

Martyrologists as diverse as John Foxe and Robert Persons built extensive religious and political narratives around the testimonies of their chosen martyrs. These martyrologists sought to bear witness to the historical continuity of their own faith traditions, while discrediting the religion of their opponents. Susannah Brietz Monta’s *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* traces the impact that competing Catholic and Protestant martyrologies had upon English literature of the period 1540-1650. Reading works such as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Copley’s *A Fig for Fortune*, Munday’s *Book of Sir Thomas More*, and Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, she argues that competing martyrologies pressured early modern authors to represent the search for religious truth as an essentially agonistic endeavor. In a world where a true martyr looked disturbingly similar to a heretic, Monta maintains, the historiographical projects of the martyrologists, and their truth claims, were undermined by a plurality of competing voices.

Monta divides her work into two main sections. Part One is broken into three chapters, which deal with how Catholic and Protestant martyrologists attempted to establish an interpretative framework to promote their own martyrs’ testimonies while countering polemics by competing martyrologists, and shows how both made the common argument that the cause and not merely the fact of death determined the validity of martyrdom. Part Two pairs texts influenced by Protestant and Catholic martyrological material with the aim of demonstrating the effects that the competing traditions had on a variety of early modern authors. This section of the book contains a lengthy discussion of suffering and its connection to religious confidence, focusing on the religious poetry and prose of Robert Southwell and John Donne. While the Jesuit Southwell sought to find grace in pain and emphasized the redeeming rewards that martyrdom brings, Donne saw literal martyrdom as unnecessary and instead explored the possibility that martyrdom may be a spiritual experience, and a part of everyday life. Monta’s well-documented account of the place of conflicting martyrological testimonies in the deep trouble over conscience of the Reformation era might have benefited from further contextualization, for instance by engagement with writers on conscience and casuistry such as William Perkins and William Ames. But this
is a quibble; this book will be of real value to literary scholars as well as historians interested in the literary impact of martyrdom.

Some of the modern historiography of Foxe and English Protestant thought has raised questions concerning female subordination, models of domestic patriarchy, and the suppression of female sexuality. Indeed, since forty-eight of the three hundred and fifty-eight Tudor martyrs described by Foxe are women, these questions are pertinent to our understanding of the Acts and Monuments and the historical contexts of English Protestant thinking. Through seven chapters, Hickerson introduces and contextualizes some of Foxe’s most fascinating and controversial female figures, including Anne Askew, Perotine Massey, Mrs Prest of Cornwall, Joyce Lewes, and Alice Benden. Hickerson explains how the disorderliness and personal convictions of female martyrs stood to offend a society in which value might be placed on modest, silent, submissive, and married women. Whereas most of the female martyrs of pre-Reformation Catholic hagiography are depicted as virgins, many of Foxe’s female martyrs were married and had to depart from their marital responsibilities in order to meet their calling as Christian martyrs. This tension between their societal responsibilities and their heavenly calling made Foxe’s women martyrs susceptible to criticism from Catholic polemicists. To relieve this tension Foxe, following John Bale, came to articulate a vision of marriage as equal or superior to virginity. Reflecting upon the apocalyptic theme so prevalent in their writings, Hickerson argues that their primary purpose in writing martyrologies was less to celebrate the lives of martyrs than to discredit and expose the false church of Antichrist. She concludes that rather “than physical virginity, it is now spiritual chastity, of which idolatry rather than marriage would be a violation, that is most prized in Foxe’s bride of Christ, but this kind of chastity, a marital fidelity replacing the virginity of ancient and medieval female saints, is equally important in the Act and Monuments in men and women” (117-18). Convincingly as her arguments are made, the connection she makes in Chapter Six between Foxe’s notion of the “true church” and the formulation of Protestant resistance theory should perhaps be nuanced by a clearer statement that the distinction between the visible and the invisible church might also be made in the context of intolerant thought such as Calvin’s. Like Monta’s, however, this is an insightful and illuminating study of an important Reformation genre.

SCOTT N. KINDRED-BARNES, University of Toronto