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Issue 9 (2017) - Early Modern Voices

The Voice of Anne Askew

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[1] When Thomas Tomkis explored the question of whether the voice could be a sixth sense in the university play *Lingua* (1607), he gave us a clue as to what he thought the answer would be before he had even begun by making *Lingua*, both tongue and speech, the only female character. The answer, obviously, had to be a resounding ‘no’. The play begins with *Auditus* reminding *Lingua* that there are only five senses, and that ‘she’ – ‘an idle prattling Dame’ – is not one of them. This rejection inspires her revenge, and she puts the five senses, *Auditus*, *Visus*, *Tactus*, *Olfactus* and *Gustus* at loggerheads by placing a coronet in full view for them to fight over, a ruse these ‘hot-spur’ gallants fall for (Tomkis, *Lingua*, A3r, C3v). Only the winner of this struggle in the end is not *Lingua*. She is exposed as a presumptuous, talkative woman who needs to be silenced. Her punishment at the end of the play is to be locked up by ‘Common Sense’ in a ‘close prison’ in *Gustus*’s house (that is, the mouth), while the crown over which the senses fight is awarded, no surprise here, to *Visus* (Tomkis, *Lingua*, M4v).

[2] The argument that this play dramatises is a familiar one. Tomkis is reaffirming a maxim from the period that is all too familiar to feminist scholars, that women should be silent (Hannay 1985: 4). However, the play also dramatises another narrative that often implicitly underpins the work of book historians and historians of reading: that this period saw a shift from the ear to the eye as the primary sense of understanding. With a very few exceptions these two ‘stories’ – the one of the silencing of women, the other of the rise of sight as the privileged sense – are not usually linked, although they should be, as this essay implies.^[1] It sets out to reverse this shift, proposing that we ‘listen’ to the inscribed words of a woman who was imprisoned in this period, Anne Askew.

[3] Do we really need to learn to ‘listen’? I propose that we do. In the last decade it has become more usual for feminist literary scholarship focussed on the early modern period to adapt and apply to women ‘recent developments from the history of the book’ (Pender and Smith 2014: 1). Thus, in addition to Gabriel Harvey, John Dee and William Drake, we now have differently ‘goal-orientated’ women readers and patrons like Lady Anne Clifford and Lady Margaret Hoby, and three queens, Katherine Parr, Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. And we can now establish that a commercial playwright like Ben Jonson who aspired to ‘literary status’ had his female counterparts too. By studying the ‘design’ of a printed closet drama like Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam* – ‘its layout and typography, from the initial logotype on the title page through to the closing ornament’ – we can show, Marta Straznicky argues, that it too ‘was marketed as the kind of drama that had emerged by 1613 as befitting a selected and educated readership’ (Straznicky 2004: 12, 48-9). But there are uncomfortable questions we also need to ask. Is one effect of this turn in literary scholarship that we silence women’s voices in an entirely different way even as we genuinely deepen our understanding of the ‘authorship, publication and circulation’ of books by women (Pender and Smith 2014: 1)? What do we lose when we advance our knowledge of the role women played in material textual publication but don’t also attend to their material voices?

[4] It wasn’t always like this. Earlier work in the field that was intent on establishing a canon of women’s writing traded productively on the many meanings of the noun ‘voice’: ‘A mode of expression or point of view in writing; a particular literary tone or style’; ‘a right to

express a preference or opinion', or even 'Sound produced by the vocal organs' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, entries 1g, 3 b, 1). All of these meanings are helpfully blurred in Kate Chedgzoy's introduction to *Voicing Women*, a collection of essays published in 1996, which reminded us that the role of feminist scholars is to recover women's 'voices' as well as to create 'a space where they can be heard afresh' (Chedgzoy 1996: 4). Chedgzoy conveys the complexity of this task when she discusses an anonymous poem attributed to Anna Trapnel, the non-conformist faith of whom led her to wish to 'bury' her voice 'underground' in order to let the words of the Lord 'run forth'.^[2] Is it always clear who we are listening to in an anonymous religious poem in this period, she asks? And can we be sure that our 'desires' are not influencing 'what it is that we hear' or, indeed, that we are not speaking for or over women of the past (Chedgzoy 1996: 4, 8)?

[5] This essay returns to this preoccupation with the 'voice' of early modern women writers, and it sets out to explore anew how we can make sense of the writing – and agency – of a woman who suppressed her voice in order to let the Lord's voice 'run forth'. Anne Askew spoke the Word of God more than a century before Trapnel, in the early years of the English Reformation, the 1540s; she was burned at the stake at Smithfield in 1546. The written record of her interrogations in prison survives only in an edition heavily annotated by a male contemporary, the reformer John Bale, making Chedgzoy's question especially relevant here too: 'whose is the voice that is speaking in this text?' My concern, though, is not to add Askew to the canon of women's writing. This has already been achieved, although a question remains about whether she could have managed to write about her interrogations after she had been tortured. That is, she may have dictated rather than written down what she remembered. What I want to do instead is to focus attention on Askew's physical rather than literary voice, as it is represented and highlighted by Bale in the *Examinations* (1546; 1547) in order to respond to a slightly different question: who has the right to speak the Bible?^[3]

[6] Focussing on the historical physical voices of the past may well seem a foolish undertaking. The earliest scratchy recording in the British Library's sound archive was produced with a graphophone in 1878.^[4] It is deafeningly obvious that we can have no recordings of the voice, scratchy or otherwise, for periods earlier than this. What we do have, though, thanks to recent work on male-authored, female-voiced texts in the English Renaissance by, among others, Alison Thorne, Danielle Clarke, Michelle O'Callaghan, Suzanne Trill, Susan Wiseman, is an understanding of how the voices of women were understood as meaningful. This essay builds on this work, but it also departs from it, arguing for a focus on the physical voice so as to understand the transformative potential to a reformer like Bale of Askew's speaking through the Bible. In so doing, it values the act of *uttering* words one believes in – sending them forth with one's breath, tongue, teeth – over and above writing them. Or to put this another way, it privileges recitation over textual citation.

Uttering the Bible

[7] Chedgzoy was not alone in the mid-1990s in her desire to 'hear' the voices of past women writers. Unsurprisingly, we find a similar blurring of literary and real voices among scholarly editors of women's writing in this decade too. In the introduction to her edition of Anne Askew's *Examinations*, published in 1996, Elaine Beilin draws attention to a knotty problem in a lively way. Askew (ca. 1521-1546) was the young woman who famously walked into Lincoln Cathedral in the early 1540s, and who occupied it for six days, reading the newly translated and printed English Bible on display. This was done in a decade that saw the 1543 Act for the Advancement of True Religion, which determined who could *not* read

the bible: “no women or artificiers, prentices, journeymen, serving men of the degrees of yeomen or under, husbandmen, nor labourers” (Cambers 2011: 162-3). Noblewomen and gentlewomen, in contrast, were allowed to read the bible but only ‘to themselves, alone’ (Simpson 2007: 166). Askew was arrested, interrogated and tortured in the Tower of London, then burned at the stake in 1546, but the record of her two interrogations in 1545 and 1546 was smuggled out of her prison cell and edited by the Reformation propagandist, John Bale, who also provided a paratextual apparatus framing and interpreting it. Here lies the knotty problem: thanks to Bale’s efforts, Askew’s testimony has survived, but only in an intrusively edited edition. ‘At every possible opening’, Beilin complains, he ‘interrupts’ her (*Examinations* 1996: xxxiv).

[8] We can see why Beilin chooses the verb ‘interrupt’ to explain the effects of Bale’s paratext just by looking at the layout of the two tracts. Together they contain an account of Askew’s two periods of interrogation which she ‘wrote unto a secrete frynde’ from prison. Bale tells us that he ‘receyved it in coppye, by serten duche merchauntes’ who had been present at her execution (*Examinations* 1996: 88). In the text Askew recalls what she was asked, by whom, and how she answered. However, her testimony is surrounded by Bale’s commentary in which he sets out, as Beilin puts it, ‘to demonstrate by continual comparison that Askew’s words, actions, and beliefs are closer to the Scriptures and to the primitive church than anything written or performed by Roman Catholics for at least the previous nine centuries’ (*Examinations* 1996: xxxiv). To be fair, Bale’s gloss always appears in a smaller font, ensuring that Askew’s words are given prominence on the page (Figure 1). Yet, Bale also has so much more to say than Askew, and he shapes our reading of her words for his own purposes, de-authoring Askew (Beilin 2005: 347), or taming her voice to create ‘a passively silent, compliant victim’, as scholars have argued (Kemp 1999: 1033).

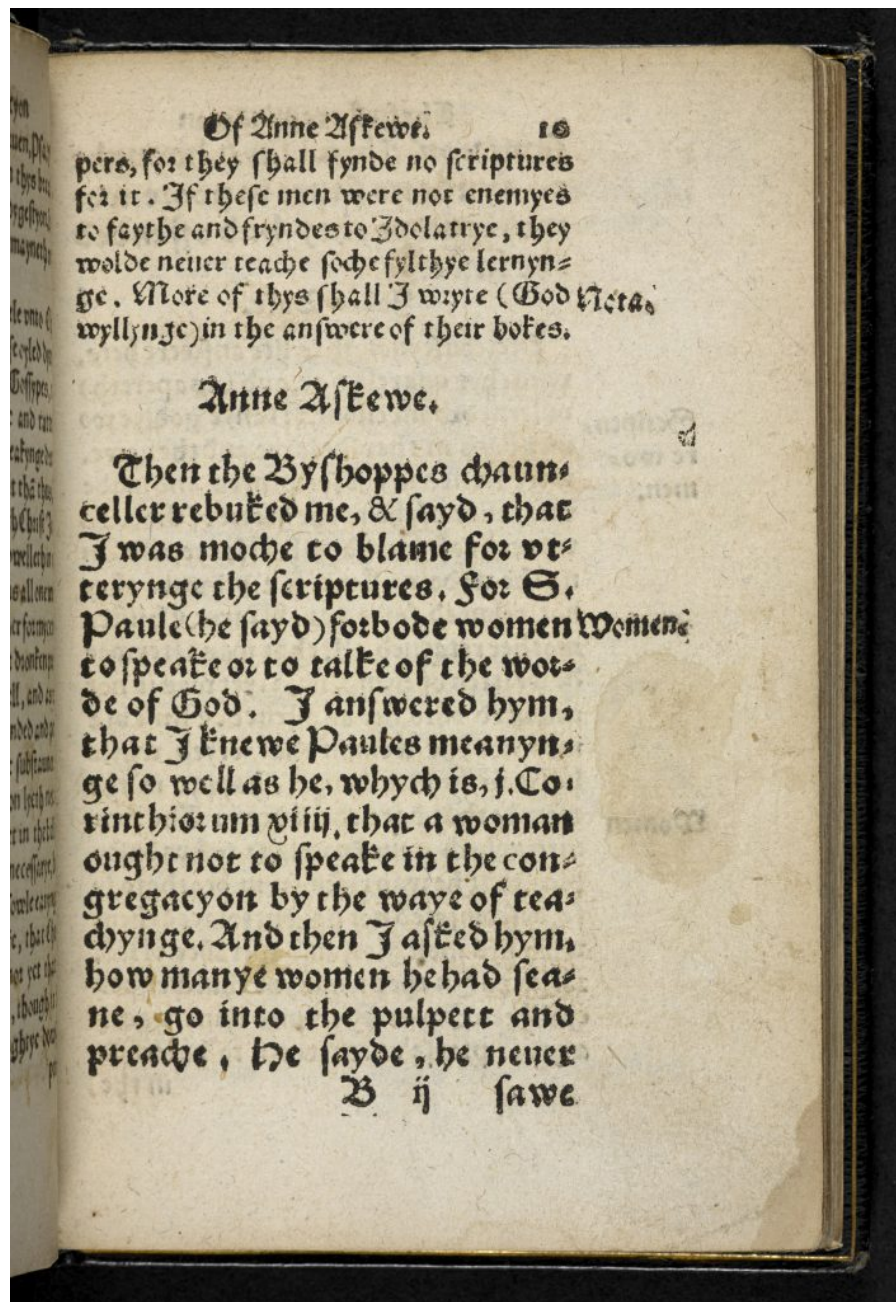


Figure 1: *The first examinatyon of Anne Askewe* (1546): © British Library Board, C.21.a.4 (1), 10r

[9] Beilin has undoubtedly done important work, adding to the canon of early modern women's writing someone who was half-hidden in Bale's edition. All the same, her hankering for the 'real' voice of Askew now seems anachronistic because of recent developments in material book history, which emphasise the collaborative nature of a printed book's production. One scholar who explored the *Examinations* in the light of these developments was Patricia Pender. In a thoughtful essay, she refuses to repeat 'the feelings of regret and loss' expressed by many scholars in the absence of Askew's original manuscript, viewing the *Examinations* as 'an exemplary instance of the kind of collaborative coauthorship that might prove valuable to the study of social theory of the text, early modern histories of books and reading, and feminist scholarship more broadly' (Pender 2010: 520). To focus only on Askew as an author who is used by Bale for his own ends is 'to ignore the many ways in which [her] words and figures exceed the frame that Bale provides for them'. Bale may have wisely sought to disguise Askew's combativeness by presenting her as a 'weak and humble woman' but 'this does not mean' that he always

‘succeeded’. Pender invites a different reading of the relationship between text and paratext in the *Examinations*, looking for ‘[s]igns of interpretive struggle’ between a feisty author and her editor (Pender 2010: 519-520). And she discovers not a woman who is repeatedly interrupted, but one who ‘unapologetically [...] studies’ (Pender 2010: 514).

[10] There is no doubt that Askew is presented as an exemplary Reformation reader. ‘In processe of tyme’, Bale writes, ‘by oft readyng of the sacred Bible’, Askew ‘fell clerelye from all olde superstycyons of papystrye, to a perfyght beleve in Jhesus Christ’ (*Examinations* 1996: 93). But how exactly did she read? Pender’s depiction of her as a studious reader is based on the fact that she cites Bible chapters in her responses. For example, when she is asked by one of her interrogators, Christopher Dare, if she would prefer ‘to reade fyve lynes in the Byble, than to heare fyve masses in the temple’, she confesses ‘that I sayd no lesse’, explaining that ‘the one ded greatlye edyfy me, and the other nothings at all’. In support of this statement, Askew adds that ‘saynt Paule doth wisse in the xiiii chapter of hys first Epistle to Corinthes’, and she quotes him as saying ‘If the trumpe geveth an uncertayne sounde, who wyll prepare hymselfe to the battayle’ (*Examinations* 1996: 21).

[11] There are many such examples whereby Askew ‘repeatedly out-references her foes, sometimes to the point of exhaustion’ (Pender 2010: 514). This habit of citation recalls Bale’s claim that she read the Bible ‘oft’. It also makes her look like one of the new readers created by print, someone who was able ‘to detach “sentences” from the interpretive place they have been given within Catholic tradition’, and re-arrange them independently ‘in a countertradition’; this is how Pender’s source, Peter Stallybrass, describes what Askew is doing (Stallybrass 2002: 69). Attention to the selection and re-use of sentences usually supposes a model of silent study: the reader pores over her book, perhaps marking sentences in the margin with a pen so she can find them again, perhaps adding them to a commonplace book. Later Protestant readers would use the navigational aids of the Geneva Bible (1560) – the first Bible to divide the text into numbered verses – to locate them. Askew’s discontinuous reading of her Bible is all the more remarkable since in the mid-1540s no such aids were available (Stallybrass 2002: 69-73; on the Geneva bible as a ‘Study Bible’ see also Molekamp 2015: 41-46).

[12] Such an emphasis discovers a different side to Askew in a text that many feminist scholars have found troubling because it seems to control her voice. Yet, by the same token, we might well ask what is lost when we give up the everyday, often personal language of feminist scholarship of the 1990s. Without Beilin’s imaginative depiction of Bale interrupting Askew, for instance, might we also forget that this text is a record of an oral event and a celebration of a woman’s voice? Is it possible that Pender inadvertently makes Askew’s voice less effective even as she recovers her agency in other ways? Pender doesn’t say explicitly that Askew’s reading of the Bible was silent, but I assume that she thinks it was. It is not just that the ability to detach sentences – or to read discontinuously – is usually regarded as the product of silent study. For Pender, key moments of Askew’s rebellion are wordless. Thus, she focuses on the silent exchange between Askew in Lincoln Cathedral, when she is reading the public Bible, and the priests who approached her. The priests came two at a time, Askew says in the *Examinations*, ‘myndyng to have spoken to me, yet went they theyr wayes agayne with out wordes speakyng’ (*Examinations* 1996: 56). Pender describes this as an ‘eerily silent encounter’, as well as Askew’s ‘actions’ in the Cathedral as ‘silent’ (Pender 2010: 512).

[13] Askew may well have read the Bible in this public place silently. But she may also have read it aloud, perhaps murmuring the words as she followed the text. We just don’t know. *Legere sibi*, to read to oneself, usually meant *legere tacite*, to read silently, Brian Cummings

notes, but ‘this may have meant a low mumble rather than total silence’ (Cummings 2013: 136-7). It is also true that her most chastening responses to her interrogators are wordless. When she is asked by the Lord Mayor whether a mouse that eats the host can be said to have ‘receyved God’ she responds by saying nothing: ‘I made them no answere, but smyled’ (*Examinations* 1996: 27). She also repeatedly thwarts her interrogators by not telling them what they long to hear. In fact, she often has little to say. When she is asked by Bishop Bonner ‘whye I had so fewe wordes’, she responds meekly and rebelliously in the same breath: ‘God hath geven me the gyfte of knowlege, but not of utteraunce. And Salomon sayth, that a woman of fewe wordes, is a gyfte of God. Prover. 19’ (*Examinations* 1996: 51). Askew is reminding her rhetorically-trained interrogators that she lacks eloquence, and that she fulfils the ideal of the meek, silent woman.

[14] And yet, paradoxically, she is also *uttering* this riposte, and in doing so she knowingly recites the words of wise Solomon. This is one of many easily missed moments in the first of the *Examinations* when we are being asked to ‘listen’ to Askew in a different way, and to recognize this text’s play with one of its keywords, the verb ‘utter’. Askew does not utter – or speak – with skill, she confesses. She has not received formal training in rhetoric at grammar school or university. But she is far from silent. She utters – in the sense of sends ‘forth a sound’, or gives out or emits ‘in an audible voice’ – the words of the Bible (*Oxford English Dictionary*, entry II. 5). This act of uttering, moreover, is not passive but full of knowledge and understanding.

[15] It is this sense of giving voice that underlies the distinction Askew herself draws at another significant point in her examination between reciting and teaching the word of God, between reading aloud and speaking from the Bible and preaching it. This time she finds authority for what she says in the words of St Paul:

Then the Byshoppes chaunceller rebuked me, and sayd, that I was moche to blame for utterynge the scriptures. For S. Paule (he sayd) forbode women to speake or to talke of the worde of God. I answered hym, that I knewe Paules meanyng so well as he, whych is, i. Corinthiorum xiiii. that a woman ought not to speake in the congregacyon by the waye of teachynge. And then I asked hym, how manye women he had seane, go into the pulpett and preache. He sayde, he never sawe non. Then I sayd, he ought to fynde no faute in poore women, except they had offended the lawe. (*Examinations* 1996: 29-30)

It is also this sense of ‘utter’ that underlies Bale’s defence of Askew’s recitation of the Bible. (And again, the interplay between saying and knowing is foregrounded.) ‘Plenteouse ynough is her answere here, unto thys quarelynge’, he argues, adding that ‘Manye godlye women both in the olde lawe and the newe, were lerned in the scriptures, and made utteraunce of them to the glorye of God’. And he goes one step further still, to recall the women who ‘gave knowlege’ of the resurrection to Christ’s ‘dyscyples’, including Saint Hilda, who ‘openlye dysputed ... agaynst the superstycyons of certen byshoppes’ (*Examinations* 1996: 30-31).

[16] To focus on utterance as a physical act of giving voice is to acknowledge Askew’s ‘material status as embodied text’ in a distinctive way (Pender 2010: 518). She has not just absorbed and memorised Scripture, by whatever method; she also breathes or speaks it, bodying it forth. We need to remember that *Examinations* is a written record of an oral event, and that Bale himself is sensitive to this fact for the simple reason that he believes the priests – Askew’s interrogators – would silence the Reformation. Bale argues in the conclusion to the first examination that there is a conspiracy of ‘subtyle sylence’ on the topic of the Pope among the Catholic clergy: ‘Ye shall not now heare a worde spoken agaynst hym

at Paules crosse, nor yet agaynst hys olde juglynge feates' (*Examinations* 1996: 67-8). *Examinations* aims to reverse this in several different ways. Bale not only fills in this 'subtyle sylence' by reminding us repeatedly of the corruption of the Pope and his ministers; he also teaches us to hear correctly the disarmingly gentle – or, as he describes them, 'foxysh' – voices of Askew's interrogators, who are always trying to persuade her to 'utter the secretes of [her] hart' (*Examinations* 1996: 58-61). In his own responses, moreover, he turns up the volume. 'Gentyll and soft wyttes are oft tymes offended', he acknowledges, because he is 'so vehement in rebukes'. But what modesty, he asks, would you use if you were 'compelled to fyght with dragons, hyders [hydras], and other odyble monsters'? (*Examinations* 1996: 69).

[17] Most importantly, though, he draws attention to the fact that Askew speaks according to Scripture, providing more citations in his commentary, often out-referencing her. When the Lord Mayor recalls that she had denied 'the sacrament of the aultre', to which she tersely says 'that that I had sayd, I had sayd', Bale adds a little more: 'In thys brefe answere, she remembred Salomans counsell, Answere not a fole, all after hys folyshnesse' (*Examinations* 1996: 32). On another occasion when Askew answers a question about whether she thinks she has 'the sprete of God' in her with characteristic brevity, saying 'if I had not, I was but a reprobate or cast awaye', Bale again offers more by way of explanation, citing multiple authorities for what she says from Scripture, that one has the spirit of God if one hears the Gospel and believes:

Electe are we of God (sayth Peter) through the sanctyfyenge of the sprete. i. Petri i. In everye true Christen belever dwelleth the sprete of God. Jo. 14. Their sowles are the santifyed temples of the holye Ghost. 1. Corin. 3. He that hath not the sprete of Christ (sayth Paule) is non of Christes, Roma. 8. To them is the holye Ghost geven, whych heareth the Gospell and beleveth it, and not unto them whych wyll be justyfyed by their workes. Gala. 2. All these worthye scrpytures confirme her saynge. (*Examinations* 1996: 24)

Indeed, as this last example should make clear, it is Bale, not Askew, who is the scholarly reader represented in *Examinations*. No matter how much Askew has studied the Bible, Bale, we are shown, has studied it more. Askew may give references for what she says – for example, reminding her interrogators not just what Paul said about women speaking in public, but also where they can find his statement: 'i. Corinthiorum xiiii'. More often, though, she paraphrases Scripture, and it is Bale who provides a reference to make it known that she speaks the Word of God. It is not that he is dismissive of her ability to cite chapters of the Bible; it is just that he values more her ability to recite Scripture from memory, without embellishment since this makes her the living embodiment of the Word of God to whom her interrogators should listen. In effect she is reading aloud the Bible without the book.

[18] To call Bale the scholarly reader of *Examinations* is not to make Askew a lesser reader. In fact, the opposite is true. A literary example that Bale may have had in mind can help us to understand why. This example is 'Folly', the fictional female orator of Desiderius's Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium* (1511). To be sure, the Protestant firebrand Bale could not seem more different to the moderate, Catholic reformer, Erasmus. Yet Erasmus's biblical scholarship, especially his *Paraphrases*, had a formative influence on the English Reformation in the 1540s, including on Bale. This work aims to make the New Testament accessible to everyone by translating it into "an oratorical stream of speech" (Cottier 2012: 31). In July 1547, six months after the death of Henry VIII, Gretchen E. Minton notes, the reformers stipulated that all churches were to have on display a copy not just of the whole

Bible but also of Erasmus's Paraphrases, the translation of which Nicholas Udall assembled: *Paraphrases, The first tome or volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus* (1548). In the same year, she adds, Bale was completing his own paraphrase of one of the books of the New Testament that Erasmus had left out, *Revelation: Image of Both Churches* (Minton 2002: 291-2). *Moriae Encomium*, translated into English by Thomas Chaloner just a couple of years later, sets out in a rather unconventional way to make sense of this simple – or foolish – idea, that the meaning of the Bible is best communicated not with learned commentaries but with an ordinary, speaking voice. This is one of the arguments that Bale is also making in his very different and much less playful way in *Examinations*. Like Erasmus, moreover, he uses a feminine voice to make the case.

[19] *Moriae Encomium* is an oration spoken by Folly, and she begins by mocking the poor delivery of famous wise men, including Socrates. If this seems a lightweight subject suitable only for Folly herself, as it should do, then we may be surprised to find ourselves listening more attentively later in her speech when she turns to the poor delivery of university schoolmen and divines. Late in her oration, Folly dramatises the sharp voice of a friar-preacher asserting that heretics should be burned at the stake. And she sends up the way in which learned divines stretch the literal meaning of Scripture with their complicated, allegorical commentaries (Erasmus 1549: R3^{r-v}; Q4^{r-v}, R1^r).

[20] The interesting question for us is why Erasmus chose to put this attack in the mouth of a self-confessed fool: a woman. One explanation, offered by Elizabeth D. Harvey in *Ventriloquized Voices*, is that Erasmus uses Folly as a 'shield', allowing him 'to say with impunity what he might otherwise not be able to articulate openly' (Harvey 1992: 63). It is his privilege to do so of course, and as Harvey notes, he is able 'to take on temporarily the voice or perspective of the disempowered precisely because he is not dispossessed of various enabling factors: he is male, educated, and knowledgeable not only about those subjects he anatomizes ... but also about the modes of expression correlated with each' (Harvey 1992: 63-4). But there is another reason why he hides behind Folly, I suggest, which puts those 'enabling factors' under critical scrutiny. The argument of *Moriae Encomium* – that reading the bible aloud in a plain speaking voice reveals its meaning much more readily than does the commentary of erudite divines – is best made by an obviously foolish speaker, literate but without a formal university education: a woman. When Folly speaks the same verses over which the divines labour, their literal meaning is made clear. Bale is making a similar point in *Examinations*, although he used the voice not of a fictional character but of a 'real' person, the gentlewoman Anne Askew, and in so doing he also goes beyond Erasmus, providing a powerful counter-defence of the right of a modestly educated woman to recite and embody Scripture in a meaningful way without the say-so of the male Catholic elite.

Ventriloquisation

[21] This essay began with the suggestion that the material turn in literary studies at the start of this century is neglecting the voices of women writers, and I focussed on Anne Askew's *Examinations* both to show how this is happening but also to recover her voice in so far as that is possible. I sided with scholars two decades earlier who were intent on recovering women's voices in a variety of different senses. But my aim to recover the physical voice of Askew will no doubt seem a foolhardy enterprise. Even in these earlier studies it was not the real voice that scholars were hoping to recover after all these centuries. 'Voice is a powerful metaphor', Elizabeth Harvey observes, 'for the rebirth of what has been suppressed by patriarchal culture since language provides the currency in society and because voice registers in an immediate way that linguistic power' (Harvey 1992: 5). The tenor of this metaphor of 'voice' is female agency but it keeps some connection to its

‘vehicle’, language and speech. We can see this metaphor at play in the introduction to Beilin’s edition, where she describes Bale as interrupting Askew. We can see it again even more clearly in an essay by Boyd M. Berry, which explores how Askew’s ‘shrewd, tactical female voice’ is ‘replaced by an impersonal, self-less voice’ – that of the Protestant martyr – by her male editor and interrogators (Berry 1997: 182-3). The ‘voice’ is a powerful and seductive metaphor in these studies. It is not hard for us to imagine Askew being talked down to and talked over even as we suspect that Beilin and Berry are actually interested in something entirely different: whether it is possible to reclaim Askew’s literary voice or writing – her ‘authorial presence’ (Harvey 1992: 1) – from Bale.

[22] The recognition that ‘voice’ is a metaphor led scholars like Harvey in a different direction to the one I am taking in this essay, away from the pretence that we might actually ‘hear’ Renaissance women to a study instead of the appropriation of female-voiced narrative in the writing of this period, and of the cultural work of silencing and marginalising that it does. Poststructuralist literary theory has ‘repeatedly challenged the stability of the categories that appear to lend “voice” its coherence as a metaphor’, Harvey argues, and as a result we cannot assume any longer that there is a ‘clear correlation between the gender of a body and the gender of a text’ (Harvey 1992: 5). Indeed, it would be foolish to assume that ‘voice’ is meant literally.

[23] The fact that so many male-authored texts with female personae survive from the Renaissance, should not surprise us. Male writers in this period were well trained in the art of impersonation at the Tudor grammar school, and this extended to female voices too, so much so, Lynn Enterline proposes, that ‘transvestite theater’ was an integral part ‘of school training in how to become a Latin-speaking gentleman’ (Enterline 2012: 88). There is a ‘dramatic, self-conscious process of impersonation’ at work in all school exercises, Enterline writes, from speaking the single sentences collected in the *vulgaria* by boys in the early forms in the character, perhaps, of a master or a schoolboy, to the more advanced rhetorical exercises of the later forms, especially prosopopoeia: ‘a certaine Oracion made by voice, and lamentable imitation, upon the state of any one’ (Enterline 2012: 80; Rainolde 1563: A4^r; N1^{r-v}). In these last exercises, it is the personae of women that dominate: Hecuba, Niobe, Andromache, Medea, Cleopatra (Enterline 2012: 83).

[24] What is being impersonated in the performance of these female voices? It cannot only have been their different quality. There has been a great deal of thought given to how boys’ voices were used and represented on the Renaissance public stage, and many references to squeaky and cracking voices have been collected (Bloom 2007: 21-65). But there is so much more to an expressive voice than this. After all, Bottom makes a laughable mistake in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when he declares that, if he is given the woman’s part to play, ‘I’ll speak in a monstrous little voice’ (Shakespeare 2016: 1.2.43-44), line 299). Equally important is the emotional range of the classical, literary female voices available for imitation and the subject position they represent. Richard Rainolde’s sole example of prosopopoeia is a speech by Hecuba, a grieving mother and Queen of Troy, at the point of the city’s utter devastation. It is full of figures that express strong emotion: ‘What kyngdome can always assure his state, or glory? What strength can always last? What power maie always stande?’ (Rainolde 1563: N2v).**[5]**

[25] Unsurprisingly, Renaissance female impersonation was sometimes so good that it has created debate among modern scholars more than four hundred years later about the authorship of some anonymous texts with female personae.**[6]** One of these debates concerns the authorship of an elegy titled ‘The Doleful Lay of Clorinda’. The elegy is one of

several mourning the death of Philip Sidney, appended to Edmund Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (1595), and the only one without an attributed author. 'The Lay' is related by the male narrator of an earlier elegy, 'Astrophel', but its performer, Clorinda – the 'I' of the 'Lay' – is identified by him as Philip's sister, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. Here, then, is a conundrum. Did Mary Sidney write the 'Lay', as some scholars have claimed, or did Edmund Spenser write it for her, taking on her persona and 'drawing upon her own poetic habits and quirks'? (Clarke 2000: 454). In a classic study of the 'Lay', Danielle Clarke steps outside the debate about its authorship, observing that even if Mary Sidney was a contributor in some way, its placing in this book by Spenser means that he, not she, owns it, prompting her to consider a new question: why would Spenser choose 'to adopt a feminine literary persona'? (Clarke 2000: 452). Clarke's analysis has much to tell us about the use made of women's voices in this period. Rather as the Hecuba example suggests, they carry emotion from a subject position not usually available to a male writer. In the case of 'The Lay', adopting Mary Sidney's 'voice' places Spenser in a closer personal relationship to her aristocratic brother and esteemed poet than his status and 'tenuous (although much desired) connection warranted' (Clarke 2000: 457, 466-7).

[26] This sensitivity to the effect of ventriloquization is clearly relevant to *Examinations* too, which has a similarly emotionally-charged investment in its main speaker, Anne Askew, although perhaps not in the way we might expect. I am not thinking of Bale's possible ventriloquization – and silencing – of Askew. In the absence of her original manuscript we cannot know whether he interfered with her text or not. In any case, it is generally accepted that the testimony is hers. Instead, I am interested in Bale's and Askew's joint preoccupation with what happens to her voice, what she is made to say and how she speaks back. Steven Connor's distinction between passive and active forms of ventriloquism will help me to make sense of this. Ventriloquism, he proposes, can denote either 'the experience of being spoken through by others' or 'the power to speak through others' (Connor 2000: 14). The first form – an 'author speaking through the voice of the other gender' – preoccupies Renaissance feminist scholars like Harvey since it 'fostered a vision that tended to reinforce women's silence or to marginalize their voices when they did speak or write' (Harvey 1992: 2, 5; on the complex metaphorical meanings of 'voice' see Dolor, 2015). It also preoccupied both Bale and Askew. An example of this form of ventriloquization is Bishop Bonner's reading aloud of Askew's confession of faith:

Be it knowne (sayth he) to all men, that I Anne Askewe, do confesse thys to be my faythe and beleve, notwithstandinge my reportes made afore to the contrarye. I beleve that they whych are howseled [received communion] at the hands of a prest, whether hys conversacyon be good or not, de receyve the bodye and bloude of Christ in substaunce reallye. Also I do beleve it after the consecracyon, whether it be receyved or reserved, to be no lesse than the verye bodye and bloude of Christ in substaunce. Fynallye I do beleve in thys and all other sacraments of the holye churche, in all poyntes accordyng to the olde catholyck faythe of the same. In witnesse wherof, I the seyd Anne have subscribed my name. (*Examinations* 1996: 59)

This is an emphatically oral event. As Askew explains, Bonner 'wolde not suffer me to have the coppie therof', and what she shares is based on what she heard and can remember (*Examinations* 1996: 58). It is also a very odd event. Askew is being asked to endorse a doctrinal point of Roman Catholicism to which she does not assent, that the sacrament is the body of Christ. But it is odd for another reason since it involves layers of reported speech. Askew is 'being spoken through' in the moment of this confession's performance.

Bonner is putting words in her mouth: ‘Then he redde it to me, and asked me, if I ded agre to it’. Yet, it is Askew who is sharing the story – perhaps even dictating it – and this means that she is ventriloquizing Bonner ventriloquizing her, and exposing his attempt to speak through her. Her resistance is quietly evident. She responds by refusing to affirm what he says, saying only that ‘I beleve so moche therof, as the holye scripture doth agre to’ (*Examinations* 1996: 60). Askew joins the ranks of other martyrs who used their voice to resist rather than confirm what had been written for them, those like Thomas Bilney who read aloud a recantation of his heresies that was passed to him at his execution on the 16th August 1531 at Lollard’s Pit in Norwich but, according to at least one account, by ‘muttering’ the words so ‘softly’ that it was uncertain whether he had recanted at all (Cummings 2013: 133-7).

[27] Bale builds on this moment of simple resistance. Part of his purpose in *Examinations*, I argued earlier, is to stop the silencing of the Reformation, and he does this in various ways. This includes reminding us at every opportunity, and in his own distinctively loud voice, just how corrupt are the Pope and his minions. But another way he does this is to turn Askew into an active ventriloquist. Indeed, what else is Askew’s uttering of Scripture but an act of ventriloquization? By the same token, what else is Bale doing when he provides references to support her brief responses other than showing that she has ‘the power to speak through’ the women and men of the Bible? If we are in any doubt about whether this is happening, I suggest we turn to Askew’s psalm, the epilogue to the first of the *Examinations*: ‘The voyce of Anne Askewe out of the 54. Psalme of David, called. Deus in nomine tuo’. The title is wonderfully provocative. The literary persona of the psalm is King David, and he is calling down God’s revenge on his enemies. However, psalms are performance scripts, and their meaning is activated when they are said or sung. Matthew Parker made this very point in the preface to his Psalter when he explains the spiritual benefits of voicing psalms: ‘Verse harde in mouth: while oft I chowde, / I spied therin no wast: / Cleare sent to mynde: more sweetely flowde, /earst thus not felt in tast’ (Parker 1567: B4^r; see also Hamlin 2015). The meaning of this psalm is also activated once we understand, not so much that Askew wrote it – if she did – but that she voiced it. When she did so, she breathed life into King David even as she stands in for him, ensuring that the link between God and his favoured people is not broken.

For thy names sake, be my refuge,
 And in thy truthe, my quarrell judge.
 Before the (lorde) lete me be hearde,
 And with faver my tale regarde
 Loo, faythlesse men, agaynst me ryse,
 And for thy sake, my deathe practyse.
 My lyfe they seke, with mayne and myght
 Whych have not the, afore their syght
 Yet helpst thou me, in thys dystresse,
 Savyng my sowle, from cruelnesse.
 I wote thou wylt revenge my wronge,
 And vsyte them, ere it be longe.
 I wylt therfor, my whole hart bende,
 Thy gracyouse name (lorde) to commende.
 From evyll thou hast, delyvered me,
 Declarynge what, myne enmyes be.
 Prayse to God.

(*Examinations* 1996: 72)

This is a female-voiced complaint with a difference. We are not reading a male author impersonating a woman, say the defeated Queen of Troy, Hecuba. Instead, we are reading – and perhaps also performing ourselves – a woman who has paraphrased a psalm and who is speaking it, making David’s call for revenge her own. In short, what matters is not that she wrote this paraphrase but that it is in her ‘voyce’. With her breath, Askew transfers to herself the spirit of David’s call for revenge and, if her ‘voyce’ is read aloud with understanding, the work of Reformation continues.

[28] My argument, then, is a simple one: the idea that Askew voiced this psalm is empowering. The same applies to Askew’s recitation of Scripture in the rest of the *Examinations*. To put this another way, I am less concerned with the question of whether Bale’s editing interferes with Askew’s written record – or even with the possibility that she did not write this testimony down herself – than with the emphasis she and Bale place on the fact that she utters Scripture throughout. Askew has found her place in the canon of early modern women’s writing thanks to the efforts of Beilin and others. She has yet to find her place in the historical defence of women’s public reading of the Bible. Unless we pay attention to the performative emphasis in the *Examinations* we will continue to overlook this. One of the most forceful contributions to this defence, which has been recognized by feminist scholars, came a century later. The Quaker Margaret Fell would use her physical and literary voice in 1666 to argue with a directness Askew lacks, that ‘Woman’s speaking in the Power of the Lord’ is justified. Fell contests the same misreading of Corinthians 1.14 that Askew did, reminding us that women have speaking parts in the bible – ‘*Elizabeth* spoke with a loud voice [to Mary]. Blessed art thou amongst Women’ – and also of the hypocrisy of male ventriloquism, directing her anger at ‘blind Priests’ who ‘will make a Trade of Women’s Words to get Money by, and take Texts, and preach Sermons upon Women’s Words, and still cry out, Women must not speak’ (Fell 1666). Fell’s defence is more focused on female-voiced narrative than Askew’s but her argument that women do ‘speak in the Power of the Lord’ is exactly the same.

Conclusion

[29] One of the many benefits of the material turn in literary studies is that it has prompted us to interrogate and expand the ‘idea of early modern women’s writing’. This field ‘has never been richer in terms of volume and variety of texts and authors’, argue Patricia Pender and Rosalind Smith in the introduction to a superb collection of essays, *Material Cultures of Early Modern Women’s Writing*, ‘but our assessment of what constitutes a woman writer often remains tied to an identifiable female voice and a more or less original text considered in its first context of production’ (Pender and Smith 2014: 2). Attention to recent developments in book history – especially Matt Cohen’s emphasis on the ‘choral’ elements of book production in *The Networked Wilderness* (2006) – allows them to include ‘literary activities that have hitherto been considered “extra-authorial”, such as women’s patronage, editing and even translation’, and to explore women’s writing as ‘publication events taking place in multiple modes over time’ (Pender and Smith 2014: 1-2, citing Cohen 2009: 6-7). ‘Choral’ is a suggestive word for scholars not uninterested in oral cultures, a group that includes Pender, Smith and some of their contributors. Yet, the primary aim of this collection is to remind us that print-publication is ‘choral’ in the sense of collaborative, ‘involving typesetters, printers, book-sellers, and readers as well as authors’ (Pender and Smith 2014: 2). This is despite the fact that Cohen presents the most far-reaching re-examination of the neglect of orality by book historians to date because he aims to close the gap between the history of the early modern book and Native American systems of

communication, describing publication as ‘choral’ to allow for the voice as well as ‘a series of producers’ (Cohen 2009: 12-19).

[30] Does the neglect of the material voice matter since so many other rich insights are shared? In this essay I have argued that it does, exploring what an emphasis on voice might mean for the way we read Anne Askew’s *Examinations*, noting that she is empowered by her male editor John Bale as a reader and speaker rather than as a writer. I want to conclude, though, by registering why this matters for literary scholarship more generally, recalling Chedgzoy’s recognition that there is a correlation between the textual ‘voices’ of the past and the living, breathing public voices of the (now) twentyfirst-century feminist critics who are doing the work of their recovery; and I would like to suggest one way we might strengthen that.

[31] We know from daily experience that the physical voice is a powerful means to agency and, dare I say it, perhaps more so than the literary voice. This is why the voice matters to a feminist campaigner like Naomi Wolf. Just think about the recent attention she gives to the vocal fry of Californian valley girls: ‘Young women’, she writes, **‘give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female voice’**. Or recall the observations of the sociologist Anne Karpf on the deepening of women’s voices since the 1950s. ‘In pursuit of social and economic equality’, she asks, ‘have women traded in one vocal convention for another? Instead of liberating women, and men, to use the full range of intonation and colour, has the new tyranny of huskiness made women with higher voices feel inadequate?’ (Karpf 2006: 177).

[32] However, rather than focussing on the changing qualities of the gendered voice for the study of earlier texts, or the meanings that a change in tone might produce – the implications of which I consider in my forthcoming book – I propose instead to end with a simple observation that transcends history: that using the voice is in itself empowering. The voice may be ephemeral but it is also curiously material or bodily. It emanates from within us, and it touches those who hear it, evoking feelings, positive and negative, producing actions. Indeed, the voice is, Steven Connor allows, translating Guy Rosolato, “the body’s greatest power of emanation”, enabling even the most dependent person to experience in the act of voicing ‘a sense of sonorous omnipotence, the power to exercise its will through sound’ (Connor 2000: 20).[7] This effect of the voice was understood by Renaissance schoolmasters who thought delivery ‘the chief grace or excellency in Rhetorick’ (Brinsley 1612: 2E2^r); by the puritans of the Reformation who argued that the ‘living voice’ of the preacher was needed to activate ‘the latent force’ of the ‘written word’ of scripture so as ‘to strike home to the heart of the listener’ (Hunt 2010: 27); and by the satirists of the 1590s who often emulated ‘a kind of shouting on paper’ (Raymond 2003: 43-4). It mattered to women too if we learn to listen, as I have been proposing. Just imagine what new histories we might recover if we were to pay more attention to what the physical voice meant to the readers of the Renaissance and even re-animate with our own voices the ‘sonorous’ empowerment of someone like Askew, as Bale intended.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Alison Thorne, who first drew my attention to the rhetorical power of the female literary voice, and to Richard Wistreich and Felicity Laurence, both of them musicologists and professional singers, who helped me to understand the power of the physical voice.

[1] Monica Green's book-length study of the effects of the development of male literate medicine on the oral traditions of female midwifery, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* (2008), is one such exception. [\[back to text\]](#)

[2] Chedgzoy 1996: 4-5, citing from a section headed "From the 29th day of the 10th month, 1657", Bodleian Library S.1. 42. Th., p. 257. [\[back to text\]](#)

[3] These two tracts are titled *The first examinacyon of Anne Askewe lately martyred in Smythfelde, by the Romysh popes upholders, with the elucydacyon of Iohan Bale* (1546), and *The lattre examinacyon of Anne Askewe latelye martyred in Smythfelde, by the wycked Synagoge of Antichrist, with the Elucydacyon of Iohan Bale* (1547). [\[back to text\]](#)

[4] It happens to be a woman's voice, although who it belongs to is not entirely clear. It might belong to Queen Victoria who might be saying something like: 'Greetings... the answer must be... I have never forgotten'. <http://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/collections/2010/09/20/a-regal-recording/>, last accessed 29th August 2015. [\[back to text\]](#)

[5] On the importance of Hecuba as an example for Erasmus in *De Copia*, and in Reinhard Lorich's Latin translation of Aphthonius's *Progymnasmata* as well as in the Tudor schoolroom see Enterline 2012: 124-39. For discussion of the vocal range offered by the female voice see Trill 1996. [\[back to text\]](#)

[6] See Lyne 2008 and Thorne 2008. Both are responding to the pioneering work of the classicist Spentzou 2003, who explains why the fictional women letter-writers of Ovid's *Heroides* should be treated as authors with their own separate 'voice'. See also Kerrigan 1991; Clarke 2008. [\[back to text\]](#)

[7] Citing Guy Rosolato, 'La Voix: Entre corps et langage', *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 38 (1974): 76. [\[back to text\]](#)

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