

## The Stage and the Stake: 16<sup>th</sup> Century Anabaptist Martyrdom as Resistance to Violent Spectacle

W. Benjamin Myers

*Using Dwight Conquergood's description of execution as performance and Elaine Scarry's explanation of the ideology of pain in the torture process, this essay explores how the Anabaptist Reformation martyrs resisted violent and ideologically charged state sanctioned performances of pain and death. By publicly performing heresy, claiming the stake as their own stage, and scripting and ritualizing public undisciplined bodies, these martyrs performed resistance to the social order that those who oversaw violent spectacle intended to preserve. This essay also examines the process of collecting and retelling martyr stories to guide performance studies scholars to challenge hegemonic sacrifices in contemporary culture.*

In 1571 Anneken Heyndricks was convicted by authorities in Amsterdam of renouncing the Catholic Church, being baptized as an adult, carrying heresy in her heart, belonging to a group of Anabaptists and marrying an Anabaptist. As she was arrested she thanked Jesus that she was worthy to suffer for his name. She was tortured and asked to recant, a request she refused. The bailiff then declared, "...you must die in your sins, so far are you strayed from God" (Braght 872). Her persecutors proceeded to torture her to extort the names of fellow believers "for they thirsted for more innocent blood. But they obtained nothing from Anneken, so faithfully did God keep her lips" (872). After extensive torture her mouth was filled with gunpowder, her hands bound together and her feet and torso tied to a ladder. The authorities kindled a fire and raised the ladder with Anneken still fixed to it. They pushed the ladder into the fire while the gunpowder was still in her mouth. As the authorities watched the ladder being raised, she cupped her hands in prayer and looked to heaven.

---

**W. Benjamin Myers** (Ph.D. Southern Illinois University) is an Assistant Professor of Speech in the Department of Fine Arts and Communication Studies at USC Upstate. The author thanks Gerald Biesecker, Jonny Gray, Steve Knight, Abigail Myers, Ron Pelias and Nathan Stucky for help with this essay at many different points in the process.



This is one of the stories from *Martyrs Mirror*, the 1660 documentation of Anabaptist Christian martyrs by Thieleman J. van Braght. This collection of martyr stories has a special place of significance in the history of the Reformation in general, and Anabaptism in particular. The resistant performances of these martyrs, and Braght's recollection of these performances offers performance studies scholars an example of performative resistance in two particular ways. The martyrs themselves were very effective in using subversive performance strategies to challenge the status quo, but the martyrs' ability to resist and subvert extends beyond their own performance choices. Braght's act of collecting and recounting was itself a subversive act that offered the opportunity for Anabaptist martyrs' performances to unleash their subversive potential. Braght's collection provides a model for performance scholars today for how to tell the stories of those whose resistance performances might otherwise be ignored or forgotten. Braght's ability to give the voiceless a degree of agency and to enable the powerless with the ability to contest the hegemony of the sovereign hold lessons for those in performance studies who want to use performance scholarship to make the world a better place.

This essay explores the *Martyrs Mirror* by examining public execution as performance, offering an interpretation of the martyr stories found in the *Martyrs Mirror*, and demonstrating the strategies that the martyrs in Braght's stories used to challenge performances of violence. Finally, the essay examines not only how performances of the martyrs are resistant, but also how the source of their stories is itself a performance of resistance. In studying theaters of death and sacrifices to hegemony in contemporary culture, performance studies scholars can make use of these martyr stories.

### **Execution as Performance**

Dwight Conquergood describes executions as performance rituals "through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence" (*Lethal* 342).

Conquergood (*Lethal*) makes the argument for modern execution as performance by paying close attention to how the state carefully monitors, crafts and scripts every detail of the process. The performance of justice is important to the state if it is to continue operating, and executions provide a stage for this performance through their ability to “tap the generative power of violence and harness the volatile energies surrounding death for political purposes” (360). An example of using performance to describe modern executions is found in the language of deterrence that often surrounds the death penalty. The personal punishment of the individual at the hands of the state is not the only function of the death penalty, but it is intended to act as a sign. While the punishment is meted out to the individual, the individual is not the primary target of the discipline. The visibility of the act of justice becomes preeminent. The performance of punishment works to preserve the social order by deterring future crimes.

Michel Foucault (*Discipline*) uses the spectacle of the scaffold to describe the political investment of the rituals of public killing. Executions use the body of the victim as a spectacle of vengeance and “an opportunity of affirming the dissymmetry of forces” (55). The purpose of punishment as spectacle is to demonstrate the power that the sovereign possesses. It shatters any illusion that there is a struggle between the sovereign and its subjects. The distribution of power is so unequal that individual resistance becomes futile. The public nature of the punishment puts on display this dissymmetry. Kirk Fouss’ meticulous and disturbing description of race lynching as performance demonstrates how this cultural logic of violence is performed to preserve hegemony:

... [Lynching] performances functioned as highly visible displays of a body in pain, with the pain displayed...as a not-soon-to-be forgotten object lesson indicat[ing] the locus and extent of hegemonic power.... Clearly, the public torture and execution of lynch mobs’ victims were designed not merely to put to death their victims but to display the putting to death of victims. Display mattered. (17)

The carefully crafted and highly visible display of violence and retribution are of the utmost importance to the state in its quest to preserve hegemony.

The infusion of religious zeal into performances of punishment only adds more justification for making executions theatrical. Performances of violence can quickly become understood as performances of faith (Ehrenhaus & Owen 293). Punishment as spectacle often becomes more entrenched and vicious when the violent performance finds its justification in a divine cosmic order. The victim becomes a sacrifice to structures that make such an execution possible. The story of Anneken mentioned above serves as a testament to the power that religious discourse has to justify these disturbing theaters of violence. The theatricality of the execution becomes vital because it intends to reach out and save the soul of the spectators, to warn of the dangers of hell and ultimately to preserve the reigning social order. This is what Foucault (*Sexuality*) describes as “biopower,” which is power geared toward populations. Biopower is only concerned with the individual insofar as s/he affects the population that the sovereign seeks to control. Religious executions during the

reformation were carefully rehearsed and all members of the “cast” were well aware of their role in making sure the sentence was carried out appropriately and with maximum effect (Dawson 264).

While theatricality matters to the state (or whoever authorizes the execution) the performances of those who are placed on the stage (or the stake) matter too. While performances of punishment are intended to display the unequal distribution of power and the ability of the authorities to display that power, some amount of agency still resides with the condemned. Spectators gathered around not only to watch the display of power, but also to watch the victim perform. Public execution provided a brief timeframe where the actions of the condemned could no longer be prohibited (Foucault, *Discipline* 60). The sentence had already been determined and the condemned could do anything he/she pleased without fear of reprisal. Conquergood (*Lethal*) explains that Puritan executions of heretics drew large crowds who would attend to see how the victim would perform. Will he beg for mercy? Will she repent of her horrible crimes? Will he spit at the executioner? (364).

The criminal faces a limited number of choices, all of which seem to reinforce the social order. If the victim chooses to be defiant by resisting, spitting and cursing, they display the behavior of a non-model citizen who “deserves” to be executed. The prisoner’s actions justify the execution. If the condemned confesses or repents (or at least does not resist the punishment) then it appears that even the victim believes that justice has been done. In some public execution settings it was expected that a patriotic individual would take this route and express the legality (and even necessity) of the punishment. This choice demonstrated a “good” death (Carlton 70).

With this type of double bind how can a martyr possibly resist the power and authority that executions are intended to publicly preserve? What kind of agency can the executed claim when the purpose of the execution is to demonstrate the dissymmetry of power between state and subject? A response to this double bind can be found in Thielman J. van Braght’s collection of martyr stories from the Anabaptist tradition in *Martyrs Mirror*. This collection of Dutch martyr stories narrates performances that resist the state’s power in theatrical punishment. This resistance is enacted through three methods: performing public heresy, understanding the stake as a stage, and carefully scripting and ritualizing performances of undisciplined bodies for the gathered audience.

### ***Braght’s Martyrs Mirror***

Anabaptism originated in Zurich, Switzerland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and quickly spread across much of Western Europe (Dyck 33). The Anabaptist movement was firmly rooted in and made possible by European reformation figures such as John Calvin and Martin Luther. These revolutionaries challenged the abuse of power and monopoly on power that the Catholic Church claimed. The Anabaptist movement was more radical than its reformation counterparts though. This movement is often referred to as the “Reformation of the Reformation.” The Anabaptists did not believe

that Calvinists and Lutherans had taken their schism far enough. As a group they held beliefs that many take for granted today, but at the time were heretical to both the Catholic Church and their Reformation counterparts.

The movement is most widely known today for its commitment to pacifism. This included withdrawing from the state and refusing to fight in wars (K. Sprunger 46). The Anabaptists also firmly believed in the separation of the church and state. While Luther and Calvin broke from the Catholic Church, they still set up governments that were supported by their religious beliefs and enforced those religious beliefs. Anabaptists believed that the state should not punish people for religious beliefs (which ironically led to their executions). Their members would not serve in government positions because they refused to use force to protect the state. Economically they believed in limitations on private property and often lived communally. The name Anabaptist comes from their commitment to adult baptism. They believed that religious commitment should only be made by adults who could make informed decisions. Calvinists and Lutherans still baptized infants. An oft repeated joke in Anabaptist circles is that the only common ground between the Lutherans and the Catholics was how much they despised the Anabaptists, and both religious sects participated in their share of persecution.

The *Martyrs Mirror* is a collection that chronicles hundreds of stories of Anabaptists who were killed for their faith. The first part of the book contains the story of Jesus and continues by recounting the martyrdom of saints from the Bible and those who soon followed. The second part of the book jumps to the killing of the Anabaptists by the Catholic Church and the Lutherans and portrays these martyrs as part of the unbroken history of Biblical martyrdom. At over eleven hundred pages, this collection can make quite an impression on someone seeing it for the first time. Its size is far from its only impressive quality though. The book not only describes each martyr's death, but often supplies the martyr's voice. Braght carefully records last words as well as letters that condemned victims wrote. He provides thorough accounts of interrogations by authorities, secret meetings and meticulous explanations of the specific torture that the Anabaptists suffered.

Perhaps the most famous part of the *Martyrs Mirror* is the series of illustrations that accompany many of the stories. These images include many facets of the process of martyrdom. While they often depict the moment of death or torture, they also illustrate moments of resistance, church services, the moment of betrayal or the cross-examination of the martyr. One type of account that is not found in either the text or the illustrations is a story of recantation. Braght documented stories of martyrs who held fast to their religious beliefs and paid the price for it. The detail that Braght injects into this book demonstrates the horror of public execution, but it also expresses the ways that the martyrs bravely performed death for what they believed.

I find this collection especially moving and beautiful because of the progressive ideology that the Anabaptists embodied. The Anabaptists were also much more open-minded in their attitudes toward women than other religions. Women could not preach in Anabaptist churches, but they were allowed to talk in church and participate

as leaders of congregational activities outside the church service. Women leaders even helped to found some Anabaptist churches (K. Sprunger 52). Braght describes the importance of women to the Anabaptist movement in the *Martyrs Mirror*. “The army of God...consisted not only of men, who are sometimes judged to be strongest, but also in women, for God’s power is made strong in weakness” (1120). The *Martyrs Mirror* includes an impressive number of accounts of women martyrs. Out of nine hundred and thirty martyrs, two hundred and seventy (about thirty percent) were women (Plenert 13).

Other acts of subversion by the Anabaptists more directly threatened the Catholic Church. The core of the Anabaptist movement was the belief that only adults should be baptized. The Catholic Church regarded this as a threat because the state registered babies at the time of their baptism. This meant that taxing and conscription were intricately tied in with child baptism. Another direct affront to Catholic doctrine was the belief that anyone could interpret scripture (Murray 186). Most members of the population were illiterate and relied on the church to tell them what the Bible said and meant. The Anabaptist movement proposed not only that anyone could interpret scripture, but that poor and obedient people were in fact better equipped than schooled priests to understand the Bible.

The beliefs of the Anabaptists posed a direct threat to the power of the reigning religious and governmental order. The combination of their especially radical religion and their refusal to use violence to oppose their persecutors meant that their suffering was extensive. Anabaptism produced far more martyrs than any other mainline religious tradition in sixteenth century Europe (Gregory 201). Persecution became an inherent part of Anabaptist faith. A simultaneously troubling and understandable tenet of faith began to emerge in the Anabaptist tradition: suffering became a mark of a true Christianity.

### **Resistant Performance and Anabaptist Martyrdom**

As discussed above, resistance to public execution is difficult. The martyr must not only give her/his life to the state, but the public nature of the martyr’s death serves to advance the very beliefs that he/she died resisting. Braght clearly demonstrates



how theatrical the authorities intended the executions to be. Many of the illustrations show large crowds of people gathered to watch the executions. The authorities would sometimes even go so far as to throw “rehearsal dinners” the night before the execution, often with the condemned person as the guest of honor (Oyer & Kreider 21). In the execution of Gerrit Hazenpoet the itemized bill shows that half of the budget for the execution was wine for the spectators.

The “success” of these performances of punishment rested on the public display of pain. Elaine Scarry describes how the structure of torture makes pain ideologically loaded. The sequence starts with the infliction of pain, moves to the objectification of the pain, and finishes with the translation of the objectification into power (51). The objectification operates by demonstrating the pain to those watching and making that pain that is already “incontestable to the sufferer...equally incontestable to those outside the sufferer” (52) The third part of the sequence makes the performance of pain ideological.

[Torture] lifts the pain out of the body and makes it visible or, more precisely, it acts as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain’s attributes-its incontestable reality, its totality, its ability to eclipse all else, its power of dramatic alteration and world dissolution-can be lifted away from their source, can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power, broken off from the body and attached instead to the regime. (56)

It is at the point of the transformation from pain to power that Braght’s martyrs turned their performances into resistance. The martyr cannot touch the first parts of this sequence. The victims cannot stop the infliction of pain (especially when recantation is not an option) and they cannot stop that pain from being made visible.

Conquergood states that in executions “officials are anxious to control the performance because condemned prisoners, although acutely vulnerable, are not without agency” (*Lethal* 360). This agency was enacted when the authorities tried to

turn the pain of the martyrs into performances of power. These martyrs instead wanted to proclaim their message on the stage they had been given. Brought articulates this argument in the preface to the second part of the book.

The tyrants found themselves deceived in their design; they thought they could cause these Christians to apostatize...on the contrary they, they raised up more opponents; for many of the spectators, at the said spectacle of killing people...who were thereby brought to reflection, and thus to investigation, and ultimately to conversion. (356)

Brought understood these martyrdoms as subversive spectacles that turned the design of execution and torture on its head. The conversion of pain into power is taken away from the state. In a seemingly counterintuitive turn, the executions work against the power they are intended to preserve. I will now turn to the specific strategies that Brought's martyrs employed in this power reversal.

### **Performing Public Heresy**

In 1553, the religious clerics of a small town in the Netherlands were responsible for conducting an extravagant parade to honor the holiness of the town's communion wafers. As was custom, everyone in the path of the pageant bowed to the sacred display. One of the merchants in the town square stood defiantly while those around him put their faces to the ground. Simon de Kramer must have been aware of the consequences of his actions, but he still stood as the procession neared him. The followers of the priest grabbed him, put him on trial and within a few days had him killed.



The image of Simon is that of unreserved rebelliousness. While the people around him are tugging on his clothes and pleading with him to just kneel, he stands



tall with his arms crossed and with what seems to be a smile. Not only does he not kneel, but he chooses a defiant stance as the authorities approach. It is conceivable that Simon could have ducked out, taken a side street, or hidden behind his booth. But outward resistance seems to be his only choice. Simon chooses to contest the powers that approach. He refuses to lend his body as support of the reigning narrative. It seems like such a worthless act of resistance. No material consequences could come from his actions, and it would be the act that would ultimately lead to his death. He could have simply knelt, but Simon would do no such thing. He chose to die rather than participate in the ritual that would implicate him in a spectacle that marked allegiance to the reigning social order.

Simon's performance of public heresy challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of public punishment. Torture must be imposed on the victim before becoming an insignia of power. The state-sanctioned theater of violence begins to lose its power at the moment when Simon publicly invites such punishment. This relationship is further challenged by the inclusion of suffering as a tenet of Anabaptist theology. Pain and persecution became marks of "true" Christianity and those who underwent this punishment were regarded as heroes within the movement. These public punishments became public rewards.

While any martyr must have a willingness to die, Anabaptists took this to an extreme. Not only would they behave in ways that would most certainly lead to their execution, but they would often rejoice when that punishment was meted out. Braght's martyrs would often delight because they were deemed worthy to suffer for Christ. This was the highest honor God could bestow. The Anabaptists were so willing to suffer that martyrs from other faith traditions began to denounce them as masochistic and suicidal (Byman 628).

The most famous story in the *Martyrs Mirror* demonstrates Dirk Willems' choice to display his faith through an act of mercy instead of saving his own life. In 1569 Dirk was imprisoned in the town of Asperen, the Netherlands, and managed to escape. One of the prison guards spotted him and began the pursuit. Dirk continued running from his persecutors when the pursuit led him over a frozen lake. He was able to cross because the prison rations had reduced his weight (Oyer & Kreider 37). The same was not true for his pursuer. As Dirk crossed the lake he turned around to see his pursuer had fallen through the ice and was drowning and freezing. Dirk went back to save the life of the man who intended to kill him. After saving this guard he was seized, and no mercy was extended to him. His execution a few days later was particularly painful. When he was placed at the stake a strong wind kept coming in and putting out the fire before it could kill him. As a result he suffered burns from the fire but not death. The ordeal was so painful that the bailiff could not watch and finally had to tell the executioner to give Dirk a quick death by another method.



Of all the stories that Braght recounts this one has gained a notoriety that other martyr stories have not. The story of Dirk Willems has been turned into a modern play and the town of Asperen has named a street after him. It is telling that the most popular martyr story to come out of Braght's collection is famous not for the death of the martyr, but for the act which led to his execution. The captivating element of this story is the choice that Dirk faced. He had the opportunity to decide whether or not he would be martyred. The escape from prison indicates that martyrdom was not necessarily something that Dirk wanted to go through, but his decision to perform this act of mercy in spite of the consequences reframes the performance of punishment. This life-or-death struggle that Dirk was engaged in with this guard seems as if it would carry with it a mentality of "every man for himself." Dirk changes the rules when he sacrifices his own life for the man who wants to kill him. He chooses execution instead of capitulating to the logic of doing everything possible to escape such a fate. The extravagantly dressed figures on the edge of the pond seem bewildered by this action. One man has questioningly thrown his hands into the air. Another is pointing to the scene as if he cannot believe what is happening. Their own unwillingness to help a colleague is evidence that different ethics guide Dirk and set him apart from his captors. He is executed as much for his mercy as for his original crime. As the captors throw their hands in the air were they angry at how he had just changed the rules? Did they realize that they had been checkmated? Were they aware that Dirk had escaped his own double bind and placed it on them? This must have been a shameful moment for the authorities. The state performs the execution of Dirk on a stage that he has chosen. It is Dirk's performance space and not the state's.

### **Understanding the Stake as Stage**

The Anabaptist martyrs not only understood the moment of the crime as a performance, but they extended resistance to the stake as well. Braght's martyrs were

very aware of their own images during the execution and understood the opportunity they had to use the stake as a place to perform resistance. Gerald Biesecker-Mast argues that these martyrs demonstrate an early form of “media savvy” and he uses the term “performative discipleship” to describe their performances (6). Like any good performer, these martyrs were conscious of audience and specific about the effect that they intended to create for their spectators.

Braght’s martyrs undermine the ideology of the state by claiming the stake as their own performance space. As Conquergood (*Lethal*) notes, public executions are intended to strip any agency from the victim through the display of unequally distributed power. When the Anabaptist martyrs decide that they want this space as their own they take away the monopoly of the message from the authorities. Regardless of what performance these martyrs display on this violent stage, the very claiming of that space as their own makes the stake a contested space filled with competing discourses. The hegemony of voice is challenged. Scarry explains that pain in the torture process is meant to be “incontestable,” but the martyrs contest this incontestability (28).

Braght was acutely aware of how the stake could be understood as a stage. The full title for this collection is *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*. In the first line of the preface Braght warns the reader to “not expect that we shall bring you into Grecian theatres, to gaze on merry comedies...” (6). These are performances not intended to entertain, but to challenge. Braght believes that these performances have serious consequences. He argues that these martyrdoms are “effectual sermons” that can convert those who watch (15).

Perhaps the best indication that many of these martyrs were effective in claiming this space as a stage is in the authorities’ response to them. In 1553 Tijs (a crippled man) was sentenced to being drowned privately. He was distressed and requested a public execution so “the people present might hear and see for what cause [he] died” (540). This request was refused. The sentence was carried out at midnight so no one could see. He was gagged and put in a bag that was tied to a boat. The authorities released the bag into the water and he was drowned. In 1551 Lijksen was singing hymns from her jail cell and attracted a crowd that upset her jailors. She was scheduled for execution and many Anabaptists planned to attend to offer support, “but the crafty murderers had anticipated [them]...for they perpetrated their murderous work between three and four o’clock...so that but few witnessed it” (522).

These hidden and secret punishments demonstrate that the authorities were at least aware of the ability of the martyrs to lay some claim to the public execution as their own performance space. These hidden and secret punishments show a breakdown in the very purpose of the punishment. Hidden punishment takes away to the ability to turn torture into public displays of power, to enact biopower. Foucault (*Sexuality*) posits biopower as an alternative to the sovereign’s previous threat of violence that was enacted on the individual. In the old model, the individual suffers punishment for his/her crime. Biopower instead focuses on regulating populations. Braght’s martyrs force the state to enact the power on the individual. While people

can of course still be afraid of hidden torture, it shows a breakdown in the procedure that is intended to preserve the social order. The punishment becomes personal rather than social.

The inability of the state to turn the body of the condemned into a stage demonstrates the success of the martyrs in turning the stake into contested space rather than one with a monolithic message. Braght's martyrs enact a version of Victor Turner's social drama here. A social drama is the performative element of societies dealing with conflict. The social drama unravels in four steps: a public breach, a crisis (i.e., the breach widens), the appearance of redressive measures, and a reintegration or recognition of a permanent schism. Conquergood (*Communication*) describes Turner's social drama an element of society that allows it to grow while simultaneously maintaining stability. A social drama is primarily about contestation, the very thing the state is seeking to eliminate in a public execution of heretics. Braght's martyrs often go through Turner's social drama steps. A public breach signals their disapproval of the state/church's power (as in the example of Simon). The breach turns into a crisis at the martyrs decision to not back down. The state/church would often engage in redressive measures by offering an option for recantation. And finally, Braght's martyrs would always choose to enact a permanent schism rather than be reintegrated into the social order. The key element here is that the martyrs were players and actors in this social drama. They were not a passive stage upon which the authority could enact its power by a performance of justice. Instead, the stake became a stage where the social drama played out, with both parties contesting the power of the other.

### **Scripting and Ritualizing Undisciplined Bodies**

Once it became apparent that the martyr would receive a public execution, he or she could begin to make performance choices. Braght's martyrs perform bravery and often go to their death performing the very actions that brought about their executions. The performances demonstrate not only the martyr's ability to claim the stage space, but their skill in producing a specific message of resistance. The performance choices usually involve some form of religious ritual such as singing Anabaptist hymns, praying, or delivering sermons to the audience. The rituals that these martyrs performed for their audiences are powerfully transgressive. Catherine Bell argues that ritual action is more than mere embodiment of power and ideology. Power is not external to ritual. "It exists only insofar as it is constituted with and through the lived body . . . Ritualization is a strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body" (204). Using Bell's description of ritual, Faber argues that we should understand the body as art, and art is always ideological (87). Many of these martyrs chose to perform these rituals as their final actions on this earth. These rituals enacted (instead of merely reflected) resistance to the systems of power that intended to discipline their bodies to act in appropriate ways.

The example of Anneken that begins this essay provides an illustration of resistance to this discipline. As she was pushed into the fire she folded her hands to pray. She could have chosen to pray silently, but the bodily action of placing her hands together was so important to her that she chose it as her final action. George Wanger made a request that his hands be untied so he could raise them to heaven. In 1529, three hundred and fifty people were burned and they sang as the flames rose. This caused confusion with one of the authorities present who could not understand why “the more I cause to be executed, the more they increase” (437).

Another carefully crafted element of the execution performance was the last words of the martyr. The genre of last words is a fascinating element of the entire execution process, and as Foucault (*Discipline*) argues, is itself a significant genre in the study of discipline (66). We often judge criminals by what words they choose to leave us with. Last words are important because they are marked with an urgency that other words do not have. Thomas Goodnight states the importance of last words by describing how “each person is allotted only so many words to say, only so many gestures, glances, thoughts, or strokes of the pen. Just as these words grow from and into a social world, so they are shadowed by limits and termination” (163). These Anabaptist martyrs usually had time to script their last words since they were usually imprisoned for at least a few days before facing execution. Foucault explains that the law usually asked the condemned to “authenticate in some sense the tortures that he had undergone” (*Discipline* 66). This authentication would help turn the execution into the display of power. The victim’s last words were expected to serve the ideology of the state.

The last words of Braght’s martyrs were usually in the same vein as their actions at the stake. They sought to find the space of resistance. Gerrot Jasepoot first kicked off his slippers because he thought it would be a shame for them to burn when they could go to a poor person. He then proclaimed “Till we meet beyond the sky, with Christ our only head: For this yourselves prepare, and I’ll await you there” (560). Jan Bosch cried out “O Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit” (630). Leonard Bernkop took a mocking stance toward his death by fire when he told the executioner “Turn me around, the other side is not done” (465).

Leonard’s last words were borrowed from an earlier martyr (Oyer and Kreider 54). Last words were often borrowed as a way to refer to previous martyrs who the victim particularly admired (Byman 638). Through this referencing the martyrs would align themselves with a tradition of martyrdom, and soon certain scripts began to emerge across different executions. The martyrs enacted a kind of performativity in their last words. Much like J. L. Austin’s performative utterances, the last words of the martyrs constitute a reality that could not exist without the utterance. As mentioned above, last words were often scripted and rehearsed. The planning that went into last words makes them an important element of the performance of martyrdom. The martyrs’ last words make the world the martyrs live in. It is performance as *making*, not *faking*. Beyond performance as an enactment of the story into which the martyrs inserted themselves, Braght’s martyrs’ last words illustrate Conquergood’s (*Beyond*)

claim that performance consists not only of cultural invention, but cultural *intervention*. Performative actions are citational, much like the last words of the condemned martyr. The last words are not uttered in a vacuum, but they are intended to be citational of the story of the Anabaptist faith that the martyr inserts him/herself into, while also seeking to serve as a resource for future martyrs to cite when scripting their own performances at the stake.

Conquergood's notion of performance as intervention refers to the ways in which social performance does not solely operate on the level of mimesis, but also on the level of poesis. The citationality of Braght's martyr's last words provide an opportunity for a radical new way by which to view the world. They act as a social intervention intended to challenge the power of the sovereign. Last words intervene by giving the martyrs the strength to understand themselves as part of an unbroken story while also calling on them to lend strength and citational options for those who are to come. They exist to intervene in the making and remaking of the social world.

### **Braght, Martyrology and Resistance**

While the performances of these martyrs demonstrate resistance to theaters of violence, the specific actions of the martyrs are not enough by themselves. These performances rely on the collection and retelling of the stories, which is also an act of performance. By the time Braght began collecting these martyr stories, the situation the Anabaptists found themselves in was quite different from those of the martyrs. Anabaptists were not only tolerated, but also had as a group become quite wealthy and influential. They avoided military service by paying for exemption. This meant that while they did not physically engage in war, they were still financially supporting the system. Many Anabaptists had even begun to serve in civil government (M. Sprunger 28, 1990).

This shift was not something that Braght was happy about, and he lamented the situation in the preface of the *Martyrs Mirror*.

These are sad times, in which we live; nay, truly, there is more danger now than in the time of our fathers, who suffered death for the testimony of the Lord. Few will believe this, because the great majority look to that which is external and corporeal, and in this respect it is now better, quieter and more comfortable. (8)

Braght ironically seems to be calling for the "good old days" when his people were being burned and drowned for their beliefs. He is troubled by how quickly the Anabaptists have acquiesced to the status quo.

Braght states that his intention is to remind his parishioners of the history of the faith tradition. His collection attempts to lift those performances at the stake and turn them into performances on the page. This collection provides a resurgence of those performances that allows them to come alive again. It is indeed a bit troubling to long for the days of torture and persecution, but it is

also disconcerting that these performances of resistance could be so easily forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

Braght's martyrs remind us of the responsibility and power that performance scholars carry. Martyrdom is not a phenomenon that has gotten any less complicated since the time of Anabaptist persecution. The word martyrdom in the west today likely invokes images of radical Islam and suicide bombers. These martyrs work within power much the same way that Braght's martyrs did. They attempt to frame the discourse, to die on their own terms to resist hegemony, to be citational of past martyr performances and to remind us that the state (or the west) does not have all the power. Please note that I am in no way claiming a moral equivalence between violent extremists and the pacifist martyrs of the Reformation. I am instead pointing out similarities which pose problems that demand answers which we have not sufficiently yet found. Lindsay Calhoun argues that Islamic martyrdom works "from the inside out in an effort to disrupt the binary explanation of terrorist acts-as either homicidal acts of radical political criminals or battles of resistance by freedom fighters defying what they see as cultural, economic, and military imperialism of the West" (344). The intentions of contemporary martyrs are similar to those of Braght's age, and these intentions are intricately linked to performance. The methods are radically different, but the goals are still similar.

People are still offered up to hegemony as sacrifices. Without in anyway condoning the atrocious acts of suicide bombers, we must at least acknowledge that Western Imperialism plays a key role in motivating these martyrs. They and their victims become sacrificed to our hegemonic power. The sacrifices to the forces of hegemony go far beyond Islamic martyrdom and its victims. The United States runs an enormous prison industry, \$50 billion (which is more than tobacco). This is not solely a government issue as prisons have become privatized. One of the most troubling aspects of the prison system is the way that corporations have become involved in incarceration. According to American Radioworks, companies such as AT&T, Bell South, Pfizer, Sprint, Bayor and Dupont (along with plenty of others) are part of the "American Legislative Exchange Council" (ALEC) which writes legislation and has politicians who push it through. Among their accomplishments, three strikes which automatically means a 25 year sentence (even for nonviolent offenses), and "truth in sentencing" which requires inmates to serve most or all of their time without a chance of parole. The rationale beyond ALEC is that more people in prison means a bigger market share for products used in prison. While confessed rapists and murders are certainly not a moral equivalent to Braght's martyrs, they are still sacrificed in the name of state (and contemporarily corporate) domination in the same way that Anabaptist martyrs were five-hundred years ago. These martyrs still serve the same function, to remind us that those with power can use it on our frail and helpless bodies as they choose.

Braght's collection of stories provides an important lesson for addressing these sacrifices to hegemony. Give the powerless agency in your story. It is not only the martyrs' actions that give us hope that absolute power can be contested, but the collection of stories is a vital component in this resistance. The martyrs' performances fail to reach their potential audience without the retelling of martyrdom and its effects. No doubt the state told its own stories of how heretics were justifiably executed and order restored. But Braght would not let that story remain uncontested. He instead crafted stories in ways that disabled the state's ability to monopolize the message.

Scholars are under the same obligation today. The ideological nature of performance necessitates that we address issues of power when we speak about performance, but the specific call of Braght's collection is to provide agency to the victims of abusive power. It is the job of performance studies scholars to ensure that those performances matter (in a variety of ways) The list of those sacrificed on the altar of the state's domination and corporate greed extend well beyond the few examples listed above. We can easily include those who live in poverty, civilian victims of war, illegal aliens, sweatshop workers, etc. One way that performance studies can and does grant agency to those within these categories is to talk about them as if their performances had the ability to challenge the status quo. Braght assumed that the martyrs' performances were important. This acceptance provides a model for performance scholars who seek to provide victims with agency and power while speaking to the system that makes resistance performances necessary.

## Works Cited

- Austin, John. *How to do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered in Harvard University in 1955*. New York: Oxford Paperbacks, 1962.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Biesecker-Mast, Gerald. "'Bloody Theater' and Christian Discipleship." *The Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 4 (2001): 1-10.
- Braght, Thieleman J. van. *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*. 1660 (trans Joseph F. Sohm 1982) Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Byman, Seymour. "Ritualistic Acts and Compulsive Behavior: The Pattern of Tudor Martyrdom." *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 625-43.
- Calhoun, Lindsay. "Islamic Martyrdom in the Postcolonial Condition." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24 (2004): 327-347.
- Carlton, Charles. "The Rhetoric of Death: Scaffold Confessions in Early Modern England." *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 49 (1983): 66-79.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics." *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions*. Ed. Sheron Daily. Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 1998. 25-36.



W. Benjamin Myers

- . "Communication as Performance: Dramaturgical Dimensions of Everyday Life." *The Jensen Lectures: Contemporary Studies*. Ed. John I. Sisco. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1983. 24-43.
- . "Lethal Theater: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty." *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 339-67.
- Dawson, Jane. "The Scottish Reformation and the Theatre of Martyrdom." *Martyrs and Martyrologies*. Ed. Diana Wood. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993. 259-70.
- Dyck, Cornelius J. *An Introduction to Mennonite History*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.
- Ehrenhaus, Peter and Owen, Susan. "Race Lynching and Christian Evangelism; Performance of Faith." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24 (2004): 276-301.
- Faber, Alyda. "Saint Orlan: Ritual as Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism." *The Drama Review*, 46 (2002): 85-91.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977.
- . *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*. London: Penguin, 1998.
- Fouss, Kirk. "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19 (1999): 1-37.
- Goodnight, Thomas. "The Rhetorical Tradition, Modern Communication, and the grounds of Justified Assent." *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Eds. David Williams and Michael Hazen. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1990. 149-66.
- Gregory, Brad. *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Murray, Stuart. *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000.
- Oyer, John and Kreider, Robert. *Mirror of the Martyrs: Stories of Courage, Inspiringly Retold, of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Anabaptists Who Gave Their Lives for Their Faith*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990.
- Plenert, Wayne. (1975). "The *Martyrs Mirror* and Anabaptist Women." *Mennonite Life* 3 (1975): 13-18.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Sprunger, Keith. "God's Powerful Army of the Weak: Anabaptist Women of the Radical Reformation." *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History*. Ed. Richard Greaves. London: Greenwood Press, 1985. 45-74.
- Sprunger, Mary. S. "The Dutch Golden age: Prosperity and the Martyr Tradition." *Mennonite Life* 45 (1990): 28-31.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U.S.A.*