Certayne questions demaunded and asked by the Noble Realme of Englande ([Wesel?]: [Hugh Singleton?], [1555?]; STC 9981)

Perhaps because of its length and anonymous character, this politically-charged radical pamphlet seems to have evaded the attention of scholars. Whereas Patricia Took in her unpublished PhD dissertation, 'Government and the Printing Trade, 1540–1560', recognises the tract's importance and attempts to reconstruct its production and circulation, it receives only a vague mention in Edward Baskerville's bibliography of Protestant propaganda, as a 'wide-ranging attack on all of Mary's policies'.

Owing to the low survival rate of illegal literature, particularly when it took the shape of short tracts and broadsides, one can only obtain an imperfect impression of the flow of Protestant propaganda that reached the English shores from the continent under Mary I. Consequently, to consider Certayne Questions as the pioneering embodiment in print of the most radical voices of English Protestantism is to neglect the fact that radical ideas were certainly being circulated, in both printed and manuscript forms, from the very beginning of Mary's reign. Nevertheless, by virtue of the fact that it helps to contextualise better known works such as John Ponet's Shorte Treatise of Politicke Power (Strasbourg, 1556; STC 20178), John Knox's First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (STC 15070), and Christopher Goodman's How Superior Powers Oght to Be Obeyed (STC 12020; both Geneva, 1558), Certayne Questions merits examination in its own right.

Little is known regarding the printing history of this short pamphlet, and much remains open to conjecture. It is nevertheless part of a series of no fewer than fifteen texts which appeared, in all probability, between 1555 and 1556, and which are all printed in the same distinctive types (Textura 220 and Schwabacher 63). A bastard variant of the traditional gothic or black letter, Schwabacher was widespread in Germany and Switzerland, even though the particular type used by the printer of Certayne Questions presents original features, particularly in some of its capital letters (M, N and R).

Printed in the octavo format which characterised the Marian propagandists' literary output, the text of Certayne Questions was made to fit on a single sheet of paper, mainly thanks to the small size of the selected type and its density on the page. Such small productions could no doubt be transported and carried around very inconspicuously. While the reference in the title-page imprint to Miles Hoggarde (one of the most active Catholic pamphleteers of Mary's reign) is clearly playful, its function might also have been to deceive the customs officers into thinking that the text was a piece of government-approved propaganda (sig. A1r).

Following the suggestion of the Short Title Catalogue, Baskerville gives 1555 as a possible date of issue. In this, he runs counter to Took's contention that the text could have been issued in late March or early April 1554. After establishing a link between a seditious letter 'in favour of the Lady Elizabeth', which the ambassador Renard mentioned in a letter to the Emperor dated 7 April 1554, and a printed libel against Philip and Mary which had been published in Danzig by a William Hotson, Took then tentatively identifies both documents with Certayne Questions on the basis of internal evidence (such as the numerous allusions to the Spanish marriage and the conquest motif associated with it). However, Took's 'internal evidence' is highly selective. Although the imprisonment of Elizabeth, the attempt to pack

3. Three of these are clearly dated: I. T.'s Apologie or defence against the calumnacion of certayne men (STC 23619) was issued in 1555 (sig. A1f), Robert Pownall's translation of Wolfgang Musculus's Temporysour (STC 18312) was printed 'Anno Domini 1555. In the Moneth of Juli' (sig. A1f), and Lawrence Saunders's Trewre Mirrour or Glase (STC 21777) appeared in 1556 (sig. A1f). The full title of Knox's Copie of a letter sent to the ladye Mary (STC 15066) implies that the letter itself was sent, not printed for public use, in 1556 (sig. A1f). However, it is likely that a printed version appeared soon after the original was sent to the Regent, for propaganda purposes.
5. Quoted in Took, p. 279.
6. It must be assumed that several bills were printed against Philip and Mary in the first half of the year 1554, when the Spanish marriage was being negotiated. In his Chronological Bibliography, Baskerville mentions a 'ballad against Philip and Mary' that was circulating in print and was sent to the Emperor on 4 June 1554. The Spanish ambassadors suggested that Sir Richard Morison, who was in Strasbourg at the time, may have been the author (p. 45). This ballad could be the same document as was described by the Danzig authorities, or another one. Baskerville also lists a 'book describing the persons of both Philip and Mary', published in July 1554 and containing seditious allusions (pp. 46–47). No extant copies of it or of the aforementioned ballad seem to have survived.
8. The allusion to a 'Prince missing of his purpose by intrety or fayre meanes' seems to refer to Philip's deprivation of a coronation by parliamentary consent (sig. A9f).
Parliament, and the execution of Lady Jane Grey all occurred in the aftermath of the Wyatt rebellion in the early spring of 1554, the pamphlet’s allusions to the Parliament of November 1554 and, crucially, to Mary’s infertility and spurious heir could not have been made until a much later date. For instance, the mention of steps being taken by the government towards a reconciliation with the Pope (sigs A3v; A5v), and of the fact that two Parliaments had been held in the same year, leave no doubt as to the earliest date at which the pamphlet was issued, since the two Parliaments in question can only be those of April and November 1554 (sig. A5v).

The April parliament was indeed summoned in the aftermath of the Wyatt rebellion, which had occurred two months earlier and was chiefly triggered by a general dislike of the prospective Spanish marriage. Yet the Queen’s decision remained unchanged and, despite divisions affecting her Council, both houses passed the marriage bills on 12 April. Most of the Lords were conservatives with Catholic leanings, which explains the author’s reference, in the pamphlet, to a ‘parcial Parliament’ (sig. A3v). However, they refused to disinherit Princess Elizabeth, who had been cognisant of the Wyatt rebellion (sig. A2v), and they failed to extend the treason law to Philip. Surprisingly, the Lords refused to pass a statute which would have revived the medieval heresy laws, amid fears of losing church land and property: indeed, the Catholics had bought more church land than the Protestants. However, the goods of an unrepentant heretic were declared forfeit. Overall, the hesitations of both houses testify to a far less straightforward situation than that depicted in the pamphlet. The November parliament immediately followed Cardinal Pole’s settlement at Lambeth and focused on the reconciliation with Rome. Furthermore, Mary and Philip had married on 25 July and a Te Deum was sung on 28 November to celebrate the Queen’s pregnancy. After some indecisiveness, a bill endorsing the restitution of church property and starting the process of reunion with Rome was passed on 3 January 1555 (sigs A3r–A3v). A dispensation was, however, appended to it whereby property that had passed into lay hands should stay there; this did not absolve the consciences of those who owned church lands, but cancelled the risk of excommunication evoked in the pamphlet (sig. A5v). In December of the same year, the medieval heresy laws had also been revived and would send many to the stake: the pamphlet seems to mention this on sig. A2v. Unfortunately for Philip, Parliament denied him a coronation and his power remained limited by the marriage treaty, thus invalidating the pamphlet’s fantastic claims about a foreigner sitting on the English throne (sigs A5v–A6v).

It became clear in the course of the summer of 1555 that the Queen had not been pregnant, an embarrassing situation which not only increased Mary’s vulnerability, but also gave rise to rumours according to which Mary’s husband had been unfaithful to the Pope (sigs A5v–A6r). This is echoed in the story recounted in sig. A6r, concerning the Emperor and his barren queen. It is unlikely that this story would have been printed while people were confident that the Queen was actually expecting. Therefore this pamphlet was probably printed in or after June 1555. According to Patricia Took, bills proliferated with the approach of the parliamentary session of autumn 1555, the main topics being Philip’s possible coronation, the threat of former monastic property being expropriated, and the possibility of penalising religious exiles by confiscating their goods. As we have seen, the pamphlet plays on English fears of a Spanish king and foreign invasion on sgs A5v–A6r, while the surrendering of abbey lands is clearly at issue on A5v. Further, the claim that ‘the next Pope may undoe al grauntes made to the contrary by his predecessor’ could also allude to the bull issued in May 1555 by the newly elected Paul IV, which one community of exiles to the other, as some members were very mobile and had travelled to Italy.
denounces the alienation of ecclesiastical property. Although this document may not have reached London until August of the same year, news of its publication would have preceded the arrival of printed copies, possibly in June or July 1555. This again tallies with a possible printing date for Certayne Questions of June 1555 or after. Thus, in referring to Mary’s marriage negotiations and to her treatment of the 1554 rebels, the pamphleteer is condemning those acts in retrospect.

II

Because this pamphlet was, in all probability, issued at a much later date than April 1554, its identification with the seditious documents that were printed in Danzig at the same period is unlikely. Further, whereas Certayne Questions was part of a series of at least fifteen pamphlets, the letter sent by the magistrates of Danzig to Queen Mary implies that the publication of a ‘libel against her Majesty and King Philip’ was an isolated enterprise. Indeed, we are told that the printer and his son ‘confessed that the work was printed by them in ignorance of the language or the purport of the libel’. Both were committed to prison as were other participants in the enterprise. The printing of this libel was carried out by order of William Hotson, an Englishman, who had promised the printers payment and ‘in whose presence some hundred copies had been sent home’. Hotson, under interrogation, confessed that he had received similar sorts of writings from a mariner named Harry Broder. What happened to Hotson we do not know; yet it seems unlikely that the printer imprisoned for unwittingly printing this seditious bill would have been responsible for printing a whole series of fifteen or more tracts between 1555 and 1556. However, this does not mean that Certayne Questions evaded the attention of Mary’s government completely. While it is unlikely to be the document evoked by Renard or by the Danzig authorities in April 1554, The Acts of the Privy Council nevertheless record the fact that ‘a seditious book of questions in print’ was circulating in Northern England on 29 June 1555. After thanking the Bishop of Durham for bringing the pamphlet to their attention, the authorities planned to issue a special proclamation to deal with it.

In the 1950s, J.F. Mozley conjectured that Miles Coverdale’s translations of four of Otto Werdmüller’s tracts were printed in Wesel by Hugh Singleton in 1555. Printed in the same Textura and Schwabacher as the pamphlet under scrutiny, the Werdmüller tracts also form part of the series of fifteen. If we were to extrapolate from Mozley’s conjecture, Certayne Questions would thus have been the work of Hugh Singleton. Singleton started his career as a bookseller in London in the 1540s, before escaping to the Continent at the very beginning of Mary’s reign. He may have settled in Wesel, since typographical evidence shows that he was working in close collaboration with Joos Lambrechts, a Dutch printer who had fled Ghent for Germany, from 1553 to 1554. Indeed, Singleton’s printing device appears on four pamphlets printed in the vernacular. Between 1555 and 1556, we lose sight of Singleton before finding him again in August 1557 in Strasbourg, a city which he was forced to leave, having failed to obtain the right of residence and to gain access to its printers’ guild. Mozley grounds his argument on the fact that an edition of Werdmüller’s Precious Perle was reprinted in London by Singleton, presumably in 1574, ‘according to the copies’ which he [...] received from Coverdale when he first put them into print’. Thus, in the preface to the c. 1574 edition, the printer asserts that ‘[t]hese [i.e. the Werdmüller tracts] I have imprinted, with as great diligence as I could, and I hope, according to the copies that I received from the translator of them’ and complains that ‘the same have ben by others thrust in my name, corruptly enoughe to my great discrede, and some hinderance unto God for the restoringe of his holye woorde (Strasbourg [Wesel?]: [Joos Lambrechts?], 1554), STC 1730.


John Knox, The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women (Geneva: [J. Poulain and A. Reboul], 1558), STC 15070.


William Whittingham?, A Brief discouer off the troubles begonne at Franckford in Germany Anna Domini 1554 (Heidelberg: [M. Schirat], 1574), STC 25642. This account remains strongly biased in favour of John Knox and his party.


Crowfoot, A Brieff discourse off the troubles begonne at Franckford in Germany Anna Domini 1554 (Heidelberg: [M. Schirat], 1574), STC 25642. This account remains strongly biased in favour of John Knox and his party.


John Ponet, A shorte treatise of politike power ([Strasbourg]: [heirs of Köpfel], 1556), STC 20178.

Skinner, Modern Political Thought, II, pp. 221–24; 234. For Ponet, a tyrant’s betrayal of his country to foreigners would justify his subjects’ attempts to depose him. His arguments remained nevertheless more tentative than those of Goodman.

John Ponet?, A Warning for England ([Strasbourg?): [heirs of Köpfel?], 1555), STC 10023.7. Another edition came off the presses of Egidius van der Erve (STC 10024). This short tract was ascribed to Ponet on the ground of a mention by John Bale of one of Ponet’s works, entitled Præmonitionem ad Anglos. See John Bale, Scriptorum illustrium majoris Britannie [...] catalogus (Basel: J. Oporinus, 1557), p. 694 (STC 1296).
also, but with the greatest displeasure to the biers’ (Precious Perle [1574?], sigs A2v–A2y). We also learn that Coverdale had directly handed over ‘copies’ of his own translations to Singleton (sig. A1y) and that the printer offered a new edition of the Precious Perle, ‘nowe brought to that brightnesse that it had, when it first came oute Imprinted by me’ (Precious Perle [1574?], sig. A3y). This statement apparently prompted Mozley to wonder when Singleton had actually printed the tract for the first time. There is a possibility that the c. 1555 so-called Wesel books were ‘the copies’ from which Singleton printed the tracts for the first time since the Stationers’ Company Registers record that Singleton was involved in editions of 1561–2. Yet, in the absence of extant copies dated 1561 or 1562, Mozley speculated that Singleton, ‘who spent 30 years of his life overseas’ may have ‘set up a press at Wesel for the benefit of the exiles there’, thus making the c. 1555 tracts the first copies issued by our printer.20 This remains conjectural since it is highly probable that Singleton printed the tracts for the first time in the early 1560s and that copies are now lost. In any case, the attribution of the c. 1555 Werdmüller tracts to a press which Singleton might have set up at Wesel rests on shaky grounds.

III

Also of interest is the question of authorship. Controversial ideas such as the unsuitability of female rule (sig. A2y) and active resistance to inferior magistrates (sig. A2v) had already been in circulation in the early days of the exile in 1554.21 We know, for instance, that John Knox submitted them to the judgement of John Calvin in Geneva and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich.22 This does not mean that he pioneered those ideas among the exiles or that he was the only one to think along those lines at that time. Indeed, An humble supplicacion unto God for the restoringe of his holye woorde (STC 1730), tentatively ascribed to Thomas Becon and published in August 1554,23 already questions the validity of Mary’s regime on the ground of her sex:

For in the steade of that verteous prince [i.e. Edward VI] / thou hast set to rule over us a woman / whom nature hath formed to be in subjeccion unto man / & whom thou by thyne holy Apostle commaundest to kepe silence / & not to speake in congregacion. Ah Lord / to take away the empire from a man / & to gyve it unto a woman / semeth to be an evident token of thyne anger toward us Englishmen [...] And verily though we fynd / that women sometime bare rule among thy people / yet do we rede / that suche as ruled & were quenes / were for the moste part wicked / ungodly / superstitious / & given to idolatry / [...] as we may se in the histories of quene Jesabel / quene Athalia / quene Herodias / & such like. (Humble supplicacion, sig. A7v)

Certayne Questions, however, distinguishes itself among the earlier extant writings of the Marian exiles by virtue of the fact that it broaches the idea of private resistance to an ungodly sovereign when asking:

whether subjectes oughte to loke to theyr own safetey, & to the safeteye of the realme and to joynye them selves wholy together, to put downe such a Prince as seketh all meanes possible to deliver them [...] & the whole realtime into the handes of Spanyardes [...] (sig. A3y)

Here, the author clearly establishes a difference between inferior magistrates (‘the cheff Captayn & sodiars’, mentioned on sig. A2v) and private persons (the simple ‘subjectes’). This highly radical idea would only be fully taken up and developed in Christopher Goodman’s notorious How superior powers ought to be obeyd of their subjects (STC 12020), published in January 1558 in Geneva.24 John Knox,25 Goodman’s friend and colleague there, would also enlarge on some of Certayne Questions’ less radical, though still controversial, themes, thus dealing at length with the invalidity of female rule in his First blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women,26 and with resistance by inferior magistrates in the Appellation of John Knoxe.27 Knox and Goodman certainly met in Frankfurt in late 1554, before getting embroiled in the troubles affecting the English church there.28 Both would reach Geneva in early 1555.

There is a possibility that both men contributed ideas to Certayne Questions, all the more as Bartlet Green, a friend of Christopher Goodman and subsequent Protestant martyr, seems to have been involved in the publication and circulation of the pamphlet from his base in London. According to John Foxe, a letter written by Green to Goodman was discovered by the Marian authorities when they intercepted the carrier. In it, Green reported to his friend on ‘certayne articles of
questions, which were cast abrode in London’. Green was also sent to the Tower on a charge of treason for having incautiously written to Goodman in the same letter that ‘the quene is not yet dead’. Although he claimed to have used those words to quash a rumour that was apparently circulating among some of the exiles, the authorities saw a threat in them. Not surprisingly, while the charge of treason was soon dropped, Green’s religious beliefs were investigated and found heretical. A letter dated 11 November 1555 and sent to Bishop Bonner by the Privy Council, tells us that Green ‘hath of good time remayned in the Tower, for his obstinate standing in matters against the catholik religion’. However, he attended a clandestine Protestant service in the house of John Poulain at Easter 1555, which suggests that he was still at liberty at that time. Unfortunately, Foxe fails to date the letter which Green sent to Goodman though, if late June 1555 is a likely date of publication for Certayne Questions, the intercepted document was probably meant to reach its recipient on the Continent sometime during the summer of that same year. In a letter to John Philpot which he wrote from prison, Green confirmed that he was accused of being involved in the publication of seditious material and, even though no evidence was retained against him, he nevertheless added that he refused ‘no punishment, if they of their consciences would judge me privy to the devising, printing or publishing of those questions’. This statement could be interpreted as an act of bravado or as a subtle admission of guilt. Whether Green was involved in the publication of the pamphlet under scrutiny or in a similar one cannot be asserted with certainty. The possible date of publication of Certayne Questions seems however to coincide with his troubles with the authorities. Consequently, it is not impossible that the pamphlet originated from the Green-Goodman circle.

Another contender for the authorship of Certayne Questions is John Ponet. The former bishop of Winchester, he fled persecution under Mary and settled in Strasbourg where he and Christopher Goodman certainly attended Peter Martyr Vermigli’s lectures. Nowadays he is best known for his radical Shorte treatise of politike power (STC 20178), published in the summer of 1556, just before his death. While Ponet did not directly question Mary’s status as a bastard and her suitability as a female ruler in this controversial pamphlet, he nevertheless advocated resistance against tyrants by private persons. Furthermore, he scattered in his treatise misogynistic comments about women’s irrationality. Ponet is also credited with the writing of a Warning for England (STC 10023.7), which denounces the exactions of the King of Spain in the Kingdom of Naples and the restoration of church property. Displaying a strong patriotic streak, A Warning for England, A Shorte Treatise, and Certayne Questions all equally play on the English fear of a Spanish conquest, which would entail the loss of liberties and goods. In all three pamphlets, political considerations overshadow religious ones – atypically for pamphlets written during the first half of Mary’s reign – which could suggest that they had either been written by the same man or originated from the same circle.

In a letter to his friend John Bale, dated July 1555, Ponet shows his awareness of propaganda strategies: for him, ‘[b]allets, rymes, and short toyes that be not deare, and will easily be born away do mucho good at home amonse the rude peple’ and he encourages Bale to find suitable writers in his circle to pen those lighter pieces. Ponet himself certainly helped in the Protestant effort to reach out to the masses. In his Shorte Treatise, he mixes scholarly and popular references, scurrilous and edifying stories; far from drawing on Scripture alone, he includes several examples from chronicle histories.

Ponet’s radical tendencies and his flair for successful propaganda are not enough to ascribe Certayne Questions to him with any certainty. However, in his Catalogus, an impressive bibliographical account of British literary achievements from their origins until the mid-sixteenth century, John Bale also attributes to Ponet a mysterious work entitled in Latin Ad Reginam interrogaiones, which could be translated into English as ‘Questions to the Queen’. Such a work, if it was ever published under this title, is now lost. Because, however, Bale composed his Catalogus in Latin, he translated every single title he mentioned, whether the texts were originally written in the vernacular or not. Further, he did not hesitate to shorten and tweak titles to adapt them to the specific format of his Catalogus. Thus, Ad Reginam interrogaiones could refer to Certayne Questions. However, if it does, then Bale might have slightly disguised the title in the attempt to preserve the author’s anonymity, owing to the radical content of the work. Bale made no mention of Ponet’s Shorte treatise of politike power in his Catalogus.

The argument for doubting Ponet’s authorship of the pamphlet under scrutiny is that he did not question the validity of Mary’s reign, either on the ground of her sex or on that of her illegitimacy, in his Shorte Treatise, unlike the author of Certayne Questions. Further, Ponet’s pamphlets tended to be printed at Strasbourg: his Shorte Treatise, and both editions of his Apologie, were printed there, as was the first edition of A Warning. Nevertheless, it remains likely that Certayne Questions originated from a particular circle of exiles with which Ponet could have been associated; indeed, the fact that there is no real progression linking one idea to another in the pamphlet could indicate that it was either put together very rapidly in response to events happening at home or that it was the collective work of more than one author, the result of ‘brainstorming’, as it were.
Charlotte A. Panofré
St Edmund’s College, Cambridge