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TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED:

A MARIAN WOODCUT IN THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

What is a full page image of the Virgin Mary doing in one of the most defining books of the English Reformation? Bizarrely, some copies of the 1552 Book of Common Prayer contain a woodcut of the Virgin, with her symbols and names from Canticles in banderols, on one of the final leaves.¹ In his bibliography of the Book of Common Prayer, David N. Griffiths has described the Virgin's appearance as 'unexpected', although offers no further comment or theory as to how this page can have materialised in the Book.² How did this woodcut get there and what does it tell us?

This woodcut is similar to others which make a regular appearance in printed primers made in both France and England for the English market. The first printed primers, like manuscript books of hours before them, had a distinct emphasis upon devotion to Mary; Eamon Duffy writes, 'the whole primer was in some sense a Marian prayerbook', based on the Little Hours of the Blessed Virgin.³ That being the case, Reformed English primers were produced which moved to supplant these 'traditional' Latin ones, recognising a popular desire and need for devotional books but supplying, in their place, English ones whose devotions were heavily revised to shape and fit the expectations of Protestant readers.

For example, a 'Goodly Prymer' printed by John Byddell for William Marshall in 1535, whose character Mary C. Erler has described as 'unequivocally reforming',⁴ was prefaced by an 'admonition' to the reader inveighing against Marian prayers, such as the *Obsecro te* which had had such a prominent place in the medieval book of hours, as idolatrous:

What vanity is promised in the superscription or title before
Obsecro te, Domina Sancta Maria? where it is written, that
whosoever saith that prayer daily before the image, called the
image of our Lady of Pity, shall see the visage of our most blessed
Lady, and be warned both of the day, and also of the hour of his

¹ The booke of common prayer, and administracion of the sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englande (Edward Whitchurche: London, 1552), STC 16280-16280.5.

² David N. Griffiths, The Bibliography of the Book of Common Prayer, 1549-1999 (London: British Library, 2002), p. 66.

³ Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580 (New Haven: Yale, 1992), p. 256.

⁴ Mary C. Erler, 'The Maner to Lyue Well and the Coming of English in François Regnault's Primers of the 1520s and 1530s', The Library, s6-VI (1984), 240.

death, before he depart out of this world. I pray you, what fondness, or rather madness, is this?⁵

In her discussion of Byddell's primer, Christine Peters has argued that Reformed primers urged respect for, even as they rejected devotion to the Virgin Mary; 'it seems too simplistic,' she writes, 'when drawing up a balance sheet of the effects of the Reformation, to assume the 'loss' of the Virgin Mary'.⁶

Yet, the appearance of the woodcut of Mary in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer goes further than the respect Peters finds for the Virgin in this reformed primer. Jayne Wackett, in her study of the counterintuitive cross-over between the image cultures of prayer books from the times of Edward VI and Mary I, has demonstrated that the 'unexpected' is remarkably common in mid-sixteenth-century prayer books.⁷ Yet this full-page devotional image in the Book of Common Prayer is more unexpected even than the illustrated initials she compares. Not only are the Virgin's names in Latin, rather than English, they also invoke the forms of address in the *Obsecro te* and other petitionary hymns in the *Horae*, whose misuse the 'Goodly Prymer' attacks.

Curiously, this impression of The Book of Common Prayer with its renegade woodcut was put out by Edward Whitchurche under the Sign of the Sun, an establishment which was inherited from John Byddell: the same printing outfit which had put out the 1535 'Goodly Prymer'.⁸ The woodcut may have slipped in, in place of a printer's emblem, through Whitchurche and Grafton's previous association with François Regnault; a similar woodcut appears, for example, in Regnault's English 'Prayer [sic] of Salysbury use', printed in Paris in 1531. Grafton and Whitchurche had collaborated with Regnault in Paris in 1538 on the printing of the Great Bible, an endeavour which was disrupted by the seizure of the pages by Francis I's Inquisitors of the Faith.⁹

Later, according to John Foxe's Acts and Monuments, Grafton and Whitchurche returned to Paris to get 'the presses, letters, and servants of the aforesaid printer, and brought them to London', setting up as printers themselves to produce the Bible they had begun with Regnault.¹⁰ Regnault was one of the leading printers of primers for the English market packaging them into 'lines' that catered for established as well as emerging religious and readerly tastes.¹¹ Similarly, and oddly given his energetic involvement in

⁵ 'A Goodly Prymer', in Three Primers put forth in the Reign of Henry VIII, ed. Edward Burton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1834), p. 2.

⁶ Christine, Peters, Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 208 and 215-16.

⁷ Jayne Wackett, 'Examining the Unexpected: Printed Images in the Prayer Books of Edward VI and the Primers of Mary Tudor', Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte - Archive for Reformation History, CV (2014), 257-8.

⁸ Tamara Atkin and A. S. G. Edwards, 'Printers, Publishers and Promoters to 1558', in A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476-1558, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell (D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2014), 27-44 (p. 33).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Cited in David Scott Kastan, 'Print, Literary Culture and the Book Trade', in The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 81-116 (p. 93).

¹¹ Erler, 'The Maner to Lyue Well', 230.

the production of reformed literature in English, in 1536 Byddell produced a Latin primer in a small sextodecimo format with a distinctly Marian cast.¹²

For Erler, consumer demand led printers like Regnault and Byddell to produce books for people across sectarian lines and a mixed market for devotional books meant that they both produced English and Latin primers.¹³ The new prayer book replaced books for liturgical use within churches, of course, but also aspired to supplant primers.¹⁴ Indeed, across the course of 1552 and into the following year, new quarto and octavo editions of the Book of Common Prayer were produced, often bound with the psalter as the primer was, suggesting a targeting of that lay market and an attempt to attach the volume to people, as well as institutions. The woodcut, then, reminds us that, although the prayer book was a product and a driver of hardening sectarian lines, it emerged into a literary market which was driven as much by lay devotional tastes in all their variety as official ecclesiastical need, a need which was more easily directed from the top.

Once a book had reached that lay market, furthermore, it was difficult to govern its use. Consider, for example, the British Library copy of the 1552 prayer book which carries numerous manuscript erasures of King Edward in favour of Queen Mary; the pronouns are also accordingly changed from masculine to feminine.¹⁵ Another copy replaces Edward with James, despite its being superseded by an Elizabethan edition.¹⁶ Neither of these readers seems put out by the obsolescence of their Book. Readers, as well as printers, then, failed to keep books in their true places and, whilst the 'Goodly Prymer' complains about the misuse of Catholic prayers in the old primers, misuse was a problem which potentially affected all books however 'correct' and whatever their reformed credentials.

It is easy to think about the mid-sixteenth century as a time of clear sectarian lines, when books, their owners and makers took up sides. This unexpected woodcut, a hang-over from a supposedly supplanted age, shows us how hard it was to hold those lines in book production. Print, for all its technological modernity, was still set and pressed by hand and the larger scale of text production amplified the quirks that work by hand admitted. The image of the Virgin Mary in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer is, then, 'unexpected' but also typical of a culture which, for all the violence of its religious revolution, sometimes unwittingly readmitted what it sought to delete.

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¹² The Primer in Latin (London, 1536), STC 15991.

¹³ Erler, 'The Maner to Lyue Well', 240.

¹⁴ Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars, p. 213.

¹⁵ The boke of common praier, and administracion of the sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englande (Richard Grafton: London, 1552), STC 16285, British Library shelfmark C.25.I.3, eg. Sig Ai verso, Biv verso and Qv recto.

¹⁶ The boke of common prayer (Edward Whitchurche: London, 1553), STC 16288?, British Library Shelfmark C.24.a.2, Sig. Lvii verso.