

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Recasting Recantation in 1540s England: Thomas Becon, Robert Wisdom, and Robert Crowley

Kate Roddy

Volume 39, numéro 1, hiver 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087134ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26543>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Roddy, K. (2016). Recasting Recantation in 1540s England: Thomas Becon, Robert Wisdom, and Robert Crowley. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(1), 63–90. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26543>

Résumé de l'article

La postérité des Acts and Monuments de John Foxe a poussé les spécialistes de la Réforme anglaise à considérer le martyr comme l'ultime acte de résistance et le reniement comme une gênante défaillance de la foi. Toutefois, des travaux plus récents ont souligné le potentiel subversif du reniement feint, en avançant que de telles actions n'étaient pas forcément des gestes de capitulation mais plutôt des manières de se livrer à une discrète évangélisation, voire à une auto-promotion assumée. Cet article développe cette hypothèse en examinant le reniement du réformiste Thomas Becon en 1543, soulignant son utilisation novatrice d'éléments explicitement théâtraux pour transmettre un message mensonger. On remarque cependant que le potentiel d'ironie du reniement aboutit à une incertitude idéologique du récit. Nous avançons qu'une telle instabilité idéologique entraîne de nouveaux commentaires écrits cherchant à interpréter, réduire ou modifier la signification du reniement. Au moyen d'une lecture attentive des textes de contre-reniement importants, comme ceux de Robert Wisdom et de Robert Crowley, nous montrons que la signification d'un reniement continue de se transformer après les faits. Il apparaît aussi que ces textes se caractérisent principalement par leur confusion et leur contradiction inhérentes. Nous en concluons que l'oscillation continue que l'on observe dans l'argumentation de ces textes révèle leur incapacité dernière à régler de façon satisfaisante la question de la signification du reniement et à rétablir une certitude auprès de la communauté.

Recasting Recantation in 1540s England: Thomas Becon, Robert Wisdom, and Robert Crowley

KATE RODDY

Trinity College Dublin

The legacy of John Foxe's Acts and Monuments has urged scholars of the English Reformation to consider martyrdom the ultimate act of resistance, and recantation as an embarrassing lapse of faith. However, more recent criticism has drawn attention to the subversive potential of the false recantation, arguing that such events were not necessarily acts of capitulation but opportunities for covert evangelism and even shameless self-promotion. This article develops the above argument through an examination of the reformist Thomas Becon's recantation of 1543, highlighting its innovative use of explicitly theatrical tropes to convey a message of falsity. However, the recantation's potential for irony is shown to result in a lack of ideological stability in the narrative. Such instability, I argue, leads to further attempts to resolve or alter the meaning of a recantation through textual commentary. By means of close readings of the notable counter-recantation texts of Robert Wisdom and Robert Crowley, I demonstrate that the meaning of a recantation continues to be altered after the fact. Yet the defining quality of these texts is shown to be their confused and self-contradictory nature. I conclude that the continued argumentative oscillation of these texts indicates their ultimate failure to satisfactorily close down meaning and restore certainty to the co-religionist community.

La postérité des Acts and Monuments de John Foxe a poussé les spécialistes de la Réforme anglaise à considérer le martyr comme l'ultime acte de résistance et le reniement comme une gênante défaillance de la foi. Toutefois, des travaux plus récents ont souligné le potentiel subversif du reniement feint, en avançant que de telles actions n'étaient pas forcément des gestes de capitulation mais plutôt des manières de se livrer à une discrète évangélisation, voire à une auto-promotion assumée. Cet article développe cette hypothèse en examinant le reniement du réformiste Thomas Becon en 1543, soulignant son utilisation novatrice d'éléments explicitement théâtraux pour transmettre un message mensonger. On remarque cependant que le potentiel d'ironie du reniement aboutit à une incertitude idéologique du récit. Nous avançons qu'une telle instabilité idéologique entraîne de nouveaux commentaires écrits cherchant à interpréter, réduire ou modifier la signification du reniement. Au moyen d'une lecture attentive des textes de contre-reniement importants, comme ceux de Robert Wisdom et de Robert Crowley, nous montrons que la signification d'un reniement continue de se transformer après les faits. Il apparaît aussi que ces textes se caractérisent principalement par leur confusion et leur contradiction inhérentes. Nous en concluons que l'oscillation continue que l'on observe dans l'argumentation de ces textes révèle leur incapacité dernière à régler de façon satisfaisante la question de la signification du reniement et à rétablir une certitude auprès de la communauté.

Introduction: responses to persecution

English Catholics and Protestants who found themselves at odds with the state due to the vicissitudes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century had few paths open to them when it came to continuing in their beliefs. Open recusancy was likely to lead to imprisonment or even execution at the hands of the religious and secular authorities. Voluntary exile required forsaking business and even familial commitments in England to go in search of religious tolerance abroad, and, as Thomas Freeman comments, was often an impossibility for women, given their lack of autonomy and subjection to spousal pressure.¹

Those nonconformists who were unwilling to either martyr themselves or flee were forced to find ways to elude the religious authorities, or to hide themselves from view. The safest (but most restrictive) way to achieve this was through hypocritical conformity, or “Nicodemism,”² which involved attending and participating in the prescribed religious services to generate an outward appearance of orthodoxy. These reluctant celebrants have left historians with little record of their experiences: as Alexandra Walsham writes, “almost by definition, men and women who yielded to the temptation to comply with the legal requirements are invisible in the reports and presentments made to courts.”³

A more discernible paper trail was left by that group which came to the attention of the religious authorities but still managed to avoid execution. In such cases, individuals were examined upon key tenets of religious belief by their bishop or his appointed subordinates and, if heresy was affirmed, given a choice between persistence in error (and, consequently, death by burning) and the signing—and, in some cases, public rehearsal—of a bill of recantation.⁴

1. Thomas Freeman, “‘The good ministrye of godlye and vertuose women’: The Elizabethan Martyrologists and the Female Supporters of the Marian Martyrs,” *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000): 13.

2. The term “Nicodemism” derived from the biblical story of the Pharisee Nicodemus who came to consult with Jesus secretly by night (John 3). On English responses to the practice see Andrew Pettegree, *Marian Protestantism: Six Studies* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), chapter 4.

3. Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 161.

4. For a detailed description of the procedures of heresy investigation during the period, see John F. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation in the South-East of England, 1520–1558* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983), chapter 2.

These recanters constitute a historically significant contingent. Alec Ryrie writes that, especially in the early years of evangelicalism during Henry's reign, "most reformers were more inclined to dissimulation, recantation and pragmatic compromises than to defiance and martyrdom."⁵ Yet, Susan Wabuda shrewdly observes that "if we were to depend solely upon the accounts of the martyrologists for the behaviour of men and women acting under persecution, we would be left with the clear impression of all the oppressed godly triumphing over their adversaries by means of their unshakeable resolve."⁶ The prime example of this phenomenon is John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*—a work more commonly known, even from the time of its first printing, as *The Book of Martyrs*. Foxe presents elaborate woodcuts depicting figures being burned at the stake, descriptions of the martyrs' stoical behaviour during their executions, and their famous last words (such as Latimer's "we shall this day lyght such a candle by Gods grace in England, as (I trust) shall neuer be put out"), all in an attempt to portray martyrdom as the iconic act of Protestant heroism.⁷

Although Foxe and his literary contemporaries presented martyrdom as the "correct" response to persecution, to abjure publicly was not necessarily to declare oneself traitor to the cause. As will be discussed more fully below, many recantations were manifestly false and the act of abjuring could itself provide a uniquely subversive opportunity to proclaim outlawed doctrines in public. While the subversive potential of the false recantation is by no means a new idea, having been previously articulated by Angela Ranson, Susan Brigden, Alexandra Walsham, and Susan Wabuda among others,⁸ I here build on this analysis by revealing the rhetorical and performative strategies that were used

5. Alec Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8–9.

6. Susan Wabuda, "Equivocation and Recantation during the English Reformation: The 'Subtle Shadows' of Dr Edward Crome," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993): 225.

7. John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO* (Sheffield, 2011), accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.johnfoxe.org>, 1570 edition, book 11, 1976. Unless otherwise stated, all further references to Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* pertain to the TAMO editions.

8. Angela Ranson, "Sincere Lies and Creative Truth: Recantation Strategies during the English Reformation," *Journal of History and Cultures* 1 (2012): 1–18; Susan Brigden, *London and Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 310–50; Alexandra Walsham, "Preaching Without Speaking: Script, Print and Religious Dissent," in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700*, ed. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211–34; Wabuda, "Equivocation and Recantation."

to unsettle the official meaning of abjuration. My analysis of Thomas Becon's 1543 recantation focuses on his use of explicitly theatrical tropes to convey this message of falsity, a tactic my conclusions will show to have deeply troubling ideological implications.

While recanters such as Becon struggle to disrupt the meaning of their abjuration even as it is in progress, those who pick up after such an event frequently continue to alter the recantation's meaning, composing lengthy responses to explain away the act of abjuration, or mould it into something more palatable. I have termed these kinds of texts "counter-recantations," documents that exist to repair the perceived public relations damage of an abjuration and reinforce challenged doctrines. The first of these is by Becon's colleague Robert Wisdom, apologizing for his own lapse in the face of adversity; the second by Robert Crowley, admonishing the former Bishop of Salisbury, Nicholas Shaxton, for his public falling away from reformism.

My thesis is that recantations are inherently unstable narratives that can never be fully reconciled or contained. As my analysis of Becon's recantation will show, these texts are volatile composites of orthodox and heterodox messages. While the dramatic (and, indeed, metadramatic) qualities of Becon's recantation highlight the text's potential for subversion and irony, its ultimate meaning cannot be satisfactorily determined. The unsettling ambiguity of a recantation therefore sets in motion a lurching and erratic dialogue among co-religionists, who seek by turns to justify, excuse, or reinterpret the original text. As the case studies of Wisdom's and Crowley's counter-recantations attest, an abjuration generates a chain of responses that only ends when momentum is exhausted and the recanters themselves are conveniently side-lined or forgotten.

Before considering the individual works pertaining to late-Henrician recantations, a brief overview of the dramatis personae of this study is needed. Thomas Becon (ca. 1512/13–1567) was a Church of England clergyman, theologian, and controversialist writer.⁹ After his graduation from Cambridge in the early 1530s, Becon spent time as a tutor and was ordained a priest.¹⁰ He first rose to notoriety in February 1540–41 when he was examined by Edmund

9. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Thomas Becon and the Reformation of the Church of England* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 1.

10. Seymour Baker House, "Becon, Thomas," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edition (Oct 2009), accessed February 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1918>.

Bonner, Bishop of London, for heretical content in his sermons preached in the Norwich diocese. He was forced to recant, and thereafter retired to Kent, where he began a prolific campaign of writing—composing more than a dozen works. These were primarily religious treatises, but many also contained a strong social message against the evils of poverty and war. As we will see, these writings were at the centre of the furor surrounding Becon's second recantation of 1543.

Robert Wisdom (d. 1568) was a Church of England clergyman, preacher, and poet. His precise religious background and training are unknown, although in 1537 he is described by John Longland, Bishop of Lincoln, as a former religious (i.e., one previously belonging to a Catholic order).¹¹ As was the case with his friend Becon, Wisdom's presence in historical record is largely a result of his legal difficulties with the Henrician bishops: he was twice accused of preaching in violation of the Act of Six Articles and forced to publicly recant: first in July 1541, and once again in 1543.¹²

Robert Crowley (1517/19–1588) was a Church of England clergyman, printer, poet, and author of controversialist works. Born in Gloucestershire around 1517, he was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford in the 1530s, where he underwent a religious conversion to Protestantism.¹³ Crowley later moved to London, and by 1546 was working as an author and printer. In 1550, he published the first complete version of Langland's medieval dream-vision, *Piers Plowman*.¹⁴ Crowley's own works from this period reflect a keen social conscience, criticizing not only religious error but greed, disorder, and the lack of provision for the poor. The most famous of these remains *Philargyrie of Greate Britayne* (1551), which daringly criticized the Henrician state's disposal of money from the dissolution of the monasteries.

The text by Crowley considered in this article is addressed to Nicholas Shaxton (ca. 1485–1556), Bishop of Salisbury from 1535 to 1539. Shaxton showed reformist sympathies in the early part of his career, and as a result of his

11. Alec Ryrie, "Wisdom, Robert," *ODNB*, online edition (Jan 2008), accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29785>.

12. Ryrie, "Wisdom, Robert."

13. J. W. Martin, *Religious Radicals in Tudor England* (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1989), 149. See also Basil Morgan, "Crowley, Robert," *ODNB*, online edition (Jan 2008), accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6831>.

14. William Langland, *The vision of Pierce Plowman now fyrste imprinted by Roberte Crowley* (London: Crowley, 1550), STC 19906.

decision to marry, he was forced to resign his see in the aftermath of the Act of Six Articles.¹⁵ A further crisis came in 1546: Shaxton was arrested following his delivery of a sermon denying the doctrine of transubstantiation.¹⁶ He recanted, apparently genuinely, and continued thereafter to uphold Catholic doctrine. The dismaying effect which this *volte-face* had on his former co-religionists will be discussed below.

The three texts considered are united not only by the relative obscurity of their writers, but by the event that inspired them. Becon, Wisdom, and Crowley's subject, Shaxton, all fell afoul of the same law: the 1539 Act Abolishing Diversity in Opinions, known then and since as the Act of Six Articles.¹⁷ Its six central tenets became the baseline of religious orthodoxy in the period and were used in the examinations of alleged heretics.¹⁸ The recantations discussed below are all designed to echo the act's phrasing, signalling the prodigal's return to obedience and orthodoxy by means of a highly public, catechismic display. Yet, as we will see, the Henrician bishops' process of spiritual rehabilitation had some unintended side-effects.

Recantations and subversion

Disparaging a doctrine necessarily involves ensuring that one's audience is familiar with the original work being denounced. This premise is illustrated by the fact that the only extant copy of Myles Hogarde's polemical dream-vision poem *The Abuse of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar* (ca. 1547) is preserved within Crowley's printed diatribe against the same.¹⁹ Likewise, the reading of a bill of recantation often required not only that the penitents should publicly affirm official doctrine, but that they should also publicly reiterate the crimes that

15. Susan Wabuda, "Shaxton, Nicholas," *ODNB*, online edition (May 2009), accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25276>.

16. Wabuda, "Shaxton, Nicholas."

17. 31 Henry VIII c. 14.

18. For details on the articles' contents, see Alec Ryrie, "The Act of Six Articles," commentary on book 8, in Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*.

19. Robert Crowley, *The confutation of the mishapen aunswer to the misnamed, wicked ballade, called the abuse of ye blessed sacrame[n]t of the aultare wherin, thou haste (gentele reader) the ryghte vnderstandynge of al the places of scripture that Myles Hoggard, (wyth his learned counsail) hath wrested to make for the transubstantiation of the bread and wyne* (London: Day and Seres, 1548), STC 6082.

brought them to Paul's Cross in the first place. Hence, as Alexandra Walsham writes, "such works became repositories of heresy, sources of the very poisons they were intended to neutralise."²⁰

That recantation documents are made to be self-effacing in tone suggests that the religious authorities were aware of the need to make the heretics and their doctrines appear inglorious. Robert Singleton plays down the seriousness and zeal of his own former opinion by stating in his abjuration: "I am an unlearned fantasty call foole."²¹ Similarly, Robert Barnes claims: "I [...] overshott my self and [have] beyn deceived by trustyng to moche to myne owne heddy Sentence."²² The suggestion is that these are doctrines that no right-thinking person should take seriously; the eccentric products of overheated brains.

It remains difficult to surmise how much contribution the recanters themselves made to the composition of the documents, and to what degree they were ghost-written by the religious authorities. The short recantation of William Jerome, for instance, lays out the articles that he retracts in a very brief, legalistic fashion (suggesting, perhaps, the use of a template) and ends with a suspiciously obsequious paean to the mercy and goodness of his captors: "the Kings gr[aces] honourable counsell and lerned clergy."²³ Anne Askew claims that she had absolutely no input into the drafting of the recantation document to which she was obliged to set her hand, imputing its entire fabrication to Bishop Bonner: "Then my lorde went awaye, and sayd, he wolde entytle sumwhat of my meanyng. And so he writte a great circumstance. But what it was, I have not all in memorye. For he wold not suffre me to have the coppie therof."²⁴ However, it is worth noting that those who thus denied involvement

20. Walsham, "Preaching Without Speaking," 233–34.

21. The Bonner Register, Diocese of London 1539–59, fol. 45r. This document (formerly Guildhall MS 9531/12) is now held in the London Metropolitan Archives as DL/A/A/006/MS09531/012/001. All references to the Bonner Register in this article are taken from microfilm facsimiles (Salt Lake City Genealogical Society microfilms #2298990-2298991).

22. Bonner Register, 38r.

23. Chapter House Papers, Rolls House, 1st Series, No. 1268, in *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. Josiah Pratt, 8 vols, 4th edition (London: Seeleys, 1899), vol. 5, appendix XII. This manuscript has been relocated to the National Archives, Kew as SP 6/9/139 ("Folio 139: Recantation sermon by [? Robert Barnes], [?William Jerome]").

24. Anne Askew, *The Examinations of Anne Askew*, ed. Elaine B. Beilin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 58.

in the composition of their own recantation bills may have been motivated to do so out of shame or regret. There is evidence to suggest that the most popular preachers were indeed required to author their own recantations: John Strype writes of Thomas Cranmer's attempt to "pen [his recantation] so favourably and dextrously for himself, that he might evade both the Danger from the State, and the Danger of his Conscience too."²⁵ Clearly, the more high-profile the individual, the more significant the victory the recantation represented (and the more well attended it was likely to be). Perhaps there was even an element of *schadenfreude*: forcing the more vocal agitators to compose their own doctrinal retractions must have been especially gratifying to the traditionalist authorities.

Although the exact circumstances under which Becon's July 1543 recantation was composed remain unknown, his status as a popular preacher makes it plausible that he himself served as author. We may consider the tone and content of the piece as further (internal) evidence: radically different from the terse efforts of some of his co-religionists, Becon's recantation is an expansive affair which lacks the legalistic phrasing typical of the ghost-written recantations.²⁶ Becon begins by relating the story of how he endeavoured to escape the authorities' notice after a former recantation by creating a second persona. He tells the spectators that, having fled the environs of Norfolk and Suffolk (where he had been ordained), he then took on the *nom de guerre* Theodore Basile in order to covertly continue his promotion of reformist doctrine:

I chaunged my dwellinge, and leavinge that Country repayred unto kent where I have lurked ever syns. I chaunged myne apparell and showyd myne self lyke a layman. I chaunged also my name and callid my self Theodore basile. I chaunged the forme of teachinge the people from preachinge unto wrytynge. Onely this I have not chaunged, allwayes contynewed lyke myself that ys to say as I have under the name Thomas becon preest preached untruylye so have I under the name of Theodore Basile wrytten untruylye [...]²⁷

25. John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials Relating Chiefly to Religion* (London: Wyat, 1721), 3.30, 232.

26. The private recantations set out points of doctrine as "articles" or "items" and recanters refer to themselves contractually as "I the afore-named." See Josiah Pratt, *Appendices to Acts and Monuments*, in Pratt, ed., vol. 1 (Geoffrey Lome); vol. 2 (Thomas Phillip); vol. 6 (Thomas Gerrard).

27. Bonner Register, 44r–v.

In telling his audience that he cunningly changed his name and appearance in order to escape detection while continuing in the same essential character, Becon suggests the *modus operandi* of the stage Vice, a character that would have been familiar to his Tudor audience. Part villain, part comedian, the Vice drove the homiletic plot of the morality play and interlude, using disguise and dissimulation to mislead the weak human protagonist.²⁸ William Tyndale had already unlocked the polemical potential of this figure in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1528) by comparing the Antichrist's protean tricks to those of the Vice: "but his nature is [...] to go out of the playe for a season and to disguise hymselfe and then to come in agayn with a new name and a new rayme[n]t."²⁹ In admitting to adopting these tricks of the Vice's trade, Becon immediately alerts his audience to the subversive intent of his speech, intimating that his penitent wretch character may be "put on" or theatrically constructed for the occasion, rather than a genuine reflection of his true views or personality.

Although Becon characterizes himself throughout the recantation as humble and remorseful, and purports to be giving evidence of his contrition by disparaging the doctrines enshrined in his former publications, his use of theatrical tropes indicates that he is in fact calling attention to himself rather than offering a shame-faced apology. In Becon's mouth, even the recanter's conventional disclaimer that he put too much trust in his own overweening intellect is oddly self-aggrandizing:

First my new counterfaite name Theodore Basile whiche ys as muche to say, as a kynge gyven of godd. ys yt not a proude name to be of myne own chosynge. ye maye easely judge whither herein I lye of my selfe to please men [...] ye shall fynde in dyverse p[a]rties of my bookes greeke woordes made Englyshe as Encomion for a praise mnemosinon for a Remembraunce and suche other monstrouse wordes for the Reader to wonder at, and wrytten onely by me, for vayne glorye to doo [sic] the

28. Stage vices (later, a lead actor labelled "the Vice") were the chief villains and plot motivators of the Tudor morality play and interlude. On the Vice's conventional disguise consisting of a false name and a change of clothing see Peter Hyland, *Disguise on the Early Modern Stage* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 118–21.

29. William Tyndale, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (London: Day, 1547), STC 24457, sigs. A4r–v.

Reader understande that I were learned in the greeke tonge, wherein I confesse playnely I am not learned at all.³⁰

While other recanters content themselves with a one-sentence declaration acknowledging that they were misled by their own learning, Becon gives a whole paragraph by dwelling on two peculiar details which he offers as evidence of his intellectual folly: that he took on a proud name and that he pretended knowledge of ancient Greek to impress his readers. Derrick Sherwin Bailey assumes that such sentences, which include references to Becon's "pride and vainglory," were added to the recantation at the behest of the religious authorities, "selected simply with the object of discrediting him, and so weakening the influence which he wielded through [his] writings."³¹ However, the rhetoric of the document itself suggests that he included them on his own initiative: that he lingers over such trivial misdemeanours demonstrates that Becon enjoys publicizing his indiscretions and playing to a crowd. The confession of how he tried to flee detection and adopted disguises also alerts the audience to his mendacious nature, encouraging them to doubt the truthfulness of the very recantation he is now compelled to present.

The inclusion of rhetorical pronouncements aimed at a listening audience ("ys yt not a proude name to be of myne owne chosynge[?]") indicates that he conceives of the recantation not simply as a document to be read over but as a monologue to be performed. He takes up a position much like that of the lead actor, repeatedly appealing to his spectators to agree with him as he lists the enormities of his former conduct:

Canne I say anny more trowe yee? dyd evyr man say of hys owne booke that yt contayneth as moche of chryste in a few lynes as the Byble and doctors teache of chryste in manye? dyd evyr man gyve suche a tyle to his owne booke, to call yt the treasure house of christen knowledge? dothe not this place suffice to prove my pryde?³²

30. Bonner Register, 44v.

31. Bailey, *Thomas Becon*, 36.

32. Bonner Register, 44v.

He also casts his co-religionist and fellow recanter Robert Wisdom in a supporting role (undoubtedly much to the latter's chagrin given that, as we shall see, Wisdom's recantation was a source of great embarrassment to him). The internal stage directions of the text indicate that on the day that their recantations were read, Becon gestured or turned to Wisdom as he spoke:

But good Audyence [...] I might saye somewhat to maister Wysedome here presente how moche was he deceaved or howe moche went he aboute to deceave the good people, to call me opynly in his sermon made at Aldermarye in Lente last paste The man of godd [...]. I mervaile maister Wysedom abhorred nott this Spyryte of pryde to make my wrytinge equall with the sacred bible and goddis worde.³³

Here Becon once again self-aggrandizes as he purports to debase himself, this time defaming Wisdom as he does so. He ironically chastises his associate for deceitfully calling him “the man of godd” and for praising one of his books—thereby ensuring that the audience knows about his writerly reputation in reformist circles.

When Becon moves on to denounce the works of literature published under this pen name, he not only lists their titles but helpfully gives detailed abstracts of heresies which each text contains:

[...] in my booke of pollycye of warre I saye, that as they p[er]secuted the prophetes and true preachers of goddis woorde, evyn soo doo they nowe [...] In my booke of a Chrystmasse bankett I say the gyftes of grace cannot be ydle. [...] In the preface of my booke whiche I call mooste arrogantelye the Golden booke of ch[ri]styn matrymony I wryte in dysprase of contynencye theese woordes folowinge [...].³⁴

He defends his decision to give such full descriptions of the erroneous doctrines contained within these books with the claim that he only goes into such detail so that men will not accuse him of having recanted untruly, and without full acknowledgement of his former iniquity:

33. Bonner Register, 44v.

34. Bonner Register, 44v–45r.

And to avoyde all occation of slaunder, that I shulde for feare be seen to lye of my self, or rather doo thuse of a polycie to escape, and so to save my self, then upon true knowledge of myne owne noughtynes, for the relief of other that hath fallen by myne occasion, I shall declare unto you some specyalties both of myne owne preachinge whiche a greate numbere of Norff and Suff knowe, and also untrue wrytinge whiche my bookes doo testyfie.³⁵

The denunciations of the doctrines enshrined in his now-prohibited texts as “naughty” are obviously necessary within the context of the recantation in order to satisfy his watching persecutors, but they may also serve a secondary purpose according to the principles of negative suggestion, as nothing allures potential readers more than being told something is too shocking or scandalous for them to read. As he cuts a copy of each book to pieces he states “I wysshe here all my bookes dystroyed accordynge to the kynges maiestyes proclamations as theese be here destroyed with myne owne handes,”³⁶ thus alerting the audience to the fact that other copies of his works are still in circulation.

To summarize, we might comment that Becon’s approach to the recantation is one of self-conscious theatricality. He adopts a vocative, histrionic tone when addressing the audience, behaving like a comic lead actor in over-emphasizing the ridiculous aspects of his own behaviour and involving his fellow recanter as a secondary character in the sketch. In adopting this manner, he alerts his audience to the insincerity of his words and the staginess of the proceedings—effectively announcing that he is merely playing a part in an interlude being stage-managed by the traditionalist authorities. Having made the falseness of the sentiments he is compelled to espouse clear, Becon is free to publicize both himself and his writings, supplying his audience with a complete bibliography of his works and introducing them to reformist doctrines under the pretence of denouncing them. For someone as brash and pragmatic as Becon, one might even comment that a recantation could become an ideal opportunity for furthering the cause: if this example is representative, recanters were free to go into detail about their doctrines before a large audience, under the very noses of their opponents.

35. Bonner Register, 44v.

36. Bonner Register, 45r.

However, if we adopt this reading of the 1543 recantation as a subversive performance, it must be observed that this was a bold and risky strategy on Becon's part. Recanters had to satisfy the authorities that they were genuine, and that their abjurations contained a clear refutation of all points of heretical doctrine which had been identified during the individual's examinations. Unsatisfactory recanters were made to repeat the exercise: thus the celebrated reformist preacher Edward Crome found himself called to Paul's Cross twice in 1546, the privy council finding fault with his initial declaration on May 9 and accusing him of dissimulation.³⁷ On June 27 he was made to confess publicly: "I dyd use collusion and colo[ur] of my hole proceding concernynge the declaration of the saide Articles whereby I mighte appeare boothe to mantayne myne owne former evyll opynyon and never the lesse to satsysfie my promysse in setting foorth of Thartycles aforesaide."³⁸

A further risk was that of a false recantation being received at face value. In this respect multiple recanters like Becon and Crome (who became well known for his "canting, recanting, decanting, or rather double canting")³⁹ had an advantage: their reputation for being made to recant meant that an audience was more likely to take these individuals' abjurations with a pinch of salt. Those who lacked this reputation for expediency were more likely to be taken seriously. To illustrate this principle Bailey sets up a contrast between Becon and the unassuming Wisdom (who lacked his co-religionist's reputation for propagandizing), asserting that while the former's recantation provoked no denunciations from within the Protestant community because it was perceived as "deliberately false," Wisdom's was deemed "an act of apostasy," and therefore necessitated his composition of the apology, *Revocaton*.⁴⁰

Yet even the stagiest and most brazen false recantations retain the possibility of audience misapprehension. This is an inevitable consequence of the use of irony as a form of protest. Dilwyn Knox affirms that medieval and Renaissance scholars of rhetoric recognized that irony was often "concealed

37. Wabuda, "Equivocation and Recantation," 235.

38. Bonner Register, 109v.

39. "Otwell Johnson, a merchant of London, to his brother John Johnson of the staple at Calais; on merchandise and news," in *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, ed. Henry Ellis (London: Bentley, 1827; repr. 1969), 2:176.

40. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, "Robert Wisdom under Persecution, 1541–1543," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 2 (1951): 187–88.

or untruthful” as it shared with allegory the quality of *obscuritas*, or opacity;⁴¹ furthermore, a prominent use of irony was recognized to be that of derision, or “covert mockery.”⁴² The question of how to uncover ironic intent was a vexed one: as irony has no distinct punctuation, and can be sustained over short or long passages, and through a variety of other figures, it is often impossible to identify its use in written texts, except by means of biographical or contextual knowledge. In performance, ironic intent may be clarified by intonation (rhetorical scholars prescribed an “emphatic,” “bitter,” or “caustic” tone), gesture, and facial expression.⁴³ Yet such signals are by no means foolproof: as Annie Gérin observes, irony (whether visual or verbal) is highly dependent on an audience’s ability and willingness to “see” the message, and “certain codes at play in the work might be meaningful only for a limited group.”⁴⁴ To “see” Becon’s true message (that he is an unrepentant reformist preacher covertly publicizing the doctrines he has been called upon to disparage), the Paul’s Cross audience must catch his use of ironic tone, emphasis, and gesture, and also have prior knowledge of the tropes of the morality play.

This dependency upon audience engagement with sub- and extra-textual factors underlines the recantation’s inherent instability as a vehicle for any one clear religious message. The ambiguity Becon exploits through his dextrous penning and performance of the recantation cuts both ways: it enables his co-religionists to uncover a message of covert resistance; but to the unwitting or unsympathetic spectator it merely promotes traditional doctrine. It is this inherent instability of meaning that drives the recanter and his or her co-religionists towards further compositions in the aftermath of the event. Counter-recantations are composed with the intention of setting the record straight with regards to an abjuration’s cause and true significance. However, as close analysis of Wisdom’s and Crowley’s texts will show, such narrative closure proves ultimately elusive.

41. Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1989), 44.

42. Knox, 48.

43. Knox, 58–68.

44. Annie Gérin, “A Second Look at Laughter: Humor in the Visual Arts.” *Humor* 26.1 (2003): 162.

Counter recantations

Robert Wisdom's *A Revocatyon of that shamfull byll that Winchestre devised and wisdom read* (ca. 1544) is a work that expresses its author's anguished awareness of the harm that might be caused to the religious community as a result of his abjuration.⁴⁵ The text shows Wisdom engaged in a strenuous attempt to explain and justify his own collapse in the face of persecution. This entails a number of different argumentative strategies, and among the chief of these is deflection: throughout *Revocatyon* Wisdom insists that it is the agency of others that brings about his troubles. The ringleaders of this persecution are the bishops, who, as Wisdom (somewhat self-aggrandizingly) alleges, envy the popularity of his sermons and fear his growing influence as a preacher:

Wherefore the byshoppe enviynge that I was in such estimation, and that so greate resorte was daylie vnto my preachynge, considering also that yf I were not defated, but still suffred to preach, w[i]thin shorte tyme a greate deale of their trumpery shulde be muche less sett by, like wise and politique felows thei caste their old and accustomed wiles and sent their [...] adherents to my preachinge that yf yt were possible thei myght catch some worde of my mouth to accuse me of.⁴⁶

These *agents provocateurs* take the form first of a neighbour who comes to Wisdom “bearinge a fair countenance and pretended frendshipe”⁴⁷ to encourage him to preach at a place where “thei had prepared the byshoppe of Londons catchpole to attache me.”⁴⁸ When this attempt fails, along with several similar endeavours, Wisdom is eventually arrested on the testimony of two traditionalist priests: “a grett teller of Rome” and “an extreme enymie of the gospell of christ,”⁴⁹ who prepare articles against him from their attendance at a 1541 sermon. Wisdom therefore begins his narrative by casting himself as an almost

45. Robert Wisdom, *A Revocatyon of that shamfull byll that Winchestre devised and wisdom read at Paules Crosse in london on the relique Sunday the xiiij day of Juli. Anno d[o]m 1543*, Emmanuel College MS 261, fols. 88–130.

46. Wisdom, 91r–v.

47. Wisdom, 92r.

48. Wisdom, 92v.

49. Wisdom, 92v.

Christ-like figure by stressing that he was the innocent victim of the schemes and betrayals of a variety of Judases.

His description of the ensuing examinations under Edmund Bonner and, latterly, Stephen Gardiner further vilifies the bishops by alleging their use of deeply manipulative interrogation techniques. Wisdom depicts Bonner performing his own “good cop, bad cop” routine to attempt to procure a confession, beginning with threats and then resorting to temptation and bargaining:

To be breafe he laboured very sore to get wrytinge of myne own hande [...] threninge me very sore that I shulde smarte for yt, and be made an ensample unto all other. But when he sawe that he nothinge prevayled that waye, so torned him to flaterye and faire promises, w[i]th grett attestayon by god and as he was [a] trew preste, he entended nothinge so muche as the glorie of god, and rather my welth than hinderament and that I shuld finde him as gentill and as good unto me, as he wold be to his own sowle.⁵⁰

There is the familiar suggestion of Satanic temptation invested in the words “flaterye and faire promises” and Bonner’s oath “as he was [a] trew preste” is made to seem either deliberately or ironically equivocal as a qualifier for the succeeding promises. The impression of diabolical temptation arises again when Wisdom describes the pressure put on him by the urgings of a friend and a relative:

Myne uncle then and Whitchurch also allured w[i]th his faire words & promises (for who ys yt that Byshopps can not begule w[i]th their flaterys) came unto me, and counseled me to folowe the Byshopps mynde [...] saide thei, you are of a weake co[m]plexion and lacke strenght to abyde the punishment of enp[ri]sonment, and know you that the byshope will co[m]mytt you to p[ri]son wch if he do, you can not live a sevinnight. And in case ye coulde abyde all the daunger of p[ri]son, yet the ende wil be you shall eyther beare a fagott and so ronne into p[er]petuall infamy, or els be brent.⁵¹

50. Wisdom, 92v.

51. Wisdom, 93r.

Wisdom characterizes his uncle and Whitchurch as men who have been brain-washed by Bonner's insidious counsel: "for who ys yt that Bysshopps can not begule[?]." Much as a demon allures by appearing in the guise of a familiar friend, Bonner puts pressure on Wisdom by turning the well-meaning visitors into unwitting proxies. Demonic counsel is also suggested by the fact that the words are calculated to provoke Wisdom to despair: his choices are starkly outlined as "p[er]petuall infamy" and death by burning. The speakers intimidate the protagonist by laying stress on the power of malignant forces over the weak fleshly body: "you are of a weake co[m]plexion and lacke strenght to abyde the punishment."

Although the wording of Wisdom's title (*A Revocatyon of that shamfull byll [...]*) leads the reader to expect that the work will be a retraction and an apology, its main preoccupation is with the conduct of persons other than Wisdom, the alleged penitent. Wisdom dwells on the betrayals of acquaintances, enemies, and counsellors, seemingly much more interested in depicting the wrongs done to him than in expressing contrition for his decision to abjure. In direct addresses to the reader he also attempts to generalize his experience, submerging it within the context of the troubles of the entire movement in order to solicit empathy, and, perhaps, to discourage criticism of his abjuration by reminding members of the reformist community that this is an ordeal which they too may one day suffer at the hands of their common enemy: "Here hast thou chr[ist] en reader the very beginninge and grounde of all my troble wherin thou maiste see a litill of their goodnesse. Their care nethor for periury nor for mischefe, so their maye defame the trewth and put preachers to silence."⁵² Within the same paragraph he goes on to describe the conspiracy enacted between Bonner and Gardiner which allowed them to persecute him without accepting blame ("to wash [their] hands as clean as Pilate did"), summarizing:

But the trouthe is this, that their hypocrisie is all one [...] bringing yt to this pointe that either I muste recante; or els stande at their grace w[hich] is as good to the preachers of gods trewth as ys the grace of the bochers of Estscheape to the poor lambe browghte into their markett.⁵³

52. Wisdom, 93r.

53. Wisdom, 93r–v.

There is no positive emphasis on martyrdom here, none of the Foxean bluster that holds that defiance can be a virtuous, heroic, and ultimately empowering act. In describing the alternative to abjuration, Wisdom gives the reader only the image of the senseless slaughter of helpless innocents. Not only was his recantation the ultimate result of the machinations of ill-intentioned others, but it would have served no good if he had instead chosen defiance.

The introductory passage to *Revocatyon* ends with another subtle denial of the community's right to judge him, as Wisdom acknowledges his frailty but affirms that he seeks forgiveness only from God. The language is at once legalistic and incantatory, recalling both the phrasing of an abjuration oath and of a prayer:

Yet the Lorde knoweth howe to make a man stronge after his weaknes,
and so rayse him ageine after his fall. Wherefore I whollie puttinge my selfe
unto the mercy of god promysed in his onlie beloved Jesu Christe do with
all my harte repent that my slander and as here folowith revoke yt.⁵⁴

Here Wisdom attempts to transform the document from a press release into a private meditation. He reminds his reformist reader that what is really at stake in the case of a recantation is not the reputation of the movement, but the eternal fate of an individual soul.

The fact that Wisdom's counter-recantation was never printed during his lifetime raises further questions concerning its author's motivations and the work's purpose. *Revocatyon* may be considered an oddity: a public defence that never actually entered the public realm. Its content is similarly contradictory, since it is a narrative at once apologetic and defiant, contrite and yet continually affirming that the fault lies elsewhere; it is seemingly addressed to an audience of peers and yet categorically states that the matter of recantation is one that concerns only the errant individual and his maker.

The reasons for its remaining in manuscript are ambiguous. As Pratt observes,⁵⁵ *Revocatyon* seems to have been prepared for publication: the manuscript displays the meticulous organization of an advanced draft and is copied in a fair hand, with marginal annotations to announce the subject matter of

54. Wisdom, 93v.

55. Pratt, Appendices to *Acts and Monuments*, 22.

each section. Furthermore, it seems to have enjoyed prior circulation among Wisdom's friends, as Becon's narrators make explicit reference to *Revocatyon* in *Jewel of Ioye* (ca. 1550), praising it as a godly and learned disquisition, and lamenting that it was "not pri[n]ted nor comunely published abroad."⁵⁶

Bailey ventures the supposition that Wisdom's written apology was the condition for his re-admission into the fold following his embarrassing public lapse, and only ever intended for the approval of an intimate circle of fellow believers.⁵⁷ However, more recent scholarship presents an alternative suggestion by demonstrating the editorial involvement of John Foxe and his assistants in annotating and preparing for publication a number of the documents contained within the same manuscript collection that houses *Revocatyon*.⁵⁸ It is therefore possible that *Revocatyon* was prepared as a fair copy because it was intended to be part of the revised and expanded 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments*.⁵⁹ That *Revocatyon* never made it into the great martyrology may be a simple matter of available space and paper,⁶⁰ or it may be a significant editorial decision on Foxe's part. As Evenden and Freeman write, Foxe had been stung by his opponents' criticism of the 1563 first edition as untruthful and revealing of reformist hypocrisies, and so when it came time to compile the second edition "Foxe was fiercely determined that nothing remain in his work which would allow his Catholic adversaries the slightest opportunity to discredit any part of it."⁶¹ This editing process, as Freeman observes, was both meticulous and ideologically conformist in nature:

56. Becon, *Jewel of Ioye*, sigs. C7r–v.

57. Bailey, "Robert Wisdom," 187.

58. Emmanuel College MSS 260–62, often referred to as "The Letters of the Martyrs."

59. See John N. King, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61–64; Elizabeth Evenden and Thomas S. Freeman, "John Foxe, John Day and the Printing of the 'Book of Martyrs,'" in *Lives in Print: Biography and the Book Trade from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, ed. Robin Meyers, Michael Harris, and Giles Mandelbrote (New Castle, DE and London: Oak Knoll and British Library, 2002), 23–54. While highlighting indications of Foxe's involvement with a number of documents contained within "The Letters of the Martyrs," none of the above scholars comment on the provenance of *Revocatyon*.

60. On Foxe's problems with paper supply for the 1570 edition, see Evenden and Freeman, 36–37.

61. Evenden and Freeman, 40.

Foxe and his fellow martyrologist, Henry Bull, exercised an editorial control over the letters of the martyrs so thorough that it stopped just short of being obsessive. Passages, indeed whole paragraphs, were added or deleted from the original texts; references to backsliding, Nicodemism, the freewillers and even the personal lives of the martyrs were ruthlessly expunged as the letters were printed.⁶²

In this light, it is easy to conjecture as to why *Revocatyon* did not make the final cut: Wisdom's detailed account of the circumstances and reasoning behind his abjuration could easily fuel Catholic criticism of early Protestants as cowardly backsliders. Foxe's rejection of Wisdom's text therefore highlights its failure in its mission to close down the meaning of the recantation and counter the deleterious effects the event had on the co-religionist community.

Despite *Revocatyon's* ultimate lack of success, Wisdom at least had the good grace to express regret for his lapse—but what were the persecuted to do when faced with a truly unrepentant repenter? In cases where the recantation was apparently genuine it was up to a member of the forsaken community to posit a public response to the act of apostasy. Perhaps the most high-profile turncoat was Nicholas Shaxton, Bishop of Salisbury, who was made to recant by the Henrician authorities in 1546 for denying the doctrine of transubstantiation.⁶³ Despite the more favourable climate for reformists which soon prevailed in Edward's reign, Shaxton never subsequently relapsed. As Wabuda writes: "he never retracted this recantation, he never apologized to his former allies, he was not reconciled with his wife, and he remained conservative in opinion for the rest of his life."⁶⁴ The responses of his former co-religionists show that his recantation was seen as a catastrophic betrayal. When, in 1546, Shaxton was sent to counsel Anne Askew to recant as he himself had done, her scathing reply was "that it had bene good for hym, never to have bene borne."⁶⁵ John Bale's response to the episode shows that he too regarded the former bishop as a traitor:

62. Thomas S. Freeman, "Publish and Perish: The Scribal Culture of the Marian Martyrs," in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700*, ed. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 235–54, 253.

63. Wabuda, "Shaxton, Nicholas."

64. Wabuda, "Shaxton, Nicholas."

65. Askew, 119.

O Shaxton [...] what devyll bywytted the to playe thys most blasphemouse part? as to become of a faythfull teacher, a temptynge sprete [sic]? Was it not ynough, that thu and soch as thu art, had forsaken your lorde God and troden hys vertyte most unreverentlye undre your fete, but with soch feates (as thys is) thu must procure the a more deper, or double dampnacyon?⁶⁶

Two years after Shaxton's fall from reformism, Crowley was to give the fullest response by reprinting the original recantation along with a substantial refutation of the traditionalist doctrines which it articulated.⁶⁷ In the introduction to the work, Crowley's address is condescendingly amiable rather than overtly hostile: "to the late bishop of Salisburie, Nicolas Shaxton, his well willer and faithful friend in Christ, Robert Crowley wysmeth eternall health thorowe Christe our savioure."⁶⁸ He promises that he has composed the work without any animosity:

Not for any displeasure that I had conceyued towards you, or anye other, by whose meanes you shoulde be willed or (as it maye be thought) required to set them abroad to the world: but onely for the loue I beare to Christes trueth, whyche I woulde not [...] suffer to be hindered by anye so blasphemouse doctrine of Antichristes schole, as are these Articles of yours.⁶⁹

Yet as he continues, his words begin to convey a distinct edge of displeasure towards Shaxton:

I call them [the doctrines] yours, bycause you subscribe to them, and set the[m] forthe vnder your name. But if I were required to say my co[n]science: I coulde not deny but I thinke them to be Wynchesters workemanshypp, because they agre so well wyth hys doctrine, & that

66. John Bale, "Elucydacyon of Johan Bale," in Askew, 120–21.

67. Robert Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles, wherunto Nicolas Shaxton late bishop of Saliburye subscribed and caused to be set forth in print in the yere of our Lorde .M.C.xlvi. when he recanted in Smithfælde at London at the burning of mestres Anne Askue [...]* (London: Day, 1548), STC 6083.

68. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A2r.

69. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A2r.

chiefely in the deuyllishe detection of hys maister the deuylls sophistry,
 whych he set abroud shortly after these Articles of yours.⁷⁰

Two aspects of this comment make it overtly malicious: firstly, the expression of doubt that Shaxton actually came up with the doctrines he has since continued to profess, since, in Crowley's view, they are clearly of a piece with Bishop of Winchester Stephen Gardiner's own contemporary work, *Declaration of the Deuils sophistrie* (1546). Worse than a genuine traditionalist, Shaxton is effectively accused of being one who will mindlessly parrot the orthodoxies of his persecutor in order to save his own life. This accusation serves a double purpose, not only discrediting Shaxton as a coward, but also countering the harmful suggestion that someone who had embraced reformist doctrine could ever truly be swayed by the theological arguments of a traditionalist. In other words, Shaxton's fall was due to the weakness of the individual man, not because of any flaw in the doctrines.

Although he begins by stating that he has composed the work "onely for the loue I beare to Christes trueth," Crowley goes on to reveal a second inducement:

Had not certaine honeste men enfourmed me of the greate numbere of the[m] that thorowe youre recantation were established in your erroures: I hadde not taken this enterpryce in hande [...]. But whe[n] I understode what hyderaunce to God's trueth, your Authoritie, hath already and myghte here after do if your articles should remayne untouched: I thought it no lesse then necessarye to spend some tyme in it [...].⁷¹

In other words, Crowley is not primarily motivated by a notional commitment to religious "truth," but by his awareness of the continuing negative impact of Shaxton's recantation upon the credulous public. Because Shaxton's "Authoritie" (presumably as a sometime bishop) continues to lend credence to his words, a formal riposte to his doctrines is required from within the reformist camp. To drive home this point about Shaxton's allurements of the people, Crowley (unsurprisingly) resorts to the metaphor of stage-playing, portraying Shaxton's

70. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A2r-v.

71. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A2v.

behaviour as false and self-consciously histrionic: “I am not ignoraunte of your behaiouire sence your recantataion [sic], boeth in the citey of London and els where. Your priuate communication (besydes youre sermons dashed ful of sorowful teares and depe syghynges to alure the people to the Romeishe waye agayne) is openly knowen to all men.”⁷² Yet despite laying continued stress upon the harm that may proceed (and allegedly has already) from the recantation, Crowley also prints a document that seems to demonstrate the exact opposite to be true: “the true coipe of a letter which the faithfull in suffolke made & gaue it vnto Nicolas Shaxton when he had reca[n]ted in London and came to Hadley to declare the same.” In this reprinted letter, the people of Hadleigh, Shaxton’s former living, write of their disillusionment with him following his break with the reformist faith, a faith that they themselves could never renounce, even in the face of persecution:

Oh Shaxto[n] Shaxton praye to oure mercifull God that he may geue the hys grace againe. For many by the are offended whose co[n]science be so assured in Gods trueth, that nother fyre, nor halter can plucke it oute of theyr hertes. [...] Yea ye haue brought yourself in such case, that none wil trust you, which is illuminate with christes verite.⁷³

It therefore seems as if Crowley wants simultaneously to chide Shaxton for luring people away from the reformist faith and to demonstrate, contrarily, that the faithful cannot be shaken or deceived. This defiant and contradictory sentiment is echoed in Wisdom’s text when he writes:

And though I have bene unfaithfull yet hath not my unfaithfullnesse difamed the trouthe of god; nor ten thousande such pitefull recantatyons can not prove but that I taughte was and ys ever trewe, and those errours verified Papists fictions and hypocrisies that I rebuked are nothinge els but mere delusion & juglinge and popish dreames, miste, and falshod of Antichriste that slander all the hole world.⁷⁴

72. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A3r–v.

73. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A6r–v.

74. Wisdom, 91r.

One final intriguing detail of Crowley's preface to the articles of refutation is that he asks Shaxton to respond to him: "I praye you write unto me (whether you shal thinke it beste) priuately or aparty, that I may either enstruct you further, other els be enstructed of you."⁷⁵ Crowley therefore presents their disagreement as if it is a dialogue, a classical debate which will eventually lead to the emergence of a clear winner (thus, presumably, resolving the differences generated by the Reformation once and for all). This request could almost be read as an attempt to foster good-sportsmanship—it is only when Crowley goes on to describe the consequences of Shaxton's refusal to respond that we obtain a clearer sense of his true motives: "If you kepe silence and wryte nothyng agayne: then maye ye well thynke that we wyl iudge you obstinate and yet to haue nothyng to saye, for nowe is it fre for you to speake your conscie[n]ce, so far as the scripture wyl beare you."⁷⁶ On the surface this remark appears rather childishly goading: "you had better respond, otherwise we will assume you have nothing to say for yourself," but what it is also intimating is that Shaxton's silence will offer his opponents proof of his guilt—something they undoubtedly want. Given that Shaxton has refused to apologise to or answer his former co-religionists for the past two years, it seems a safe bet for Crowley to assume that he will not do so this time. The request for a response therefore allows Crowley to make himself appear fair-minded and open to debate, while remaining safe in the knowledge that no riposte will ever, in all likelihood, be forthcoming.

Crowley's *Confutation* is a very different type of counter-recantation to Wisdom's *Revocation*, but, like the latter, it is a text that appears to be full of curious contradictions: it simultaneously seeks to affirm and deny the effect which Shaxton's abandonment of reformism has had upon the faithful community, asks for a response it does not really expect or desire, and strenuously denies the personal antagonism which its mordant tone effectively communicates. Both counter-recantations suggest a multitude of ways to reinterpret the original act of apostasy, but their continued oscillation between different strategies and explanations means that they are never able to finally achieve narrative stability.

75. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A3r.

76. Crowley, *The Confutation of the .xiii. articles*, sig. A3r.

Conclusion

Whether they have survived recorded in bishops' registers or as pamphlets printed for public distribution, recantations are unique and intriguing texts.⁷⁷ So much about each individual recantation is unknown and largely unguessable: its precise authorship, the true views of the recanters themselves, and how each work was interpreted by its contemporary reading or listening public. To the modern reader these scraps of the history of religious persecution in England seem like enigmatic play scripts, lacking stage directions to aid our interpretation. They are the records of a single performance, which, as Becon's effectively demonstrates, had the potential to turn an act of punishment into an unlikely opportunity for evangelism, alerting spectators to the falseness of the exercise through the use of hyperbole and metadramatic devices while also informing them of some key tenets of reformist doctrine. However, such potential for irony is also evidence of the inherent instability of the genre: recantations may be interpreted as corrective or subversive, but openness to both readings means they can never be wholly authoritative.

The observations made here concerning the rhetoric and power-dynamics of the public recantation in late-Henrician England echo the findings of Peter Lake and Michael Questier in their study of the executions of Romanists and Puritans under Elizabeth I and later monarchs. Lake and Questier stress the performativity of the gallows speech, as well as its capacity to challenge, unsettle, or subvert official meaning:

What happened on the gallows could certainly reinforce the structures of authority, but in order for that to happen the departing criminal had to speak, and the genie of spiritual power, the charismatic aura generated by gallows conversion and the good death, had to be let out of the bottle of secular control. And once that had happened, Catholics had a golden opportunity, albeit at a price, to gloss and appropriate the conventions

77. Susan Wabuda notes that none of the original printed pamphlets from Henry's reign have survived (the recantations from that period being reprinted within secondary works or issued as revised versions). See Wabuda, "Equivocation and Recantation," 227–28 (note 13).

of the occasion and thus to put their own distinctive theological and polemical spin on them.⁷⁸

Where these later executions differ from the recantations of the 1540s is a factor both of severity and of legacy. During executions, the prospect of violence and death heightened the emotion of the attending crowd and added gravity to the occasion. Such executions played into the traditions of *ars moriendi* and popular notions of the “good death,”⁷⁹ infusing the convicts’ last dying speech with significance and granting them a certain licence to speak openly, lessening the need for dissimulation and equivocation. The recanter’s story was a comparatively low-key affair, lacking the excitement and terror that surrounds a spectacle of death. While executions capture finality and conviction, recantations document a moment of flux—perhaps a genuine shift in religious belief, or only a shift in its outward expression. Because they are not the terminus of a life, recantations are open-ended affairs: having performed their public penitence, the recanters carried on, perhaps steadfast in their affirmation of orthodoxy (as in Shaxton’s case), or perhaps again to veer away into heterodoxy (as Becon and Wisdom did).

As we have seen, to make a recantation—whether it was evidently false or a genuine act of apostasy—was to commit an act that often produced considerable literary fallout. Counter-recantations are compositions that prove to be just as problematic as the abjurations that inspire them. Both of the examples discussed above, Wisdom’s *Revocaton* and Crowley’s *Confutation*, are unsettled and self-contradictory texts. Wisdom tries to acknowledge that his fall was his own responsibility while repeatedly asserting that it was someone else’s fault; Crowley wants to prove to Shaxton that his actions had grave consequences while simultaneously proving the unshakeability of the Protestant community.

Recantations create a discomfort that even the most strenuous contradictions cannot assuage because their very existence requires the faithful to acknowledge that one of their number has been prepared to stand up in public and swear an oath that they believe a patent untruth to be true. In this light, it is hardly surprising that counter-recantations seem to be such ambiguous texts. We can perhaps better understand why such undue emphasis was put on

78. Peter Lake and Michael Questier, “Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists and the State in Early Modern England,” *Past and Present* 15 (1996): 64–107, 76–77.

79. Lake and Questier, 153.

acts of martyrdom by those who constructed the history of sixteenth-century Protestantism—and why Nicodemism and dissimulation needed to be faded out of the story. Yet it is worth observing that Elizabethan historiographers (such as Foxe and his collaborators) are themselves far from artless; in fact, such authors were attempting a recasting of the material they inherited from the previous generation. As Patrick Collinson reminds us, Foxe was himself an accomplished dramatist (author of Latin plays such as *Christus Triumphans*), and his construction of his martyrology involved not only deliberate editing and omissions but also the employment of fictive and rhetorical strategies that “lent the appearance of verisimilitude.”⁸⁰

Despite the centrality of fiction-making to English Protestant history in the sixteenth century, the fear of openly acknowledging fabrication and dissimulation remained. Although hypocritical conformity was also frowned upon by Catholics (provoking especially harsh criticism from the Elizabethan Jesuit pamphleteers, such as Robert Persons), it is tempting to think of it as somehow feeding into the peculiarly Protestant horror of confusion and multiplicity.⁸¹ To lie, dissemble, or equivocate was to paint reality other than it is and to take refuge in fiction and fabrication: the devices of the protean Vice, not of the plain-speaking Christian.

Jonas Barish writes of the common link between the antitheatrical sentiments of the fifteenth-century Lollards and those of the seventeenth-century Puritans: “one of the most persistent of antitheatrical theses [is] that the players’ intent is always to lie.”⁸² If theatre is lying, Becon’s recantation demonstrates that lying is also inherently theatrical. Lying and dissimulation—like acting—entail taking on false attributes, citing opinions which are not your own and utilizing linguistic ambiguity. Furthermore, when lying and theatre are employed in the service of promoting doctrine, or (as in recantations) denying it, what their smoke and mirrors really point to is the performative nature of belief itself. Becon is able to expediently alter himself and his doctrine to

80. Patrick Collinson, “Truth, Lies and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century Protestant Historiography,” in *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Donald R. Kelley and David Harris Sacks (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Centre and Cambridge University Press, 1997), 37–68, 63.

81. For Jesuit views of hypocritical conformity see Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1993; repr. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), chapter 2.

82. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 67.

fit the circumstances; he is, to use Stephen Greenblatt's famous term, "self-fashioning."⁸³ His interiority, like Shaxton's, remains a mystery to the community, and the radical implication of this is that his inner beliefs may be just as unfixed and changeable as his public conduct.

Yet even if we understand the depth of the moral and textual dilemma posed by false recantations, we should not let the Foxean model of a history of persecution "shrouded in the smoke from the fires of Smithfield," as Freeman puts it, prevent us from also appreciating the ingenuity and tactics of those who sought to further their cause while simultaneously saving their own lives.⁸⁴ As Andrew Pettegree comments, we are not required to accept unquestioningly that the "uncompromising moral absolutism" of the exiles and martyrs was a good thing.⁸⁵ Those who proclaimed their faith openly when challenged avoided the sin of lying and deception, but those who compromised their integrity and temporarily yielded in times of persecution may actually have done more, in the end, for English Protestantism than their intransigent brethren simply by staying alive and in England. Such individuals continued to exert an influence, however tentative, over the populace and eventually helped to found a more lasting institution, the Elizabethan Church. Recanters such as Becon, Crome, and Wisdom played a vital role in promoting their faith, even if their immediate successors tried their best not to acknowledge it.

83. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

84. Freeman, "The good ministry," 8.

85. Pettegree, *Marian Protestantism*, 116.