations and their spiritual remedies. As suggested by the title of one vernacular version, *The Art or Craft to Live Well and to Die Well* (1505), the art of dying was an ellipse with two foci, in which meditation on death prompted reflection on the conduct of life. It focused, first, on the deathbed and a powerfully communal dialogue with the dying person as the end of life approached: “Brother, art thou glad that thou shalt die in the faith of Christ? The sick man answereth: Yea.” Similarly, Caxton’s *Ars moriendi* (1491) stressed the importance of a friend’s counsel to those who are near death. “When any of likelihood shall die, then it is most necessary to have a special friend, the which will heartily help and pray for him, and therewith counsel the sick for the weal of his soul.”¹⁹

Approaching death wrought temptations—loss of faith, despair, or preoccupation with temporal things—and the deathbed became the battlefield for a personal and communal struggle to set all such matters aside and commit entirely to the mercy of God. Since the death of the righteous person “is ever precious in the sight of God,” to die in repentance, contrition, and the faith of the church would lead the soul to a “place of refreshing,” and—in regularly reiterated metaphors—death became a release from prison or a return

from exile. Couched within such metaphorical narratives of release and return, the final struggles of death became the pretext for metaphysical and theological meditation on the fragility of life, and the craft of dying well became a synecdoche for the craft of living well.²⁰ Early modern prisoners of conscience, facing execution, composed letters of farewell to friends and family that drew deeply from this reservoir of devotional practice constructed around an intimate final dialogue.

Finally, the familiar letter had served for centuries as a vehicle for philosophical argument and religious instruction, and Renaissance humanists “rediscovered” letters and classical epistolary theory. Sometimes this rediscovery was literal, as when Petrarch found Cicero’s letters in the cathedral library of Verona in 1345. More often rediscovery took the form of the renewed use of the letter as a medium of erudition and persuasion. Alongside letters of Seneca, Pliny the Younger, and others, Cicero’s letter collections *Ad Atticum* and *Ad familiares* became models that legitimated the familiar letter as one element in the renewal of classical learning.²¹

This extensive epistolary tradition exerted several influences on the literary form and purpose of the letter from prison as an act of testimony. These influences began with classical educational and literary theory that linked the letter to the oration as forms of rhetoric. Renaissance humanists appropriated this connection and taught letter writing primarily as an exercise in rhetoric aimed at *persuasion*, thereby using the epistolary form to accentuate the issue of how the reader would respond to the writer. Renaissance epistolary theory further accentuated the relationship of trust between writer and correspondent by employing the classical trope that the familiar letter represented a “halved dialogue,” part of an ongoing conversation with an absent friend. According to Angel Day’s summary definition in *The English Secretarie* (1586), the letter was “the messenger and familiar speech of the absent,” which “conveyed in writing, the intent and meaning of one man, immediately to pass and be directed to another.” The letter from prison vividly dramatized these commonplace definitions through narratives that depicted the separation of imprisonment as the circumstance that necessitated an epistolary “messenger” for the speech of an absent friend. Not surprisingly, when prison letters appeared in print, their publishers chose to emphasize the generic themes of persuasion, trust, and dialogue by focusing on letters that prisoners addressed to family members, friends, fellow prisoners, and religious congregations. The crucial epistolary art was to create vivid rhetorical images of the prisoner, the prison, and unfolding events that would make them realistically “present” to the reader.²²

For the English Renaissance, perhaps the most influential advocate for this renewal of the letter as a rhetorical, educational, and philosophical form was Erasmus of Rotterdam, who used letters both to forge his personal reputation in the republic of letters and to act as a component of his larger educational program. His *De conscribendis epistolis* went through several drafts before being published in 1522 as a full-scale textbook on the writing of letters. After the manner of Petrarch, Erasmus molded the letter to “communicate feeling, especially the feeling of closeness or intimacy,” and Kathy Eden has described how this “Renaissance rediscovery of intimacy” became an instrument of self-expression for the writer and, likewise, rooted the reading of letters “in the intimacy associated with friendship.” Erasmus extended this relational concept of reading to the reading of scripture, and he exhorted Christians to read the Bible “with the same expectation of intense feeling and intimate communication that they would bring to the letter of an absent and sorely missed friend.”²³ English prison letters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regularly guided the reader’s reception of testimony from prison by employing this analogy between the experiences of reading scripture and reading the letter of a trusted friend.

Early modern prison writers appropriated these various dialogical definitions of the letter and not only presumed a dialogue between writer and reader but also portrayed various scenes of dialogue, counsel, and debate within the letter’s narrative. The letter from prison as both a literary form and a manner of describing experiences reinforced the idea that testimony was a social act that sought to achieve reciprocal trust between speaker and listener, between writer and reader. The rhetoric of Renaissance letter writing thus prompted prisoners to write letters “as a means of self-presentation and social identification,” which both presented a self-image and defined the writer as “belonging to a specific group of people who shared the same interests and ideals.” Letters from prison developed this dialogical model of testimony by expanding the rhetorical purpose of self-presentation to include a mutual process of self-examination by both writer and correspondent. Judith Rice Henderson has illuminated these purposes by analyzing two connotations of the humanist trope of the letter as a mirror of the soul. In one respect, the letter reflected for the reader’s gaze the writer’s self-portrayal, intended to establish credibility or trustworthiness. In the course of the sixteenth century, however, Henderson finds that cultural developments promoted another metaphor: the letter as a mirror for critical self-reflection. During the century printing encouraged reflective reading in solitude, and “Church Reformation promoted

personal Bible study, private devotion, confessional prayer, and self-examination.”²⁴ Letters from prison created reciprocal influences between these two metaphors of the mirror by presenting critical self-reflection as a constitutive feature of the prisoner’s self-portrayal to readers.

FOUR PRISONERS OF HENRY VIII

When Henry VIII decided to separate from Rome and establish the English sovereign as the “supreme head” of the English church, the vast majority of the English people responded to this change and its wider consequences by collaborating with Henry’s reform, even when they reshaped the meaning of that reform to preserve their local religious customs and political interests.²⁵ But a small number directly resisted the king’s course of action and endured imprisonment. Four prisoners illustrate the ways in which Henrician prisoners drew both inspiration and justification from the extensive, earlier traditions of prison writing and devotional literature. All alike were executed for their resistance, even though they differed sharply in their rationales of resistance.

John Frith was a significant voice among the English advocates of the evangelical reform associated with the name of Martin Luther. Frith had assisted the biblical translator William Tyndale in Marburg, but after his return to England Frith was arrested for (unwisely) writing in opposition to the traditional theology of the Eucharist. Meanwhile, both the bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, and the lord chancellor of England, Thomas More, engaged in theological polemic against Frith, Tyndale, and Luther but were imprisoned for opposing the steps by which Henry separated the English church from European Christendom. A decade after the executions of Frith, Fisher, and More, a young gentlewoman from Lincolnshire, Anne Askew, aligned herself with the English evangelicals; sought a divorce from her Catholic husband, Thomas Kyme; and went to London, where she had connections to Protestant women surrounding Queen Katherine Parr. There she came to the attention of Henry’s bishops and councilors, who twice arrested her and conducted interrogations concerning her religious beliefs. Askew was arraigned and burned for heresy at Smithfield on July 16, 1546. Collectively, the prison writings of these four demonstrated not only the adaptability of inherited literary forms to new circumstances and opposing religious allegiances but also the significance of printing for the subsequent cultural impact of their writings.

Despite their substantive theological differences, both John Fisher and John Frith wrote from the Tower of London in ways that displayed their common indebtedness to older traditions of spiritual counsel, meditative self-examination, and the *ars moriendi*. Taken together, their brief writings from the tower were traditional in form and content, yet they also introduced what would become an influential image of the prisoner as a spiritual counselor who employed paradigmatic, metaphorical narratives to draw the reader into an imaginative, interior landscape of spiritual self-appraisal.

These traditional literary forms were clearly reflected in two brief treatises that Bishop Fisher wrote after he was imprisoned in the Tower of London in April 1534. In both Fisher employed the epistolary device of addressing his half-sister Elizabeth White, a nun in the Dominican convent of Saint Mary and Saint Margaret, Dartford. One, *A Spiritual Consolation*, was a meditation in which a person suddenly “assailed” by death is prompted to a lively repentance. Fisher advised his sister that she would most fully profit from his treatise if she read it alone “in secret manner” and imagined herself in the situation of this person “suddenly taken and ravished by death.” Following Fisher’s salutation to Elizabeth, the meditation proper began with a voice lamenting, after the manner of the *ars moriendi*, “Alas, alas, I am unworthily taken, all suddenly death has assailed me.” Perceiving the near approach of “my last home,” the speaker will soon depart in exile “out of this world never to return again into it.” What final destiny awaited? “In what country I shall be received,” only God knows. Having foolishly ignored the “profit” of the soul to attend to the “vain comforts” of this world, the imagined speaker launched into a long apostrophe to the body: “O corruptible body, O stinking carrion, O rotten earth,” with the near approach of death, “now dost thou appear what thou art in thy own likeness.” The voice appealed to the reflective reader to imagine “yourself as dead” and your soul confined in the “prison of purgatory,” where the intercessory prayers of friends would advance your eventual redemption and release.²⁶

In a second short treatise, *The Ways to Perfect Religion*, Fisher greeted Elizabeth and offered her ten considerations for those who sought to be fervent in their love of Christ. Without such fervor, Fisher advised, “religion cannot be to you savory, nor any works of goodness can be delectable.” It was desire that made even arduous labor “appear easy and pleasant.” Fisher elucidated this proposition through an extended metaphor of a hunter’s love of the hunt. The hunter engaged in grueling work but was sustained as he traversed difficult ground without stopping for food and rest, because “the love and desire of his game so greatly occupieth his mind and heart.”²⁷

In these meditations Fisher deployed metaphors for the plight of the soul—in exile, displaced in an unknown land, and imprisoned in purgatory—that would receive constant reiteration and adaptation throughout early modern prison writing. Like the anonymous voice in Fisher's *Spiritual Consolation*, prisoners found themselves “assailed” by the prospect of death, which compelled them to recognize their “own likeness” in a corruptible body and to urge their readers to imagine themselves in a comparably perilous circumstance. These were inescapable moments of honest self-appraisal. For Fisher they were likewise moments of solidarity. The metaphorical identification of prison and purgatory entailed that, just as the prayers of the living benefited the dead so also the imprisoned and the free participated in a single community. Spiritual desire propelled their common quest, since “all true Christian souls be called hunters, and their office and duty is to seek and hunt for to find Christ Jesus.”²⁸

The prison writings of John Frith displayed numerous formal parallels to the meditative writings of Bishop Fisher. In his brief treatise *A Mirror or Glass to Know Thyself* (1532), Frith responded from the Tower of London to an unnamed friend who desired to “be somewhat instructed to know himself” so that he might give proper thanks for benefits that God had “so abundantly” bestowed. Frith replied that God had “inspired certain sparkles of truth” in the classical philosophers who had proposed that “the chiefest point of wisdom and direction of a man’s life, was to know himself.” On this point the philosophers agreed with scripture: Solomon said that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom. But, Frith cautioned his friend, a person must pursue self-knowledge “as the scripture teacheth him,” since otherwise “I shall have none occasion to fear God, but rather to advance myself equal with God.” Scripture, in fact, *was* the mirror that enabled both a reflective reader and a reflective prison writer “to know thyself.” It revealed that “every good and perfect gift commeth from above,” Frith wrote. “Outward gifts or inward, pertaining either to ye body or soul, if they be good,” descended to each person “from the father of light.” More explicitly than the spiritual counsels of John Fisher, Frith’s *Mirror or Glass to Know Thyself* drove home the polemical dimensions of this advice concerning Christian self-knowledge and conduct. God’s gifts, Frith reminded his unnamed friend, placed their recipient under a solemn obligation to care for the spiritual and physical welfare of the neighbor. The Christian honored and praised God by fulfilling divine commandments through works of mercy, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, housing the homeless, and visiting the sick and the prisoners but not by building

chantries, gilding images, giving copes and chalices to churches, or making pilgrimages to Canterbury.²⁹

In these brief spiritual treatises, both Fisher and Frith employed the epistolary device of addressing a specific correspondent, however broadly they may have intended their message to circulate through wider audiences. For both men the correspondent represented a seeker after God, and in writing to such a correspondent the prisoner assumed the role of spiritual counselor. In subsequent decades the prisoner's reciprocal definition of writer and correspondent enabled printed prison letters to shape these interactive identities in myriad ways, capitalizing on the epistolary form to elaborate imagined dialogues and dramatize mutual obligations. Depending on specific rhetorical purposes and political contexts, the letter might attempt to align the reader with the prisoner, the correspondent, or an imagined listener to their dialogue, but in each of these alternative cases the letter drew the reader into the interplay of interconnected identities.

Frith's representation of transcendent illumination descending from "the father of light" presaged another prominent motif of letters from prison as they developed in Tudor England. The prison cell became, as it had in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a site of personal transformation. To convey this transformation, Fisher and Frith portrayed the constraints of imprisonment—whether the prison cell or the mortal body—through metaphors of journey to another country in a quest or hunt for the single and true destiny of the soul. Megan Cassidy-Welch has traced the medieval history of this "spatial vocabulary" of imprisonment and emphasized the ways it juxtaposed "physical confinement and spiritual freedom."³⁰ Depicting the cell as not only a constraining space but also a redemptive space was, in short, integral to the act of bearing witness to the transformative power of God, and the meditative texts of Fisher and Frith derived emotional energy from the physical circumstances of the prison writer. Thus, Fisher's imagined protagonist in his *Spiritual Consolation*—the person suddenly confronted with impending death—paralleled Fisher's own expectation that he would not survive his imprisonment in the tower. Similarly, the "I" who spoke in Frith's *Mirror* described scriptural wisdom inspiring a person to stake salvation on adherence to the commands of God, a personification of Frith's understanding of his own decision. "I ever thought and yet do think," Frith wrote in a letter from the tower, "that to walk after God's word would cost me my life at one time or another."³¹ Although neither Fisher nor Frith drew explicit autobiographical connections between imprisonment and their meditations on

spiritual transformation, scores of later prison writers would do precisely that, going well beyond the metaphors and scriptural allusions of Fisher and Frith to elaborate the prison cell as the indispensable narrative scene from which they wrote.

Thomas More, one of the preeminent literary stylists of the age, expanded the possibilities of the epistolary form in eleven letters he wrote from the Tower of London to his daughter Margaret Roper during the fourteen months before his execution in July 1535. Internationally famous as a humanist scholar, friend of Erasmus, and the author of *Utopia*, More's wit and judgment had earlier attracted the attention of Henry VIII, whom More served as lawyer, diplomat, and, from 1529 to 1532, lord chancellor of England. But More's uneasiness with Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his refusal to take the oath of succession following the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn led first to More's resignation as chancellor and then his imprisonment.³² More's letters to his daughter artfully elaborated three dimensions of the concept of conscience that would be prominently deployed in subsequent prison writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More began by grounding his resistance in the personal conviction of conscience. He then made the case of conscience not primarily through philosophical or theological argumentation but through vivid autobiographic narratives of his interrogation and imprisonment. And, third, he portrayed his individual deliberations of conscience arising from his solidarity with the Christian community.

From May 1532 to the spring of 1534, events had moved swiftly in Henry's break with Rome. More's efforts to remove himself from controversy by retiring from public life did not avail, because of royal suspicions about More's stances toward the "great matter" of the king's marriage, the primacy of the pope, and Elizabeth Barton (the holy maid of Kent), whose reported special revelations had taken a political turn in opposition to the king's divorce from Catherine. In an unsuccessful attempt to avert Henry's anger with respect to these issues, More wrote from his house in Chelsea to Thomas Cromwell in early March 1534. "It thoroughly pierceth my poor heart," More declared, that the king thought More might not "well stand with the duty of a tender loving subject toward his natural prince." But, although More's letter asserted fidelity, it also withheld any explanation, simply affirming that behind his silence lay a loyal and well-intended mind. More's highest desire, he assured Cromwell, was that Henry "as thoroughly saw my mind, as I do myself, or as God doth himself," since God's sight "pierceth deeper into my heart than mine own."³³ More had made the perhaps unavoidable but nonetheless fateful

decision to maintain silence, claim the inviolability of conscience, and hope thereby to protect his family from the “great displeasure and danger of great harm” that might ensue from his decision.³⁴

The double “piercing” of More’s heart in his letter to Cromwell clearly indicated the hazardous ambiguity of appealing to the sincere rectitude of undisclosed intentions. On one hand, the thought that the king might suspect disloyalty wounded More’s heart. On the other hand, More would not openly declare himself and instead appealed to the invisible witness of God, whose searching investigation pierced more deeply into the heart’s affections than was possible to any mortal gaze. As Katharine Maus has argued with respect to representations of personal interiority in the English Renaissance, Tudor authorities conceived treason as a crime that occurred “in the mind alone prior to any outward manifestation,” and governmental oaths, interrogations, and trials aimed to expose this inward, secret motive to the light of day.³⁵ When More cordoned off his conscience from such public examination, he placed the sanctity of conscience and the interior integrity of the self in direct conflict with the governmental suspicion of covert motives that was presupposed in the legal conception of treason.

A reckoning was unavoidable. In mid-April 1534 Cromwell, Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, acting as the king’s commissioners, summoned More to Lambeth House, presented him with the text of the Act of Succession, and urged him to swear the attendant oath. More refused, was placed in the custody of William Benson, abbot of Westminster, and very shortly thereafter transferred to the Tower of London. On April 17 More wrote Margaret Roper from the tower, reporting the details of what had transpired. It would be the first of the surviving letters between the two during More’s imprisonment. In More’s retelling, the vicar of Croydon, Rowland Phillips, and several London priests had also been ordered to appear before the commissioners, but More was the only layperson in the group and “the first that was called in.”³⁶

More’s letter depicted for Roper the ensuing contest of wills, in which More privately read through the Act of Succession and the oath, after which he announced to the commissioners that his conscience prevented him from swearing to “the oath that there was offered me.”

I shewed unto them that my purpose was not to put any fault either in the act or any man that made it, or in the oath or any man that swore it, nor to condemn the conscience of any other man. But as for myself in

good faith my conscience so moved me in the matter, that though I would not deny to swear to the succession, yet unto the oath that there was offered me I could not swear without the jeopardding of my soul to perpetual damnation. And that if they doubted whether I did refuse the oath only for the grudge of my conscience or for any other fantasy, I was ready to satisfy them by mine oath. Which if they trusted not, what should they be the better to give me any oath?

In More's portrayal of the verbal contest, swearing to an oath confronted the self with a life-defining public promise, a decisive moment that would shape religious dissent throughout the entire period from More to the Quakers. His purpose was neither to coerce nor condemn another but, instead, to make public the core commitments that "moved me in the matter." More was prepared to swear that he had taken his stance in good faith and not from any capricious grudge against king or kingdom, and he asserted that if his interrogators were unwilling to accept the sincerity of this oath then it would be pointless for them "to give me any oath." More's earlier effort to retire into silence rather than respond to the questions of Thomas Cromwell had failed. When confronted with a public oath, he concluded that so to swear would fragment the cohesive principles of his identity—"the jeopardding of my soul to perpetual damnation."³⁷

The king's councilors appeared incredulous that More's conscience had thus intervened. Thomas Audley replied that "they all were sorry to hear me say thus" and presented to More a list of members of Parliament who had already sworn. The commissioners then dismissed More into the garden of Lambeth House to reconsider his refusal. The remainder of the letter provided Margaret Roper with a dramatic narrative of debate, in which More gave voice both to the commissioners' efforts at persuasion and his own rebuttals. His narrative began with More portraying himself pondering his initial confrontation with the commissioners.

I was in conclusion commanded to go down into the garden, and there-upon I tarried in the old burned chamber that looketh into the garden and would not go down because of the heat. In that time saw I Master Doctor Latimer come into the garden, and there walked he with diverse other doctors and chaplains of my Lord of Canterbury, and very merry I saw him, for he laughed, and took one or twain about the neck so handsomely, that if they had been women, I would have went he had been

waxen wonton. After that came Master Doctor Wilson forth from the lords and was with two gentlemen brought by me, and gentlemanly sent straight unto the Tower.

Declining to enter the heat of the garden and remaining in the “old burned chamber,” More afforded himself something of a box seat, from which to witness a “pageant” that dramatized the precariousness of patronage at Henry’s court.³⁸ Surveying the garden, More first observed Hugh Latimer, frequently controversial for his reformist views but currently favored by Anne Boleyn, as Latimer entered the garden, “very merry” and laughing with “other doctors and chaplains” of Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury. Next More watched two gentlemen escort Nicholas Wilson, the king’s demoted chaplain who had taken Catherine’s part in the divorce, “straight unto the Tower.” These contrasting scenes observed from the “old burned chamber” thus symbolized the deliberations of conscience through which More aimed to achieve critical distance on the ethical decision that confronted him. After these churchmen—whether merry or distraught—had “played their pageant and were gone out of the place,” the commissioners recalled More to their chamber.³⁹

Exasperated that More would neither change his position nor discuss the reasons for his refusal, the commissioners accused him of “stubbornness and obstinacy.” More replied that, if he could write his objections without danger of offending the king or violating the statutes, he not only would do so but also would swear to take the oath of succession, provided that “any man” might resolve his objections so that “I might think my own conscience satisfied.” When the commissioners rejected this offer, More retorted that, if it was impossible to “declare the causes without peril, then to leave them undeclared is not obstinacy.” At this juncture in the debate Archbishop Cranmer intervened, remarking that, since More did not condemn the consciences of those who had taken the oath, it appeared that More’s own conscience was “a thing uncertain and doubtful.” Given this uncertainty, Cranmer advised More to rely on a truth “you know for a certainty and a thing without doubt,” namely, that More was “bounden to obey your sovereign lord your king.” More had the clear obligation, Cranmer concluded, to set aside “the doubt of your unsure conscience in refusing the oath, and take the sure way in obeying your prince, and swear it.” Taken aback by Cranmer’s thoroughgoing assertion of obedience to royal authority, More could only respond that “in my conscience this was one of the cases, in which I was bounden that I should not obey my prince,” since, whatever others might think on the matter, “in my conscience

the truth seemed on the other side.” Furthermore, he assured the commissioners he had “not informed my conscience neither suddenly nor slightly, but by long leisure and diligent search for the matter,” and—in a flash of sarcasm—More dismissed the archbishop’s reasoning as a formula “to avoid all perplexities,” since whatever the king commanded resolved “all the doubts.”⁴⁰

According to More’s letter to Margaret Roper, William Benson then warned that More had reason to fear his “own mind was erroneous,” since “the great council of the realm” had reached an opposing conclusion. “To that I answered, that if there were no more but myself upon my side and the whole Parliament upon the other, I would be sore afraid to lean mine own mind only against so many. But on the other side, if it so be that in some things for which I refuse the oath, I have (as I think I have) upon my part as great a council and a greater too, I am not then bounden to change my conscience, and confirm it to the council of one realm, against the general council of Christendom.” More acknowledged that he would indeed dread to depend on “mine own mind only against so many,” but he did not understand his conscience to stand alone “in some things for which I refuse the oath.” Although both More and his adversaries presupposed that conscience reached its personal decision in dialogue with the “great council” of the authoritative institutions of society, More concluded that he had “upon my part as great a council and a greater too” and was not therefore obligated to alter his conscience and “confirm it to the council of one realm, against the general council of Christendom.” In the course of the interrogation, both More and his examiners had buttressed the convictions of conscience with the “exterior consensus of what they perceived as Christendom,” and yet, in a society of conflicting authorities, deciding among them seemingly made it impossible for the individual conscience to “avoid all perplexities.”⁴¹

Perseverance in this contest came with a cost. Beset by both the pressure to conform and fear for his family’s safety, More’s prison letters repeatedly acknowledged the frailty of his own resolve and, consequently, his entire reliance on the mercy of God. Margaret’s husband, William Roper, in a biography of More that Roper composed during the reign of Mary Tudor, smoothed over the anguish, recalling that, apart from the responsibility for his family, More found the “strait” discipline of the tower well suited to his piety, since the troubles that befell him were “no painful punishments but, of his patience, profitable exercises.” However true this retrospective judgment may, at the last, have come to be, More’s own epistolary record of “the troublesome storm of this my tempestuous time” laid down an autobiographical pattern of both

conscientious resistance and penitential introspection that would be repeated across generations of later prisoners.⁴²

This struggle toward a concluding spiritual victory of tranquility before death shaped More's individual version of an archetypal narrative of divine support for those who faithfully adhere to principle.

Albeit, mine own good daughter, that I found myself (I cry God mercy) very sensual and my flesh much more shrinking from pain and from death, than methought it the part of a faithful Christian man, in such a case as my conscience gave me, that in the saving of my body should stand the loss of my soul, yet I thank our Lord, that in that conflict, the Spirit had in conclusion the mastery, and reason with help of faith finally concluded, that for to be put to death wrongfully for doing well (as I am very sure I do, in refusing to swear against mine own conscience, being such as I am not upon peril of my soul bounden to change whether my death should come without law, or by color of law) it is a case in which a man may lose his head and yet have none harm, but instead of harm inestimable good at the hand of God.

The deliberative process of resolving the conscience under the watchful eye of God gradually bestowed on conscience a stability that could not be changed in the way that one might alter an idea or an opinion. As he explained to his fellow prisoner Nicholas Wilson, More had besought God to give him "the grace in such wise patiently to conform my mind unto his high pleasure" in order that divine mercy would "conduct me into the sure haven of the joyful bliss of heaven" and, More hoped, "all mine enemies too," since in heaven "shall we love together well enough."⁴³ Conforming one's mind to the divine purpose thus became the goal of the spiritual exercises of imprisonment, a meditative discipline that instilled patient endurance, that dispelled anger, and that transfigured the humiliation of imprisonment into a divinely inspired humility. In this labor of conforming the mind, the artistry of the letter from prison both served the prisoner's purpose of sustaining dignity amid extremity and rendered a compelling portrait of human conscience negotiating its way through the perilous decisions of earthly life.

In some ways this was a solitary self-reckoning, but to speak only of solitude would paint a misleading portrait of prison religion. Even in isolation, the spiritual disciplines of imprisonment—prayer, memory, and writing—proved highly collaborative. Indeed, the letter as a literary form accentuated

solidarity. It was the “halved dialogue” that bridged the distance of physical separation, conveyed empathy, recalled past times together, delivered physical tokens of affection, and established liturgical rhythms of shared devotion. The correspondence between More and his daughter clearly captured the letter’s mediating capacity to overcome the separation and lack of information that beset both prisoners and their families. When she could not speak directly with him, Margaret took comfort, “in this bitter time of your absence,” by sending letters whenever possible, by remembering the “words ye had to us when we were last with you,” and “by reading again and again your most fruitful and delectable letter, the faithful messenger of your very virtuous and ghostly mind.” After composing a prayer that she “daily and hourly” prayed for her father, she copied it into a letter to him, and More replied, “Good Margaret, when you pray it, pray it for us both: and I shall on my part like.” Summarizing the effect of this epistolary exchange, More employed a commonplace metaphor of prison writing that, in the absence of pen and ink, the urgency of writing forced the prisoner to compose a letter with a coal drawn from the fireplace. If his own writing were to “declare how much pleasure and comfort, your daughterly loving letters were unto me a peck of coals would not suffice to make me the pens.”⁴⁴

Like Thomas More, Anne Askew recounted interrogations by ecclesiastical authorities, and she framed her reports as correspondence with her supporters that was intended to “satisfy your expectation, good people.” But whereas More’s last letters foregrounded the familial and religious intimacy with his daughter, Askew’s affective connections with her correspondents slip from view in the surviving copies of Askew’s interrogation narratives, which instead focused on her responses to questions posed by various examiners. These encounters began in Sadlers Hall, London, extended across several days in her prison cell, and concluded with an interrogation by the bishop of London, Edmund Bonner. Throughout, Askew presented herself as an adroit interpreter of the Bible, both defended and sustained by the efficacy of her immersion in the sacred text. Reading Askew’s account of these proceedings today, one can well imagine her interrogators’ consternation. Askew’s prison writings leave the enduring impression that it was the examiners who were under examination. None passed the test. When one of her questioners, Christopher Dare, asked how she interpreted two verses from the Acts of the Apostles, Askew tartly responded, “I would not throw pearls among swine, for acorns were good enough.” When Bishop Bonner encouraged Askew to unburden her conscience, she replied that “I had naught to say. For my conscience

(I thanked God) was burdened with nothing.” Not unlike Thomas More, Askew strategically deployed silence and the refusal to respond in her verbal combat with examiners. She was also disconcertingly skilled at emphasizing—with no little irony—her status as a woman to justify that silence. When John Standish and other clergy “tempted me much to know my mind,” Askew responded by citing Paul that a woman should not publicly interpret scripture, “especially where so many wise learned men were.”⁴⁵

When her examiners pressed Askew to discuss her relationship to Thomas Kyme, she worked to control the debate by turning the issue of her gender in another direction.

I answered that my lord chancellor knew already my mind in that matter. 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 do so. But if it were the king's pleasure to hear me, I would show him the truth. They then said it was 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 no other answer in that matter.

Askew's reference to the wisdom of Solomon applied a biblical narrative to her present circumstance. God had appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked, “What shall I grant you?” In reply Solomon had appealed for “an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who can judge this vast people of Yours?” Events soon tested Solomon's capacity for wise judgment when two women appealed to him in a dispute over who was the true mother of an infant. When the king melodramatically proposed to cut the child and give half to each woman, one of them immediately pleaded to give the living child to the other woman. Solomon recognized the trustworthiness of this woman who was willing to sacrifice her personal desires to preserve the life of the child and ordered that the child be given to her, whom he judged to be the true mother. When the people of Israel heard of Solomon's decision, “They stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice.”⁴⁶ By alluding to this narrative to illuminate her refusal to bend to the pressure of examiners, Askew tacitly created a tension between her interrogators and the wise exercise of justice. Her willingness to sacrifice herself rather than betray her principles would be recognized by a wise

king as evidence that she was a “faithful subject,” whose statements arose from fidelity to a comprehensive commitment that defined her integrity as a self.

These prison writings of Fisher, Frith, More, and Askew employed comparable epistolary conventions, even though only More’s were printed as letters in the familiar sense of the term. The texts accentuated the connection between persons separated by prison walls, and they established identities of writer and correspondent based on that connection. In their narrative dimension, they introduced additional characters, whether an imagined hunter crossing a field or actual interrogators seated in a chamber of Lambeth House. At the same time, these Henrician prison writers used this shared set of textual strategies to bear witness to sharply opposing stances toward religious life in early modern England, and, when print editions appeared between 1546 and 1578, the formal similarities among these prison writings heightened their substantive differences. Through these early print editions, Henry’s prisoners had a long, influential afterlife. When the great Elizabethan hagiographer John Foxe compiled the writings of William Tyndale, John Frith, and Robert Barnes, Foxe’s appraisal might equally have applied to Fisher, More, and Askew: the “science of printing” was putting to godly use the collected writings of those who were “chief ringleaders in these latter times of this Church of England.”⁴⁷

In 1546 and 1547, the acerbic defender of Reformed doctrine John Bale edited Askew’s prison writings for publication in the months following her execution, and, since no autograph manuscript of the *Examinations* is known to exist, Sarah Wall cautions that “it is impossible to separate absolutely Bale’s editorial work in Askew’s text from the conjectural narrative produced by Askew herself.”⁴⁸ Bale interjected his own commentary within the text of Askew’s *Examinations*, and these comments prominently displayed methods and motives of the hagiographic editor that would have pivotal significance for the subsequent development of the printed letter from prison. Not surprisingly, Bale drew attention to parallels with ancient Christian martyrs, specifically between Blandina, martyred at Lyons in 177 CE, and the death of Anne Askew, attributing a “frail” nature to both women that “Christ made most strong by his grace.”⁴⁹

Just as important, Bale not only drew parallels between the two martyrs but also emphasized the parallel responsibilities that fell to the witnesses to the two martyrdoms. Persecutions against the ancient church had not prevented “the examinations and answers, torments and deaths of the constant martyrs” from being written and “sent abroad all the whole world over,” and “the faithful brethren in France” had written “unto their brethren in the lands

of Asia and Phrygia very far off,” concerning Blandina’s “strong sufferings for Christ’s faith.” Likewise, Bale observed, the books of John Wycliffe and his followers had not “perished” but circulated widely in England for a century and more. Bale concluded from these historical lessons that it was utter madness “to strive against God, when he will have the long hidden iniquities known,” and Bale now took up the witness’s obligation to “write here unto you” of how “Christ wonderfully triumphed” in Anne Askew as he had in Blandina. Moreover, Askew’s preserved writings represented extensions of her very person: her accounts of her interrogation were “witnesses for her sufficient” that fire had not “taken Anne Askew all whole from the world, but left her here unto it more pure, perfect, and precious than afore.” Bale’s own testimony became a direct petition to his readers to take Askew as an exemplar of all those whom God would bring forward against “this horrible fury of Antichrist, to the glory of his persecuted church.”⁵⁰

The relation between the imprisoned witness and the witness of posterity took a different but complementary form in the publication of the tower writings of Thomas More. More’s family had preserved his prison letters for twenty years, until More’s nephew William Rastell printed them in his edition of More’s English works during the reign of Mary Tudor. Rastell, a lawyer and legal scholar noted for his compilations of English statutes, fled to Louvain with his wife, Winifred, rather than assent to the Act of Uniformity of Edward VI. During his three and a half years of exile, Rastell prepared More’s works for the press and, after returning to England, dedicated his edition to Queen Mary. In his dedication Rastell explained that More’s works were either scattered in individual volumes or had not yet been printed, causing Rastell to fear that they might “perish and utterly vanish away” unless they were “gathered together and printed in one whole volume.” He therefore made it his business to collect “as many of those his works, books, letters, and other writings, printed and unprinted in the English tongue, as I could come by.” Keeping them “in my hands, very surely and safely,” he finished his edition in April 1557. Rastell assured the queen that the book would benefit both contemporaries and “our posterity” and after “being read of many, as it is likely to be, shall much help forward your majesty’s most godly purpose, in purging this your realm of all wicked heresies.” Rastell concluded by reminding the queen that More, “being with almighty God, and living in heaven with him,” did not cease “to pray to God for the king’s majesty, for your highness, your subjects, your realms, and dominions, and for the commonwealth, and catholic religion of the same, and for all Christian realms also.” Like Bale’s editions of

Askew, Rastell's portrayal of Thomas More continued, in and through printed writings, to bear earthly testimony to the cause for which he had died, in More's case as a witness to the unity of the church.⁵¹

From the outset these four prisoners of Henry VIII acted on the impulse to bear witness to both their circumstances and their religious convictions. They refused, in the words of John Frith, to "be put to silence," and their letters from prison soon circulated among family members, friends, and supporters. Crucially, this circle included witnesses-to-the-witnesses, such as John Bale and William Rastell, who recognized that print held the possibility of dramatically expanding the dissemination and influence of prison testimony. In their secondary testimony to the conscience of the prisoner, these compilers and editors extended the witness from prison for the benefit of "our posterity" and the realm of England. The letter from prison thus participated in the expansion of "print-capitalism" that, in Benedict Anderson's analysis, eventually "laid the basis for national consciousness" among readers "connected through print."⁵² More pointedly and dramatically, however, the letter from prison made its contribution to a gradually emerging "national consciousness" from society's margin, a location where the intersection of religious dissent, imprisonment, and print generated a potent literature of cultural resistance.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

The Renaissance definition of the letter presupposed separation and dialogue across distance. The letter overcame separation and made present a person who was absent. Letters from prison capitalized on these generic conventions through the rhetorical strategy of vividly portraying constraint, the arrival of a visitor, and times of isolation, thereby accentuating the bond of communication that linked an imprisoned writer to a network of correspondents. This literary device of distanced yet direct address shaped three indispensable elements of the letter from prison: the self-portrayal of the prisoner, the implied identity of the reader, and the image of the prison cell that separated them and thus demanded the letter's creation. In the most skillfully composed prison letters, these three elements are tightly intertwined, but a preliminary disentanglement calls attention to themes that run through the following chapters.

The letter from prison, especially when widely disseminated in print, established a culturally mediated image of the writer's identity. Individual prisoners appropriated this image from classical texts and the writings of renowned

earlier prisoners, adapting it to meet their immediate circumstances and the specific rhetorical purposes of their own self-presentations. Like Thomas More looking down on unfolding events from the “old burned chamber,” a prisoner’s self-portrayal typically adopted a distanced perspective on public events. This vantage point afforded a detached but not disengaged view of social corruption, factional interests, and abuses of power that threatened the common good. When delivering this detached appraisal of contemporary society, the prisoner claimed the moral authority of bearing witness to transcendent, enduring truths rather than worldly self-interest.⁵³

In this self-portrayal, the person presumed guilty by the state wrote as the individual embodiment of ethical norms and patterns of meaning that could lead a community through a present crisis of external oppression and inward doubt. Thus correspondence between prisoner and readers was not only *communication* but also reciprocal *identification*, which implicitly shaped the identity of the prison writer and the identities of readers around shared loyalties, memories, and narratives within the evolving social networks through which the letter circulated. When the letter appeared in print, its potential readership expanded beyond a circle of immediate correspondents to include audiences both supportive and hostile, both contemporaneous with the writer and at the remove of decades, who entered the imaginative space that the letter represented. As a consequence of this expanding readership, the prison writer stood in very different relations to these wider audiences of readers. Many read a letter close to the time of its composition, but many more read it after the passage of years and retrospectively interpreted it through their experience of subsequent events. The crucial point became the active, reciprocal identification of writer and reader within a concrete historical circumstance.

The literary form of the letter, as a text composed at a specific moment in time, underscored in multiple ways the fragile contingency of the circumstance in which prisoner and reader “met.” Yet, returning to Nadine Gordimer’s aphorism, the letter from prison testified not simply to a singular circumstance but to “the *event beyond the event*, its past and future.” Writing of memory, hazard, and hope, the imprisoned witness placed a personal narrative within a metanarrative of human conduct over the course of history, and the dialogical form of the letter invited readers to enter that shared metanarrative, which interpreted not only the prisoner’s circumstance but their own. The letter, understood as a rhetorical form of persuasion, thereby entwined prisoner and reader in a dialogical deliberation of present decisions and possible futures. As John Frith, John Fisher, Thomas More, Anne Askew, and their

later editors illustrate, decisions made in the present moment had implications for “the *event beyond the event*” that drew the imprisoned witness into disciplined self-appraisal. Writing the letter from prison was not only a mode of communication but also a spiritual practice, not only a dialogue with others but also an interior dialogue with conscience.

The prison cell—the space of writing—became integral to this representation of the witness. Like the letter that made present those who were absent, the cell became the space in which the prisoner and the reader were brought into each other’s presence and transfigured by their encounter. To depict the personal transformation wrought during imprisonment, early modern prison writers portrayed the physical space of their cells through figural representations that transformed confining walls into thresholds of freedom and oppressive physical abuse into a redemptive ordeal. Prison writers and their communities therefore described the prison in ways that furthered their principal rhetorical purpose: to portray the prisoners’ testimony overcoming the political regime’s effort to repress it. Letters from prison are not, in other words, the first place to look for historically accurate descriptions of the early modern prison.

Nonetheless, two features of late medieval and early modern prisons provided opportunities for the prison writer to transform the prison cell into a rhetorical stage on which to produce narratives of testimony. First, since the mid-fourteenth century, some prisons had become central features of urban landscapes in England and Europe. Housed in major government buildings or flanking a city’s main square, they symbolized political and religious authority.⁵⁴ Challenging this symbolic architecture of institutionalized order, prisoners wrote a counterscript that, on the one hand, located moral authority with the incarcerated and, on the other hand, depicted judges, ecclesiastical examiners, and jailers as illusory agents of a worldly power destined for eclipse in the cycle of divine providence. Second, despite some imposing urban architecture, jails and prisons across England were administratively decentralized and inefficient. The semiprivatized administration of jails meant that payment by prisoners to jailers was built into the system and led to an arbitrary, sometimes brutal exercise of power and to vastly different treatment contingent on a prisoner’s wealth and status. At the same time, this lax, frequently corrupt, and inefficient operation of jails enabled prisoners to communicate with one another and with the wider society, both in person and through writing. These social connections often took explicitly religious forms, and the prison cell acquired an aura of sanctity, as a space of worship, spiritual disciplines, and

ethical self-interrogation. The socially permeable walls of the early modern prison cell encouraged prison writers to depict it as a liminal or transitional space—not a rigorously regulated enclosure—in which the prisoner pursued a transformative journey with potentially enduring social impact.” Both the prison’s architectural symbolism of public authority and the physical circumstances of its day-to-day operation thus unintentionally lent themselves to rhetorical reinterpretation, through which the prison cell provided a spatial representation of the prison letter’s ironic inversion of moral authority.

The following six chapters interpret the letter from prison and its *dramatis personae*—the prisoner, the reader, and the cell—by placing illustrative letters in three broad frames of reference: “Solidarity,” “Politics,” and “Discipline.” Each frame of reference accentuates a different aspect of the multiple cultural connotations of testimony, cultural resistance, and conscience. Diverse authors composed numerous letters from prison across a long span of time, from the reign of Henry VIII to that of James II. Throughout that epoch prison letters displayed these three generic and interactive purposes of mobilizing communities of religious resistance, advocating political change, and interrogating the consciences of both prisoner and reader. In principle, the three thematic sections of the book could be arranged in any order. But to avoid repetitive descriptions of historical context, the book pursues its themes against a broadly chronological background. The chronology began in this chapter, by identifying the inherited literary forms that would shape the early modern prison letter and illustrating these forms through the prison writings of John Fisher, John Frith, Thomas More, and Anne Askew. Each subsequent chapter adds successive generations of letter writers: Protestant prisoners of Mary Tudor; Elizabethan Puritans, Separatists, and Catholics; the seventeenth-century Leveller leaders John Lilburne and Richard Overton; royalist prisoners, including Charles I; and Baptists and Quakers of the later seventeenth century.

The first interpretive frame, “Solidarity,” examines the letter from prison as a literary instrument for defining, solidifying, and transforming a community of resistance across time, as the letter circulated through a social network that read, preserved, disseminated, and interpreted it in manuscript and print. It explores the ways in which the prison writer and the community of interpreters collaborated in developing a portrayal of the prisoner of conscience as a paradigm of ethical and religious conduct for members of that community. And it assesses how, through the passage of time and preservation in print, letters were retrospectively reinterpreted to address the societal issues of later eras.

The second frame of reference, “Politics,” interprets the letter from prison as a document of advocacy in an environment of contending social movements that disrupted inherited institutions of political order. In an epoch of complex cultural change, the prison writer argued for particular causes, rights, and decisions as one advocate among many, and this polemical purpose challenged the prisoner’s rhetorical intention of demonstrating truthfulness and moral character that transcended political factionalism.

The third frame of reference, “Discipline,” explores the prison writer’s depiction of the cell as a space of spiritual transformation. There, writing became an act of self-discipline by which, in the words of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the prisoner reckoned with “the burden of the witness.” “‘No one bears witness for the witness,’ writes the poet Paul Celan. To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely of that solitude. And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others.”⁵⁶ In each of these three frames of reference, the letter from prison as a work of literary art imaginatively depicts both this isolation and this responsibility. The prisoner’s letter portrays this paradoxical responsibility to bear witness from a constrained space through spatial images of a message that passes through the cell’s confining walls. At the same time, it employs temporal images of the prisoner striving to maintain hope that testimony delivered at a single moment in time might have significance in the longer sweep of history. Through these representations of the prisoner’s unswerving resolve to bear witness, the letter from prison aimed to shape and represent the moral character of an evolving community of interpretation that would consolidate around a shared religious and political cause.