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A Puritan and his devil: religious conflict between William Prynne and William Laud, 1625-1645

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A Puritan and His Devil: 
Religious Conflict between
William Prynne and William
Laud, 1625-1645.

Faye Newton
Part I
The Origins of the Conflict

In the period between 1625 and 1645, William Prynne "issued nearly a score of tracts,"¹ attacking English prelacy in general and William Laud in particular, twice suffered the severest of penalties next to death, endured lengthy imprisonment, and vanquished one of England's most powerful men, all in the name of militant Puritanism. During those twenty years, Prynne's savage but effective pen was directed almost solely to one holy end, the irrevocable defeat of the Laudian interpretation of worship by the English successors of Calvin. For Prynne there could be no thought of compromise. The forces of darkness were at work in the land, seeking to subvert the true doctrines of predestination and scripture with the idolatry of those lost years before the Reformation. The Devil had to be met and dispensed with once and for all, and to William Prynne, the Devil bore a striking resemblance to William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury (1633--1645).

To comprehend Prynne's conflict with Laud and his bitter hatred for all things Laudian, it is necessary to understand

the nature of Prynne's Puritanism, how he came by it and what it encompassed, and the nature of his adversary's religion.

William Prynne was born in 1600 in Swainswick, Somerset, "a notoriously Puritan shire." His father and maternal grandfather were both of Puritan persuasion and probably were quick to acquaint the young Prynne with the Calvinist ideal. If they followed the pattern of most of their fellow Puritans, Prynne's father and grandfather doubtlessly also expressed a fear that Puritanism was being betrayed to Romanism both at home and abroad, giving the abortive Spanish marriage attempt and the wars in Bohemia as dire examples. In all probability, Prynne's youthful ears often heard expressed the desire for a stalwart defender of Protestantism who would conclusively end the popish threat to truth. Such a call to arms could hardly have failed to leave its mark.

In 1618 Prynne passed from the influence of family and neighbors, and entered Oriel College, Oxford. Oriel was undergoing a period of doctrinal transition at the time. Long a Calvinistic college, Oriel had just come under the jurisdiction of a new chancellor, Lord Pembroke, who was proceeding along Arminian and anti-Calvinistic lines, "substituting the study...of the Fathers, Councils, and schoolmen for the abridgments and systems of theology founded principally upon the Holy Scriptures."  

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3 J. Bruce, Biographical Fragment (Westminster, 1877), p. xix.
Biographical Fragment suggests that the king's promulgation of the order for the change was a result of Laud's instigation, and he hints further that this order was probably "the first thing that made Prynne acquainted with the character and designs of the man between whom and himself there was thereafter to be the deadliest enmity." Whether this was in fact the case cannot be positively determined, but the doctrinal change was, nevertheless, important as another instance of the clarion call to defend Protestantism and the English Reformation against the disciples of Antichrist. It gave solidarity to the fears of the Somerset Puritans at a time when Prynne was just beginning to realize his potential.

In spite of his disagreement with the developing policies at Oriel, Prynne managed to graduate in January, 1621, with no religious altercation ascribed to his name, and in June he entered Lincoln's Inn to study law. He found the atmosphere there more congenial with his fast hardening Puritan dogma. While the preachers at the Inn were "selected as men of large and liberal culture, ... they were also prominent exponents of Calvinistic theology." The year after Prynne's arrival Dr. John Preston, "a famous and militant Puritan," became the chaplain at Lincoln's Inn, and Prynne had frequent

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4 Ibid.
6 Kirby, p. 5.
opportunities to hear him and other nearby Calvinist preachers. The sermons of these men, corroborating so exactly Prynne's previous experiences, must have strengthened his already calcifying Puritan precepts. The only ingredient still lacking in Prynne's progress toward an irrevocable commitment to Puritanism and the consequent attack on whatever challenged it was personal study.

Aided by a rare capacity for memory, Prynne not only used his time to store up legal knowledge, but he also made a singularly thorough examination of ecclesiastical writers and of the Scriptures. He emerged from his studies with an unusual knowledge of both law and religion. Unfortunately Prynne had entered into his quest for religious truth with his mind very nearly, if not completely, made up. He found, therefore, exactly what he was looking for -- undeniable proof of the merit of Puritanism as the true religion. From this point on, Prynne's mind was unconditionally closed to any form of religious compromise or innovation, and from this point on, it was inevitable that Prynne and Laud clash violently over the course of the Church of England.

After completing his religious study, Prynne's ecclesiastical position was basically this: "Nothing but faith could save a man, and faith was granted by God, granted once and for all and only to the elect."\(^7\) In addition, the preaching of the

\(^7\)Haller, p. 220.
Word was of paramount importance in worship. The communion table was just that—a table, and as such should be stood either "permanently under the pulpit or brought out occasionally for its special purpose." It was to be placed in an east and west position signifying its use as a table and not as an altar. Genuflexions, bowings, the sign of the cross, using the communion table as an altar, and kneeling to receive the Eucharist, Prynne considered Arminian innovations and, as such, dangerous to the souls of Englishmen.

Over his entire religious position hung the pall of Prynne's dread of Rome. Any who did not share equally his fear of the papists, Prynne "viewed with the keenest and most watchful distrust. Protestantism was in his estimation a beleaguered city."

To a man of Prynne's beliefs, Laud's ecclesiastical position was anathema. Laud refused to accept the concept of predestination, blasphemy to Prynne. Instead Laud followed Arminius in declaring that salvation was open to all, not to an elect alone. Preaching of the Word took a back seat in Laudian worship, and in its place external forms were emphasized. "From the cradle to the grave, Laud would have man's life surrounded with a succession of ecclesiastical acts influencing his soul through the gates of the senses."  

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8 Gardiner, VII, 15.
9 Kirby, p. 11.
10 Bruce, p. xxix.
11 Gardiner, V, 359.
The sacraments, genuflexions, bowing, altars, and kneeling at the Eucharist, were to be emphasized; in order that through uniformity, Englishmen might build up a sort of religious code of habit that would sustain them in a world in flux. The individual did not have to constantly search for proof of his election; he need only step from first to second place in the church and allow that institution to undertake the sole care of his spiritual life.  

In his attitude toward Rome, Laud's position was equally repugnant to Prynne:

Laud acknowledged the Church of Rome to be a true church on the ground that it 'received the Scriptures as a rule of faith, though but as a partial and imperfect rule, and both the sacraments as instrumental causes and seals of grace.'

He did not accept the infallibility of the Catholic Church, but his assertion that bishops held their positions jure divino, by divine right, rather than jure humano, by man's right was like a popish whiplash across Prynne's face. Laud even went further and declared that

No congregation which wasn't under the government of a Bishop could be considered to form a part of the Church, a concept which would have unchurched the whole body of foreign Protestantism.

Tormented as he was by a fear of Rome, Prynne could not

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12Ibid.


14Gardiner, II, 126.
consider Laud's position anything other than an open avowal of his intention to use his ecclesiastical office to reinstate Rome in the See of Canterbury.

To a man like Prynne, married so completely to strict Calvinist dogma, such a man as Laud, continually rising in the ranks of the National Church, presented an overwhelming menace. In Laud he saw beyond a doubt the incarnation of Antichrist, hovering threatenly over English Protestantism, and, unless Protestantism quickly marshalled its forces, all of the gains of the Reformation would be swept away in one giant genuflection. Prynne saw his way clear at last. He must assume the role of the stalwart defender of Protestantism. He must take up the sword of militant Puritanism and wield it until the innovations and Romanish trespasses epitomized by Laud were laid forever in the grave. If he had to place Laud in the grave to accomplish his sacred end, then so be it.
Part II
The Conflict*

Once Prynne had discovered his enemy, he was eager to do battle. In 1623, not yet ready to attack Laud (then Bishop of London) personally, he penned instead *The Perpetuity of a Regenerate Man's Estate,* a violent, though somewhat tardy, attack on the theology expressed in a book written by Richard Montague in 1624. *The Perpetuity*’s significance did not lie in its attack on Montague’s *A New Gag for an Old Goose,* however, for numerous other tracts had already thoroughly castigated him. Instead, it was significant, because it attacked a position that was essentially the same as that adhered to by Laud. In the most violent language, Prynne attacked the idea that the Roman Church was a true church and, "if not a sound Church, it was not fundamentally corrupt but superficially corrupted." With "bitter words and long quotations from the Fathers and the Anglican bishops," he refuted Montague’s assertion of the fallibility of Calvinist doctrine and proved, to his satisfaction at least, the inherent truth of the tenet

*The spelling and punctuation of quotations from primary sources have been modernized to facilitate the readability of the paper, and the dates have been given according to the New Style Calendar for purposes of clarity.

**In the remainder of this paper, this tract will be referred to as simply *The Perpetuity* for the sake of brevity.

16 Kirby, p. 12.
of predestination. That the book was apparently an attack on Montague mattered little to Prynne. The important thing was that he had thrown out a challenge that could not help but bring his enemy to him.

Prynne was correct in assuming that The Perpetuity would bring Laud to him. "Infuriated by the book's 'violently Calvinistic tone,' Laud stirred the Court of High Commission into action." A letter summoning Prynne to appear in court on October 24, 1627, was sent to the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn, since writs could not be served within the Inns of Court. Instead of intimidating Prynne, however, the letter merely served as notice for the Calvinistic party to rally to their new champion's defense, and, when Prynne appeared before Laud and the other members of the High Commission, he produced a writ of prohibition from the Court of the King's Bench at Westminster, thwarting any attempt at censure.

Laud was furious at this overriding of ecclesiastical authority by the common law court. He had labored at great length to establish the ecclesiastical court's independence, and this writ of prohibition, questioning as it did the "legality of the bishops' court," came as an unexpected

17 Ibid., p. 13.
18 Ibid.
blow to him. "Baffled of his prey, he threatened to lay
Prynne by the heels for delivering the rule."19 Unable
to make good this threat, Laud assuaged his frustration by
burning The Perpetuity in private.

Prynne's next tract was A Brief Survey of Mr. Cosin
His Cozening Devotions* which appeared in 1628. Once again
Prynne was writing ostensibly in protest of an already pub­
lished work, A Collection of Private Devotions attributed
to Cosin in February, 1627. Using the same vitriolic lan­
guage with which he had attacked Montague's theology, Prynne
attacked Cosin's form of worship, which, like Montague's
theology, had much in common with Laud. According to Prynne,
Cosin, and thus Laud by association, advocated many practices
in worship which smacked strongly of Arminianism and Romanism.
Prynne asserted that such perverted practices should be
stifled, instead of being published and spread abroad to
delude unsuspecting minds. Laud doubtlessly read this latest
attack on forms he agreed with, but this time he seethed in
silence. Attempts at censorship proved useless against
Prynne's ingenuity, and Laud was forced to bide his time once
again.

19Ibid.

*In the remainder of this paper, this tract will be re­
ferred to as simply Cosin's Cozening Devotions for the sake
of brevity.
Laud had a brief respite from Prynne's siege on his religious position, but in 1630 two new pamphlets appeared, renewing the attack. The first, *Anti-Arminianism or the Church of England's Old Antithesis to New Arminianism,* asserted that an Anglo-Catholic party existed in England with the express aim of subverting the national religion. It said further that the English prelates, who should be the foremost defenders of the English Church, had failed in that task. Indeed, those very prelates who should be defending the church were, in fact aiding the forces of innovation and Catholicism. On these grounds, Prynne accused the bishops of usurping the rights of both king and parliament as defenders of the true faith. Such an indictment of prelacy doubtlessly hardened Laud's resolve to act against Prynne at the first opportunity, for the fear of the overthrow of episcopacy presented as great an evil to Laud's mind as the fear of Rome presented in his opponent's thoughts. Laud did ease his anger somewhat, however, by proceeding against Michael Sparkes, Prynne's printer, in the High Commission, and by having the *Antithesis* burned twice within a year of publication.

*In the remainder of this paper, this tract will be referred to as simply the *Antithesis* for the sake of brevity.*

Prynne's second 1630 tract was *God, No Impostor Nor Deluder*. Although this brief work was not an overt attack on non-Puritans, its fierce defense of the basic Calvinist dogma of predestination was as good as an attack. It openly avowed that any who refused to accept the existence of an elect were not only fools and subverters of truth, but also doomed men with no hope of Heaven in their eternal futures. "At this point Prynne was threatened with imprisonment and his books were confiscated." Rumors flew back and forth that Laud had at last imprisoned his dedicated adversary, but such was not the case, since in that period the responsibility for publishing unlicensed pamphlets could be laid to the printer alone.

Having escaped imprisonment once again, Prynne pressed the attack, this time in *Lane Giles His Haltings* published in 1631. Prompted by an increase in popish customs, such as bowing and genuflecting, it was a violent attack on Giles Widdowes, a ritualistic cleric. Prynne accused Widdowes of trying to substitute an "English mass" for the Church of England's service. The language implies that Widdowes was not the only person Prynne suspected of

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20 Kirby, pp. 16-17.
21 Ibid., p. 17.
desiring an "English mass." As if in answer to this veiled accusation, Laud summoned Michael Sparkes once again before the High Commission, but this time Laud was completely thwarted, for Sparkes was able to prove himself innocent of publishing the book.

Prynne finally overstepped the thin boundary that had protected him from prosecution for six years. Oddly enough, the book which brought him before the Star Chamber touched on religion only incidentally. Appearing late in 1632, the Histriomastix professed to be an attack on the evils of plays and playgoers, and it was just that, but the violence of its language and the extravagant conclusions drawn within its thousand odd pages far surpassed anything previously written by Prynne. Actually the book had been approved for publication by Archbishop Abbot's chaplain, Buckner, but Laud's chaplain recognized that it offered the long awaited opportunity to bring Prynne before the Star Chamber. He called it to Laud's attention, and Laud pounced on it.

In January, 1633, the sale of the Histriomastix was prohibited, and in March all copies were ordered confiscated. Laud construed "Prynne's attack on the theatre, female actresses, dancing, playgoers, and magistrates who failed to suppress plays ... as including the King and Queen (Charles I and Henrietta Maria)."

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23 Gardiner, VII, 330.
This, together with the book's unmistakably Puritanical air, was sufficient to allow Laud in February, 1633, to place Prynne in the Tower. Both Charles I and Attorney-General Noy, according to Mrs. Ethyn Kirby in her biography of William Prynne, failed to find anything in the Histriomastix which would be censurable in the Star Chamber. Nevertheless, Laud prevailed on both men to allow the proceedings to go forward. Thus, Prynne spent the remainder of 1633 in the Tower under a warrant "general against law, wherein no offense was specified." Laud succeeded, in the meantime, to the archbishopric of Canterbury.

In February, 1634, Prynne was taken from the Tower to the Court of Star Chamber. Peter Heylyn, Laud's trusted disciple, had drawn up the charges against Prynne, after being carefully instructed by Laud to emphasize the political context of the Histriomastix rather than the ecclesiastical side. Laud wished Prynne to appear in the unfavorable light of a libeller and opponent of the Crown, rather than in the increasingly popular role of an opponent to prelacy. "Libel, verging on treason," was the crime Laud wished ascribed to his arch-enemy.

25 Kirby, p. 28.
The actual charge against Prynne was stated thusly by Attorney-General Noy:

He has compiled a book, called Histriomastix, the Player's Scourge or Actor's Tragedy, and therein he has presumed to cast aspersion upon the King, Queen, and the Commonwealth, and endeavored to infuse an opinion into the people that it is lawful to lay violent hands upon Princes that are either actors, favorers or spectators of stage plays.2

Prynne categorically denied the charge. There was absolutely no connection intended between Histriomastix and the King and Queen, he insisted. References to Caligula and Nero were mere illustrations of the sorry effects of plays on the human personality and were in no way intended as a reflection on Charles or Henrietta Maria. He likewise maintained that his branding of female actors as "whores" had nothing whatsoever to do with the Queen, who had taken part in a masque late in 1632, just prior to the book's appearance. The Histriomastix, he said, was:

No more but a collection of divers arguments and authorities against common stage plays. It had been printed publicly and not secretly. And as for encouraging others to be factious or seditious... he was upon his oath... so far from disloyalty, schism, or sedition, or neglect of the King, State, or Government that he has with very much joy, cheerfulness and thankfulness to God, ever acknowledged his happiness by the peace he has under his Majesties happy government.27

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27Rushworth (London, 1703), II, 221-2.
Prynne's denials were useless against his stern judges. His guilt was a foregone conclusion. Even his own counsel sensed the hopelessness of defending such a suddenly unpopular client. The best that they could offer in Prynne's defense was to maintain that "his intentions had been good and that some of his strongest expressions deserved a milder interpretation."28 Unyielding, even in the face of hopelessness, Prynne refused to plead to the charges against him. By his refusal to plead, he laid himself open to conviction.

"On February 15 and 17, 1634, the judges pronounced sentence in language as violent as that used by Prynne."29 Before pronouncing sentence, however, "each judge gave his appropriate comments on the enormity of Prynne's offense, or the falsity of his arguments."30 Cottington dealt first with the book itself, relegating it to the hangman for burning, so that, "it might in respect of the strangeness and heinousness of the matter contained in it, have a strange manner of burning."31 He then proceeded to recommend that Prynne be expelled from the Bar and degraded from his degree at Oxford. He desired also that Prynne be deprived of both his ears, one to be dispensed with in the pillory at

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28 Gardiner, VII, 332.
29 Kirby, pp. 28-9.
30 Trevor-Roper, p. 163.
31 Rushworth, II, 233.
Westminster, the other to be cut off at Cheapside. To this already unusually severe sentence, Cottington added a fine of £5000 and perpetual imprisonment. Richardson agreed with Cottington, but he desired to increase the penalty by stipulating that Prynne should "be restrained from writing and neither have pen, ink, nor paper." Laud, strangely enough, thought this last penalty too extreme. "I confess," he said, "I do not know what it is to be close prisoner, and to want books, pen, ink, and company." A man in such a case might be driven to unforeseen extremes. For this reason, Laud suggested that Prynne be allowed pen and ink along with permission to attend church. At this point, Prynne uttered a barely audible thank you, and the court inflicted no further penalty upon him, although Richardson in parting snapped, "Let him have the Book of Martyrs, for the Puritans do account him a martyr." A faced with such an unexpectedly severe sentence, "even Prynne's fortitude gave way," and he petitioned the Privy Council for clemency. Prynne acknowledged the justice of his sentence, and begged the Council's intercession with the King to mitigate his fine and pardon his corporal punishment. The response was his transfer from the Fleet prison, where he had been taken after his trial, back to the Tower.

32Ibid., pp. 236-7.
33Gardiner, VII, 334.
33ARushworth, II, 247.
34The Annals of the Parish of Swainswick, p. 50.
There, in the rooms which had become so familiar to him in the past year, he awaited the execution of his sentence.

On May 7, 1634, he was taken to Westminster, placed in the pillory, and one of his ears chopped off. Three days later the same gory process was repeated at Cheapside. Those copies of the Histriomastix which could be found were burned beneath the pillory, so that the smoke from them nearly suffocated their author. The Society of Lincoln's Inn hastened to rid themselves of so black a sheep and on April 24, thrust Prynne from their company. Less than a week later, the University of Oxford, now thoroughly under Laud's influence, degraded Prynne from his degree.

The final blow was still to fall, however. Realizing the nature of the Archbishop's wrath, Prynne had sent his books to his tailor's house in Holborn for safekeeping. In spite of his care in maintaining complete secrecy in the transaction, news of the ruse reached Laud through his spies. Ever quick to act against a foe, Laud secured a warrant from the Court of High Commission and Edward's (the tailor's) house was searched and all of Prynne's books confiscated and later sold to pay Prynne's fine. Prynne, in helpless rage, protested the illegality of this action.

35Gardiner, VII, 333.
35AKirby, p. 31.
The public, the majority of whose views Prynne represented, although in a much more extreme form, showed little sympathy for Prynne in 1634. The venom of the Histriomastix and the seemingly plausible interpretation of its context by the Star Chamber repelled the general public. Many, it is true, still looked to Prynne as the champion of Protestantism, but others saw him as a fanatical bigot who did more harm than good. Indeed a large share of the public chose to defend the stage against Prynne as a sign of their loyalty to the Crown. Even the Inns of Court, "eager to clear themselves of any suspicion of disloyalty," had prepared a masque in honor of the King and Queen and had presented it at the very time when Prynne stood arraigned before the Star Chamber. Whatever public indignation resulted from Prynne's harsh punishment was due largely to his position as a scholar and barrister, and not to any personal affection for him.

Prynne was little concerned with public opinion, however. The severity of his punishment had left him stunned, but the confiscation of his beloved books had shaken him again into an awareness of Laud's maleficence. Enraged by the persecution of one he considered little short of Antichrist, Prynne wrote an inflamed letter to Laud. All the accumulated

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36 Ibid., p. 27.
spleen of the past year and a half bubbled from Prynne's pen. He attacked each of Laud's arguments and accused him of illegality in all of his proceedings. He attacked Laud personally, "scoffing at his lowly parentage and declaring him to be an 'exceeding fiery, insolent, virulent, implacable, malicious, and revengeful spirit.'"37 He accused Laud of using his influence to poison the King's mind against him and of distorting the meaning of the Histriomastix. He denounced the Archbishop as a Jesuit tool and an object of scorn to all Christians. He closed by prophetically asking Laud to consider "how soon [he (Laud)] might be yet a more contemptible spectacle of misery and justice than [Prynne himself]."38

Prynne wrote this letter on June 11, 1634. On June 16, Laud delivered it into Attorney-General Noy's hands as the basis for further proceedings against Prynne. On June 17, Noy confronted Prynne with the letter, demanding to know if the writing belonged to him. On a pretense of inability to determine the nature of the handwriting without first seeing the letter, Prynne got his hands on the smouldering diatribe and promptly tore it up to prevent its use as evidence against him. He was still brought before the Star Chamber, but,

37 Ibid., pp. 31-2.

38 Documents Relating to the Proceedings against William Prynne, p. 53.
without the incriminating letter, there was no way of convicting him, and he was returned to the Tower.

Imprisonment in the Tower was less of a hardship than it seemed. Prynne was allowed to converse with fellow prisoners and with friends and relatives. He was also allowed to go about London, provided he was accompanied by a keeper. With such advantages, the wily Puritan did not find it difficult to continue writing and distributing pamphlets during his very imprisonment.

In 1635 *A Breviate of the Bishop's Intolerable Usurpations and Encroachments upon the King's Prerogative and Subjects' Liberties* appeared. He also collaborated with John Bastwick in writing *Flagellum Pontificalis* "to prove the parity of bishops and presbyters." In 1636 an anonymous work entitled *A Looking Glass for All Lordly Prelates* materialized, bearing the unmistakable Prynnian heavy touch. In it the bishops were "compared to the devil, as 'roaring lions, seeking whom they may devour.'" Three other tracts denounced the dogma of apostolic succession and ritualism: *(Certain Queries Propounded to the Bowers of the Name of Jesus and to the Patrons Thereof, Certain Queries Propounded to Bishops, and The Umbishoping of Timothy and Titus).*

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30 Kirby, p. 33.
A Divine Tragedy Lately Acted also appeared in 1636, damning Sabbath-breakers and the Declaration of Sports. In the same year, a ten page tract, News from Ipswich was published three times under the name of Matthew White and distributed by Rice Boyea, a silenced minister. This abusive attack on Bishop Wren of Norwich and all who shared in suppressing the Puritans’ Sunday afternoon lectures or in prohibiting sermons on fast days was attributed to Prynne, although of all the 1636 pamphlets, it was the least likely to have been authored by Prynne. Nevertheless, it was on the basis of its publication that Prynne was again tried by the Star Chamber.

Unpreturbed by an impending trial, Prynne continued to write. In 1637, Prynne wrote a Quench Coal and later, in May, Brief Instructions for Church Wardens emerged containing legal advice on how the wardens could avoid prelatial visitations. By this time Prynne’s works were almost wholly available in Dutch and were in the process of being translated into French, in order “to make the bishops’ cruelty known to all nations.”

Under the Archbishop’s very nose, Prynne communicated his tracts to his servant, Nathaniel Wickens, and through him they passed to the printers.

41 Trevor-Roper, p. 256.
With his second trial in June, 1637, Prynne's writings suffered a lull. In this trial, Laud had decided "to make an example of the most outspoken of his enemies," and for this purpose he had chosen William Prynne, John Bastwick, a physician, and Henry Burton, a preacher.

Laud was correct in regarding them as implacable and dangerous opponents. Between them these Puritan writers had scathingly denounced every point in the Anglo-Catholic program and, what was even more dangerous, had held the whole party up to ridicule.

Prynne had hoped to use the trial to emphasize "the encroachments of the prelates upon the King's prerogative," but this was minimized by the prosecution, and instead, the power of the bishops was defended against Puritan attacks. The three were charged with "writing and publishing seditious, schismatical, and libellous books against the hierarchy of the church and to the scandal of the government." These "sedious, shcismatical, and libellous books" were not named specifically, but they were generally considered to be Prynne's Quench Coal, The Unbishopsing of Timothy and Titus, and News from Ipswich; Burton's sermon, "For God and the King."

43 Ibid.
44 Kirby, p. 41.
45 Rushworth, II, 382.
presented in November, 1636; and Bastwick's *Litany*.

Prynne was regarded as:

The chief offender, whom confinement had failed to silence, whose influence prevailed upon others to express his own extremist doctrines, /and/ whose resourcefulness, even in prison, baffled the vigilance of the authorities and eluded the censorship.\(^4^5\)

This estimate was probably true. With his legal training, Prynne was certainly the most dangerous of the three, as he proved by employing his knowledge of the law to confuse and obstruct the proceedings.

For three months Prynne and his cohorts were able to thwart their enemies. Refusing at first to file the necessary answers to the bill of information, they secured additional time to consult with their counsel. In the meantime, the Privy Council had Prynne's rooms in the Tower searched for incriminating papers. The search proved fruitless, but Laud did manage to arrest and imprison Prynne's servants.

The three defendants had not been idle during this time either. They presented a cross-bill, drawn up by Prynne, in which they accused the prelates of the Court of High Commission of "usurping on His Majesties prerogative royal, and innovations in religion."\(^4^7\) The bishops were so embittered by this attack

\(^4^5\) Trevor-Roper, p. 319.

that they tried to change the charge against the three to treason. Much to the judges’ chagrin, however, they were forced to admit that the bill was legally drawn up and presented, and, as such, it could not be used as a basis to establish treason. The three further angered the Court by demanding that the bishops, who were their avowed enemies, be ejected from the Court. This request received a sharp refusal.

Greatly incensed by Prynne’s legal maneuvering, the Court demanded that the three defendants submit their answers to the charges against them. This the three were willing to do, but the violent attitude of their answers and their precarious positions, not to mention possible pressure from Laud, prevented any counsel from signing them. Without the signature of some qualified counsel, the answers were unacceptable to the Court, and the three defendants were, therefore, held pro confesso and sentenced accordingly.

At this point, Laud seized the opportunity to defend his besieged position. He said that the ceremonies which he enforced were not innovations on the established law. The moving of the communion table to the east end, he treated as a matter of convenience, and his practice of bowing he defended as a personal form of worship. The charge that he was undermining the royal authority, he flatly denied. 48

48 Gardiner, VIII, 230.
With Laud's defense of episcopacy out of the way the Court proceeded to pass sentence on June 14, 1637. The three were to lose their ears (Prynne still having two fragments to forfeit), incur a fine of £5000 each, and suffer solitary life imprisonment, in Prynne's case in the Castle of Carnavon in Wales. Finch added an additional penalty to Prynne's sentence. He was to be branded on the cheeks with the letters S.L., as a seditious libeller.

On June 30, Prynne appeared in the pillory at Westminster for the execution of his sentence. The hangman was extremely harsh in his handling of Prynne, cutting off his ears in the roughest possible manner and branding one cheek twice. Prynne's enemies explained the hangman's brutal attitude by saying that at his 1634 punishment, Prynne had "promised the hangman £5: if he used him kindly, which he did, and afterward had given him only half a crown and five sixpence."\(^\text{49}\) Prynne sympathizers rejected this explanation, however, calling it pure fabrication and insisting, depending on their simplicity, that Prynne's ears had either grown back miraculously, thus frightening the hangman into clumsiness, or that Laud had contracted with the executioner to perform such rude surgery. Whatever the cause of the hangman's cruel treatment, Prynne was not deterred from speaking to the spectators on the

\(^{49}\) Documents Relating to the Proceedings against William Prynne, pp. 86-7.
illegality of his trial and the more dangerous illegality of the position of the Laudian bishops in the Church.

He was even so bold as to compose an epigram concerning the S.L. seared into his cheeks.

Triumphant I return! My face descries
Laud's scorching scars-God's grateful sacrifice.
S. L., stigmata laudis.

Laud for his part greatly deplored the fact that Prynne had been allowed to speak at all.

The attitude of the people had undergone a marked change in the three years since Prynne's first trial. To them he had become a Puritan martyr, and as such he was due the greatest reverence.

As Prynne passed along the Northern Road on his way to Carnavon, he was greeted by the loudest declarations of sympathy, which were at the same time declarations of hostility to Laud. 51

At both Coventry and Chester, he was treated as a guest of the greatest honor. All along his route, it was obvious that the people had accepted Prynne's assertion that:

The power of the Crown was being put at the disposal of a single ecclesiastical party and many considered the object of the party to be the restoration of Papal authority. 52

Not everyone, it is true, was of this opinion; some shared

50 Jordan, II, 160.
51 Gardiner, VIII, 233.
52 Ibid., p. 231.
the opinion of Clarendon that "Prynne and company got just what they deserved," but sympathy seemed to be in the ascendancy.

Official attempts were made to stem the rising tide of Pro-Puritan sympathy. Government propaganda, including the Archbishop's speech in the Star Chamber, was published, but it merely served to increase the sales of Prynne's books and the libels against Laud. Censorship of the press was enforced with greater and greater restrictions, and still Prynne's books were circulated. Reprisals were enacted against those who had welcomed Prynne on his way to prison, especially on the communities of Coventry and Chester, but these only served to intensify anti-Laudian feeling. Prynne was moved to the greater isolation of Mount Orgueil Castle on the Channel island of Jersey, but this did not hide the fact that Laud's "attempt to check the rising tide of disaffection by a sharp, bold punishment of the worst offenders" had backfired. "Puritanism had gained martyrs and during the summer the attacks were vigorously renewed. Laud was denounced as a man of blood." Laud had accomplished one significant thing, however. Prynne, "deprived at last of pen and paper,"

54 Jordan, II, 161.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Trevor-Roper, p. 350.
was finally silent. The price of this silence was to prove costly.

While Prynne was composing meditative poetry on his Channel isle, the approach of the Civil War was sounding a still distant, but inevitable, death knell for his old enemy, Laud. The summoning of the Long Parliament in 1640 was the fulcrum upon which the fortunes of Prynne and Laud reversed themselves. The Long Parliament set Prynne and his fellow sufferers free and annulled their sentences as illegal. On November 19, 1640, Prynne left prison, and on November 21, he and Burton met on the Island of Guernsey and sailed for England. "Prynne and Burton, the spirit of militant Puritanism, now returned to London in triumph."57 They landed in England and were entertained and gifted joyously at Southampton. Village after village cheered their progress. At Staines they were met by friends from London, and at Brentford there was a celebration in their honor. Finally they were joined by some two thousand horsemen, over one hundred coaches, and many sympathizers on foot. "By the time they reached Charing Cross, the procession had swelled to gigantic proportions."58 On November 28, 1640, they entered London. Less than a month later, on December 18, the Archbishop of Canterbury was impeached by the House of Commons of the Long Parliament.

57Kirby, pp. 52-3.
58Ibid.
On February 24, 1641, the articles of impeachment were voted against him, and on March 1, 1641, he was committed to the Tower, where he was given Prynne's old chambers, possibly at Prynne's instigation. The charge against him was treason.

It is hard to say whether or not Laud was in the real sense guilty of treason.

If the fundamental laws of England meant the supremacy of Parliament, Laud was guilty of assailing them. His contemporaries believed him to be dangerous, ... because he was engaged in completing an instrument that would outlast his lifetime. Laud alone could not accomplish such a goal, but Laud had seldom relied on his own strength. He had always relied on the authority of Charles I, and Parliament could not trust Charles not to help him now. If they could have trusted Charles to follow their wishes, there would have been no reason to chastise Laud.

Since they could not trust the King, Parliament impeached Laud, alleging he was guilty of treason on a threefold basis. First, he had tried to subvert the fundamental laws of the land, introducing arbitrary government in their place. Secondly, he was accused of attempting to subvert the established religion, reinstating popish superstition and idolatry. The last charge was inevitable: he was

\[\text{Gardiner, IX, 249.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
charged with endeavoring to subvert the rights of Parliament. Laud's most indomitable adversary, William Prynne was put in charge of prosecuting Laud. From that moment the Archbishop's fate was sealed.

The approach of the Civil War pushed Laud's case temporarily into the background. Prynne could not forget his old foe, however, and fearful that Laud would yet find a way of returning to power, Prynne resumed his pamphleteering against the Archbishop. Rome for Canterbury, an indictment of Laud's supposed Catholic sympathies, appeared first. Then in July, The Antipathy of the English Lordly Prelacy Both to Regal Monarchy and Civil Unity* emerged as a protest against the House of Lord's failure to follow the Commons' lead in passing the Root and Branch Bill. In The Antipathy, not only Laud, but the entire body of English episcopacy stood accused of specific treasonous acts, or, at the very least, of being accessories to treason from their very beginning. For example, Prynne maintained that Robert, a bishop under Edward the Confessor, was to blame for the Norman Conquest, because he had persuaded the king to make the Duke of Normandy his heir. This damaging work was followed by A New Discovery of the Prelates' Tyranny, a scathing assault on the persecution of Prynne, Burton, and Bastwick in 1637. With each

*In the remainder of this paper, this tract will be referred to as simply The Antipathy for the sake of brevity.
slash of the pen, Prynne increased the certainty that, while England might, for the moment, be sidetracked by civil war, it would not forget the danger still represented by the imprisoned Archbishop or the consequent need to deal decisively with him.

After Laud had spent three years of alternating hope and despair in the Tower, he was disturbed at four a.m. on the morning of June 1, 1643, by Prynne and ten musketeers. Bearing a warrant for the seizure of the prisoner's letters and papers, Prynne proceeded to gobble up every scrap of paper he could lay his hands on, ostensibly for the purpose of discovering the extent of Laud's estates. The search was doubtlessly a source of deep gratification to Prynne, who had been the object of many warrants issued by his present victim. It must be said in Laud's favor, however, that he never came calling at so ungodly an hour as four o'clock in the morning. Nevertheless, unpreturbed by the hour, Prynne prolonged his search until 9 a.m. Then, satisfied that no crumb had escaped him, he departed with:

Twenty-one bundles of papers which Laud had prepared for his defense, the two letters from the King concerning Chartham and other benefices, the Scottish liturgy with the directions accompanying it, and the private diary which Laud had kept since his first entry into St. John's College as an undergraduate.61

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Prynne took with him, in addition, Laud's book of private devotions, in spite of the Archbishop's impassioned plea to have that, at least left behind. Forgetting the courtesy Laud had shown him in 1637, Prynne refused his prisoner's request, leaving Laud to sigh that Prynne "must needs see what passed between God and me: a thing, scarce ever offered to any Christian."\(^6\) Prynne left with another item "scarce ever offered to any Christian," a pair of the Archbishop's gloves, which Prynne had examined so minutely that Laud had given them to him. In exchange for the gloves Laud received the second, and final, thank you that Prynne was ever to offer him.

Prynne's search, aside from the gloves, failed to bear the voluptuous fruits he had been expecting. He doubtlessly perused the Archbishop's papers with the greatest care, but they produced no evidence that could be used to gain a conviction of treason. In his frustration, "Prynne declared that Laud had burned all his secret papers when he visited Lambeth with Maxwell after his committal by the House of Lords."\(^6\) This the Archbishop denied, and an inspection of the facts certainly seems to substantiate his denial.

Two months after his early morning search of Laud's rooms, Prynne published Rome's Masterpiece, and the effect of this

\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 419.
work on the popular imagination compensated in large part for the lack of evidence against Laud. The tract revealed the so-called Habernfeld Plot which was handled by Prynne as a second Gunpowder Plot. Using indirect, yet obvious means, Prynne made it appear that Laud was a party to the plot. With Rome's Masterpiece, Prynne had hit upon the surest method of vanquishing his foe. By associating Laud and the cause of Rome in the public's mind, Prynne could play upon the popular fear of papists until it should reach such a frenzy that it would demand Laud's very life as an assurance against heresy in religion.\textsuperscript{63A}

Laud appeared briefly before the House of Lords on November 13, 1643. He was totally unprepared, however, as a result of Prynne's mass confiscation of his papers coupled with his lack of means (brought on by the confiscation of his ecclesiastical livings in June, 1643) to secure counsel. Prynne was busy at the time prosecuting Nathaniel Fiennes for the surrender of Bristol to the Royalist forces, and so Laud was allowed a brief respite.

Prynne could not let Laud rest completely in peace, however, and in November he published The Popish Royal Favorite. The book was supposedly composed from the papers seized in Laud's chamber. It was presented as a revelation of the Archbishop's duplicity in certain papist schemes,
such as the abortive Spanish marriage negotiations. In all likelihood, Prynne had doctored the evidence so that it presented Laud in a particularly damning light. Otherwise Prynne would have made it public earlier, when he first secured possession of the papers. If such was, in fact, the case, Prynne would have no scruples about misinterpreting his opponent's meaning. After all, he did consider it his sacred duty to remove Laud from the English religious scene, and he did have the example of Laud's misconstruction of the Histriomastix to follow.

With the new year, attention focussed again on the unfortunate prelate. On January 16, 1644, he appeared before the House of Lords to answer to his impeachment. Again he was unprepared, and the trial was deferred. On January 22, he appeared once more and this time pleaded the Act of Oblivion, "whereby he confessed himself guilty of the crimes charged against him."64 Laud's guilt had been assumed from the very beginning; however, as Prynne had in 1637, so that the hearing of the evidence, carefully censored by the ever vigilant Prynne, was a mere formality.

Nevertheless, Laud's trial began in earnest on March 12, 1644. "Laud's whole life was objected against him."65

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64 Kirby, pp. 69-70.
65 Trevor-Roper, p. 422.
Witnesses, selected by Prynne for their grievances against the Archbishop, presented "a tedious series of charges" from March until July. Laud patiently answered each charge, but his efforts were in vain, since few of the judges even bothered to remain to hear his answers. Laud, by this time, was speaking to an openly hostile House of Lords. The bishops had been excluded, the royalist peers were with the King at Oxford, and those who had supported the peace party had withdrawn in August, 1643.

In September, 1644, Prynne added to Laud's worries by providing each of the members of the House of Lords with a "thin blue folio," entitled A Breviate of the Life of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury.* It was not only another document to swell the charge against him; it was a cruel exposure of his most intimate life, as revealed in his diary, or a garbled form of that diary. Even his dreams were used against Laud. The Breviate was Prynne's supreme effort to win a conviction against Laud. In it he deserted legalities and used psychology to convince England of Laud's guilt. Everything that Laud had ever done was shown as a betrayal of the English religion. Some discerning souls saw through Prynne's pretense and pointed an accusing

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66 Ibid.

*In the remainder of this paper, this fact will be referred to as simply the Breviate for the sake of brevity.

67 Ibid., p. 424.

68 Ibid.
finger at the editor rather than the author of the diary, but the majority of those who had the power of decision over Laud chose to believe Prynne.

On October 22, Laud's room in the Tower was again fruitlessly searched. Failing to secure the longed for evidence, Prynne turned to the people. Stirred up as they were by Prynne's publications, the Londoners howled for Laud's death. "From the streets and the pulpits, the death of the Archbishop was demanded." As a result Laud was summoned before the Commons on November 2 and acquainted with their decision to proceed by ordinance of attainder, unless he could prove his innocence. Since he had already done just that with purely negative results, Laud had no further recourse. On November 16, 1644, the Ordinance was passed by the Commons and sent to the Lords. The Lords hesitated, but mob pressure and the possibility of cementing the recent military alliance with Scotland in the Solemn League and Covenant by sacrificing Laud, their now common enemy, overcame their timidity. On January 4, 1645, the House of Lords passed the Ordinance of Attainder, rejecting at the same time, Laud's last futile attempt to save himself by presenting a royal pardon drawn up two years previously. Laud was sentenced to death by hanging. On this one small, gruesome point,

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69 Ibid., pp. 426-7.
however, he emerged victorious, for his request for the ax in preference to the rope was granted, in spite of Prynne's and the Common's rude protest. His request for three clergy­men of his own choice to attend him on the scaffold was refused, however, and "two reliable Puritan ministers were appointed by the Commons to perform that function." 70

William Laud died on Tower Hill, January 10, 1645, but not before Prynne had struck him a final blow in *Hidden Works of Darkness Lately Brought to Light* and Canterbury's Doom. No longer touched by his longtime enemy's malice, Laud preached his own funeral sermon from the scaffold, protesting his loyalty to the Church of England to the last. He then placed his head on the block and submitted to his fate. Prynne had won the battle he had undertaken so many years before. The agent of Satan, so long a danger in England's midst was dead, and Laud's dream of the English Church as a strong and unified instrument of political control lay chopped to bits on Tower Hill.

"The more I am beat down, the more I am lifted up." Payne wore his hair long after 1637 to conceal his dishonor.
Part III
The Pen Mightier than the Sword

The years preceding the catalytic events of the Civil War were, for the majority of Englishmen, quiet, restful years. Such was not the case with William Prynne. He was besieged with activity. In the twenty year period between 1625 and 1645, a veritable torrent of pamphlets, tracts, and books gushed from his pen, for in that period, he was frantically seeking to secure the English Church for the tenets of Calvin.

In the path of this holy design, one obstacle loomed, black and menacing -- the religious position of William Laud, who was, for the first fifteen years of Prynne's crusade, the most powerful cleric in England, and decidedly not of Prynne's religious views. Confronted with the danger Laud posed to Calvinism, Prynne was driven to destroy that threat. The only means at his disposal were his pen and his learning, both dipped liberally into venom, bigotry, and possibly even fanaticism, but both extremely effective on the mind of his era. Because of their violence and bigotry, Prynne's tracts have no lasting literary quality outside of his own period. As the key to seventeenth century English thought and to the gargantuan struggle between Prynne and Archbishop Laud over the direction of the English Church, however,
they are quite important.

At the base of Prynne's theology rested the stern Calvinist doctrine of predestination, a dogma that Laud and those of Laudian persuasion were all too eager to stamp out of the English Church. Recognizing this threat, Prynne picked up his pen and hurled The Perpetuity of a Regenerate Man's Estate out upon the public. The Perpetuity's style was typical of all of Prynne's subsequent works. It's language was completely vitriolic, cutting like a knife into the theology of the Laudians. It's position concerning Calvinism was prejudiced, bigoted, and dogmatic. Prynne's position was the only true interpretation of God's will; anything else was blasphemy. Citations from the Church Fathers, ecclesiastical writers, and the Scriptures tumbled over each other in Prynne's haste to prove that he had found the way to salvation -- the only way. Not content with this macrocosm of reference, Prynne reiterated his position in epistles and letters to the reader, typical of almost all of his work. The margins, too, were littered with lengthy, ponderous notes, causing W. M. Lamont to label Prynne, in the twentieth century, "marginal Prynne." In all probability Prynne won over many simple souls by the sheer weight of his references.

71 W. M. Lamont, Marginal Prynne (Toronto, 1963), introduction.
In spite of, or perhaps because of his violent, weighty style, Prynne emerged as an exponent, an extremist, but an exponent nevertheless, of the religious beliefs of an important segment of the population of seventeenth century England. He held up to the public gaze the conflict between Scripture and Sacrament, and it emerged much more sharply in the light of controversy than it had ever appeared in the pulpit. He compelled the choosing of sides, and he eventually helped force the conflict to its resolution.

In *The Perpetuity*, he was answering an attack on predestination and the Calvinist conception of divine grace. Prynne contended that there was no argument, for "such as are truly regenerated and ingrafted into Christ by a lively faith, can neither finally nor totally fall from grace." He proceeded to utilize every reference that could conceivably support this view to smother his opponent's (Montague's) assertion that grace was free to all, that man of his own will could choose to receive or to reject grace, that a man once having received grace could fall from that state, perhaps even totally and forever. In answer to this apostasy, Prynne affirmed that:

> God defends and keeps those who have been regenerated. God has chosen them, not they Him, so that he preserves them out of love...a constant immutable and perpetual love...the saints can never separate themselves from God; they do not have free will because their wills are subordinate and conformable to the will of God.\(^73\)


\(^73\)Ibid., pp. 13-19.
To believe otherwise would be to "pull God out of Heaven," said Prynne. It would mean giving oneself over to "the dismal, the dangerous, and pernicious mists of popery and Arminianism." The Perpetuity was typical of Prynne's writing in defense of Calvinism from the period 1625 until 1638. It was a sort of guerrilla warfare of the pen. Using it awkwardly, and yet acutely, Prynne was, as a rule, able to sneak up on his real target, Archbishop Laud, and strike a blow at his position without actually leaving the comparatively innocent guise of aiming at someone else already in print. Thus, Montague, Cosin, Widdowes, and Wren, if Prynne did write News from Ipswich, were merely decoys. Laud was the real fortress under attack, and Prynne's aim was accurate and deadly.

After 1638 Prynne's attack became more overtly directed at Laud personally, doubtlessly due to the fact that Prynne was becoming inured to the threat of punishment, after all he had already lost his ears twice; and, perhaps also due to a sixth sense that hinted at Laud's increasing weakness. Whatever the reason, Prynne did begin to attack the institution of episcopacy through assaults on Laud, rather than vice versa. At first anger jarred him into writing A Brief Relation of Certain Special and Most Material Passages and Speeches in the Star Chamber, denouncing Laud for his part

74 Ibid., p. 3.
75 Ibid., p. 2.
in the 1637 prosecution of Prynne. By 1644, however, and the publication of A Breviate of the Life of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, Prynne had dropped all pretense about his wish to attack and destroy Laud. In the Breviate, Prynne was on one of his most venomous, bigoted, distorted, fanatical binges, and he was supremely successful in accomplishing his projected ends. His corrosive spleen burst over the English nation and transformed many Englishmen into the frenzied, bloodlusting mob that finally forced Laud's death warrant through Parliament.

At the very beginning of the Breviate, Prynne made it unmistakably clear that his main purpose in writing was "to give impetus to the Commons, since several of the members most interested in Laud's prosecution had died."\(^7^6\) Twisting the words of his victim's own diary, Prynne made Laud the author of his own condemnation. He frequently reminded the reader that these admissions of guilt in regard to such things as advancement by "unlawful actions,"\(^7^7\) the existence of conscious thought in Laud's dreams, and intentionally giving the King false counsel, were all recorded just as Laud wrote them.

Of course Prynne in no way believed this himself. He knew that he had mangled Laud's meaning beyond recognition.


\(^7^7\)Ibid., p. 33.
Indeed, he probably would have admitted it, as he later admitted he had made additions to *Canterbury's Doom*, had the success of the resolution of the conflict with Laud not depended so completely on the emotional effect of Laud's supposed self-condemnation. Twentieth century critics may score Prynne all that they wish for his literary gauchness, but they cannot deny that, with the exception of the *Histriomastix*, Prynne was extremely successful at moving his contemporaries in the direction in which he wished them to go.
Part IV
Conclusion

William Prynne was undeniably a bigot and an extremist, and in that capacity lay his significance for his period. "He was, therefore, just the kind of person to turn the doctrines of the preachers into a reckless assault upon the existing order."78 The preachers' moderation stopped them short of the controversy, but Prynne's colossal egoism, which allowed him to believe that "the dogma of election was a personal certification from on high of his own infallible rectitude,"79 plunged heedlessly into the fray. In his own bileous way he helped to precipitate the confrontation of Puritan and High Church Anglican.

Although he vanquished the opposition's leader in that confrontation, Prynne did not secure for all time his theology in the Church of England. The Church at the end of the seventeenth century was much less dogmatic than Prynne had desired, and its ceremonies were strikingly similar to those advocated by Laud, for all his popish stain. The real and lasting result of Prynne's head on clash with Laud was that by its very violence it showed the way to a real resolution of the controversy. Prynne's extremism briefly caught

78 Haller, p. 219.
79 Ibid.
his contemporaries up into the struggle, but ultimately it
tired them and repelled them into recognizing that "what had
been impossible to effect in a Church to the worship of which
every person was obliged to conform became possible in a Church
which anyone who pleased was at liberty to abandon."

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30 Dictionary of National Biography, XI, 635.
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