



## **Friction in the Archives: Storytelling in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism**

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Résumé de l'article

Les écrits de martyrs ont été au centre de l'histoire de l'anabaptisme de la période de la Réforme dès le début du XVI<sup>e</sup>, et la recherche les a longtemps utilisés comme documents sur une communauté persécutée et typiquement clandestine. À partir d'une convergence remarquable entre les sources qui nous sont parvenues — la lettre d'un martyr emprisonné et la requête de pardon d'un anabaptiste repentant, donnant toutes deux un récit comparable des événements — cet article montre que ces récits de martyrs peuvent être revus de façon à révéler la subjectivité de leurs auteurs dans leur récit des débuts de l'anabaptisme. Simultanément, les récits de pardon peuvent amener une nouvelle perspective sur les récits de nature historique, et qui ont acquis, avec le temps, à travers les pratiques du chant et de la lecture en communauté, valeur de vérité.

# Friction in the Archives: Storytelling in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism

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*The writings of martyrs have been at the centre of the history of Reformation-era Anabaptism since the sixteenth century itself, and scholars have long used them as sources of information about a persecuted and typically clandestine community. Based on a rare confluence in the surviving source material—a martyr's prison letter and a repentant Anabaptist's request for pardon that provide two different narratives of closely related events—this article reframes martyrological narratives as stories that reveal much about the subjectivity of their authors and the ways in which they shaped the early history of Anabaptism. At the same time, pardon tales can introduce new perspectives into historical narratives that were, over the course of centuries, inscribed as truth through communal practices of singing and reading.*

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The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 90.

Believe that sacred stories are strong enough to welcome examination.<sup>2</sup>

Kristen Beachy, *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*

Claes Gerrits was, by his own admission, a drunk and a gambler. In 1552, the Zeeland native found himself in Delft after losing money in games of chance.<sup>3</sup> Four years later, he was in Dordrecht, awaiting a response to his request for pardon. The charges he sought to appeal had nothing to do with his history of drunken debauchery. In the months between his arrival in Delft in 1552 and his arrest in March 1554, Gerrits gave up gambling and became an accused heretic.<sup>4</sup> In his letter of remission, he told the story of how this transformation occurred. While Gerrits lamented the loss of his money in Delft, he met a man named Adrian Cornelis.<sup>5</sup> According to Gerrits, Cornelis spoke words of comfort in a time of trouble, and he offered instruction in God's commandments. Soon, Gerrits stopped gambling and no longer drank

2. Kirsten Beachy, ed., *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 28.

3. Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (hereafter NL-HaNA), Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238r.

4. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 239v. On Dutch letters of remission, see Marjan Vrolijk, *Recht door Gratie: Gratie bij doodslagen en andere delicten in Vlaanderen, Holland en Zeeland (1531–1567)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), as well as Hugo de Schepper, "Het gratierecht in het Bourgondisch-Habsburgse Nederland 1384–1633: Vorstelijk prerogatief en machtsmiddel," in *Symposium over de central overheidsinstellingen van de Habsburgse Nederlanden*, ed. Herman Coppens and Karin van Honacker (Brussels: s.n., 1995), 43–87; de Schepper, "The Individual on Trial in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands: Between Tradition and Modernity," trans. Elizabeth Bradbury Pollnow, in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World*, ed. Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley (Lanham, UK: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 200–04; Hans de Waardt, "I Beg Your Pardon: I am a Heretic! A Countryside Conventicle in Holland in the 1520s," in *Religious Minorities and Cultural Diversity in the Dutch Republic: Studies Presented to Piet Visser on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. August den Hollander, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 29–40; and Guido Marnef, "'Verleid en bedrogen.' Berouwvolle doopsgezinden in Brabantse remissiebriefven, 1543–1565," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 22 (1996): 69–77. On an earlier historical period, see also Peter Arnade and Walter Prevenier, *Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble: Pardon Letters in the Burgundian Low Countries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). Patronymes were used instead of family names in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. For clarity and consistency, I use them as surnames in this article.

5. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238r.

to excess. As he attempted to mend his ways, he became friends with Cornelis, whom Gerrits admired as a “very devout Christian man.” Gerrits, his pardon letter stated, had no reason to suspect otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Only later, after he heard that Cornelis had been executed in Leiden, did Gerrits realize that he had been tricked into taking part in illegal religious gatherings.

Gerrits was not alone in seeking pardon for crimes against the church. Dozens of other such requests relating to cases of heresy and blasphemy between the 1530s and 1550s survive in the high court’s archive in The Hague, scattered through volumes containing hundreds of letters of remission for crimes such as murder and theft.<sup>7</sup> Each letter relates a tale of error, misunderstanding, or regret. In a series of cases, multiple supplicants claimed ignorance of the prohibition of evangelical gatherings on account of their village’s isolated location.<sup>8</sup> Others sought to exploit legal loopholes. In response to rumours of a general pardon for remorseful Anabaptists in 1541, a resident of Gouda, for example, pre-emptively requested grace for his re-baptism before any charges had been raised against him.<sup>9</sup> Still others, like Gerrits, recounted how they had realized, a little too late, that they had fallen prey to those peddling heresy.<sup>10</sup>

Three decades ago, Natalie Zemon Davis demonstrated that pardon tales can reveal much about the subjectivity of their authors and the social world of early modern Europeans, and since then, an exciting body of scholarly work has grown around the genre.<sup>11</sup> This article will place Gerrits’s letter in the context of such scholarship, and in so doing, it argues that pardon tales and the practices of storytelling they invoke can deepen our understanding of how the history of

6. “[...] nyet wetende dat hy anders was dan een zeer devoot kersten mensche.” NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238v.

7. Remissions in cases of heresy and blasphemy are recorded in the following volumes of the Hof van Holland’s archive: NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nrs. 3545, 3547, 3548, 3549, 3550, 3556, 3558, and 3559.

8. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3547, fols. 29r–68r, de Waardt, 34ff.

9. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3550, fol. 120r. Such an offer of remission had been made in 1534: James D. Tracy, *Holland Under Habsburg Rule, 1506–1566: The Formation of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 166. Several hundred accepted: see Vrolijk, 282.

10. For example, see NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3547, fol. 29vff; the case is discussed in detail in de Waardt, 34ff.

11. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); see also the sources cited above, n. 4.

sixteenth-century Anabaptism has taken shape. Pardon letters preserve voices very different from those in the martyrological accounts that have been at the centre of histories of Anabaptism, and they thus bring new perspectives to long accepted narratives. Where the letters of remission contain accounts of ignorance and remorse, the texts that martyrs wrote in prison are testaments of unwavering faith. Each recounts an individual's defiance of attempts to bring about the recantation that seemingly came so easily to those seeking pardon. Indeed, the letter that Gerrits's friend Adrian Cornelis wrote in prison in Leiden in 1552 has served as an example of such resolve for over four centuries. In it, he recounted the circumstances surrounding his arrest and the torture he endured in prison, imploring his readers to remain steadfast should they face persecution themselves. A decade after Cornelis's death, his prison writings were printed in *The Sacrifice unto the Lord (Het Offer des Heeren)*, the most extensive and widely printed Anabaptist martyrology of the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> A song recounting his execution was subsequently printed in the songbook appended to *The Sacrifice unto the Lord* in 1563.<sup>13</sup> A century later, his account was included in Thieleman van Braght's *Martyrs' Mirror (Het Bloedigh Tooneel of Martelaers Spiegel)*, the martyrology that sustained Anabaptists' memories of their heritage of persecution during a time of relative peace, and which remains part of the living tradition of contemporary Amish and Mennonite communities.<sup>14</sup>

12. On the publication history and structure of this martyrology, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 225–31. The most widely available edition of *Het Offer des Heeren* is based on the expanded edition of 1570. See S. Cramer and F. Pijper, eds., *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica: Geschriften uit den Tijd der Hervorming in de Nederlanden*, vol. 2: *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1904) (hereafter *Offer*).

13. *Een liedtboecxken, tracterende van den offer des Heeren* (S.l.: s.n., 1563). The songs are included in the edition of Cramer and Pijper (see above note).

14. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only upon Confession of Faith and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus Their Saviour ... to the Year A.D. 1660* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1951), 526. Original Dutch in van Braght, *Het Bloedigh Tooneel of Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde of Weereloose Christenen, Die om 't getuygenis van Jesus haren Salighmaker geleden ende gedood zijn van Christi tijd of tot desen tijd toe* (Amsterdam: Hieronymus Sweerts, 1685), 2:133. On the history of the *Mirror*, see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 245–46 and especially David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). On the evolution of Dutch Anabaptist culture after the sixteenth

Thus, while Gerrits's request was filed away in the court's archive, Cornelis's letter—a very different perspective on a closely related set of events—became enshrined in the shared memory of the Anabaptist community and shaped our understanding of its history. The martyrs' centrality reflects, in large part, the nature of the sources available to us: most often, only those Anabaptists who were apprehended and interrogated left any trace of their faith in the written record. Martyrological narratives have thus been among the most important sources for the history of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, and scholars have mined them for evidence of Anabaptists' interactions with the legal system and for the motives that drove individual martyrs to maintain their faith through torture. So too, the songs that recounted martyrs' experiences have provided clues to a devotional culture that was largely private and clandestine. Although scholars have periodically debated the factual accuracy of martyrological literature, such texts are widely accepted as reliable sources for the study of a subject for which other evidence is usually scanty.<sup>15</sup>

Even as recent scholarship has confirmed that the actions of the martyrs were the exception rather than the rule, the doubt and regret of individuals like Gerrits has thus remained on the margins of the history of Anabaptism.<sup>16</sup> Because so little is known about those who avoided prosecution, they play a passive role in a narrative that has often been driven by the deaths of the

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century, see Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser, eds., *From Martyr to Muppy (Mennonite Urban Professionals): A Historical Introduction to Cultural Assimilation Processes of a Religious Minority in the Netherlands: The Mennonites* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994).

15. On these debates, see two articles by Samuel Cramer, "De geloofwaardigheid van Van Braght," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 39 (1899): 65–164 and "Nogmaals de geloofwaardigheid van Van Braght. Tevens antwoord op de kritiek van den Heer W. Wilde," *Doopsgezinde Bijdrage* 40 (1900): 184–210. As Gary Waite notes, we should not simply ask whether accounts of Anabaptist activity are true but consider how they might reflect authorities' perceptions of those actions, in *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1525–1600* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 71.

16. See especially Michele Zelinsky Hanson, *Religious Identity in an Early Reformation Community: Augsburg 1517 to 1555* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), chapter 3 and Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany: Anabaptism and Lutheranism, 1525–1585* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On patterns of prosecution in the Low Countries, and particularly on the reasons why some Anabaptists were executed and others escaped punishment, see Jaap Geraerts, "The Prosecution of Anabaptists in Holland, 1530–1566," *Menonite Quarterly Review* (hereafter *MQR*) 86 (2012): 5–47.

martyrs.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, within the historiography of Anabaptism to which they are so central, martyrs have often had curiously little agency; made notable by their deaths rather than their lives, they most often appear as the subjects of persecuting governments, or more passively still, as memories.<sup>18</sup> Although they are often the key figures in historical narratives, the martyrs implicitly have little power in shaping them; their accounts provide records of what was done to them by others, and although their resistance is almost axiomatic, the inevitable ending of death and annihilation by the flames epitomizes their role.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, such silences reflect structures of power that govern a series of moments in the creation of historical knowledge: the initial recording of facts, the selective process of preservation, the construction of a narrative, and finally, the retrospective assessment of that history's significance.<sup>19</sup> The intersection of Gerrits's pardon tale and Cornelis's prison letter—a confluence that is perhaps unique in the surviving source material—suggests ways in which we might reconsider some of the silences in the history of Anabaptism, bringing new voices into its telling and recognizing the full complexity of familiar ones. Together, the accounts of Cornelis and Gerrits reshape the traditional view of martyrological literature as a source of information about persecution and memorialization. Instead, they reframe such accounts as carefully-crafted stories that reveal much about how martyrs actively interpreted their own experiences and sought to relate them to their readers. In their writing, martyrs both drew upon the assumptions of a broader community and tacitly shaped the ways in which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anabaptists recounted its early history.<sup>20</sup>

17. John Oyer argues that histories of Anabaptism need to incorporate the perspectives of those who concealed their faith or recanted under interrogation, thus widening the definition of membership in the movement: see "Nicodemites among Württemberg Anabaptists," *MQR* 71 (1997): 487–514. See also Mark Furner, "Lay Casuistry and the Survival of Later Anabaptists in Bern," *MQR* 75 (2001): 431.

18. James C. Juhnke provides valuable commentary on the significance of martyrs: see "Shaping Religious Community through Martyr Memories," *MQR* 73 (1999): 546–56. For a different perspective on the roles of victims and witnesses in historical narratives, see Amos Goldberg, "The Victim's Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History," *History and Theory* 48 (2009): 220–37.

19. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), esp. 6, 48–49, and 58–59.

20. On the relationship between history and storytelling, David Carr notes that "history as a discipline simply adds *more stories* to an already story-laden world." See "Getting the Story Straight: Narrative and

As new students of history are quickly taught to recognize, sources are not simply records of events that occurred, but evidence of particular ways of interpreting them. Yet because the voices of individual Anabaptists are so often filtered through those of others, their subjectivity is usually lost to us. Although we can presume that the authors of martyrological literature were active agents, rarely can we reconstruct how they crafted their stories. Gerrits's pardon tale and Cornelis's prison letter enable us to consider those practices of storytelling, and in turn, to recover their centrality to the culture of sixteenth-century Anabaptism more broadly. While the two accounts reveal how Anabaptists' stories took shape, a song that Cornelis wrote in memory of others who died for their faith ultimately reveals the significance of practices of storytelling to the history of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. While that history may first have been told in the voices of martyrs such as Cornelis, his singular perspective was only inscribed as truth by innumerable others who told and re-told it over the course of generations.<sup>21</sup> The story of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, Cornelis's songwriting reminds us, may be filled with the actions of martyrs and their persecutors, but it was forged in the practice of storytelling itself.

### Stories and historians

Over the past several decades, historians have revealed stories and storytelling as fruitful subjects of analysis, particularly in the context of early modern Europe.<sup>22</sup> In a society in which oral communication continued to dominate,

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Historical Knowledge," in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London: Routledge, 2001), 202.

21. On the difficulty of distinguishing between how events actually occurred and how they were recorded, see Trouillot, 7.

22. On the uses of stories in history, and for examples of studies in which stories hold a central place, see, among others, Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1493–1515; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Judith Pollmann, "Of Living Legends and Authentic Tales: How to Get Remembered in Early Modern Europe," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 23 (2013): 103–24; Alon Confino, "Narrative Form and Historical Sensation: On Saul Friedländer's *The Years of Extermination*," *History and Theory* 48 (2009): 199–219; Geoffrey Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001); Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error:*



storytelling had special significance. Newsmongers, as Robert Darnton has noted, spread information by word of mouth, transforming current events into political or moral narratives.<sup>23</sup> Spoken or sung, information could be separated from the media of script and print, and its spread evaded censorship.<sup>24</sup> Stories, as these scholars have demonstrated, demand that we attend not simply to their content, but to the actions through which they were told and the contexts in which their audiences encountered them.

The ability of stories to reveal the modes of their telling, as Natalie Zemon Davis has argued, makes them of particular value to historians. Although stories were long dismissed as unreliable sources for historical facts, Davis suggests that they can provide evidence of the unspoken principles that guided their writers and audiences. Shaping the French pardon tales that Davis studied were notions of gender and class, as well as accepted outcomes of anger and preconceived images of aggressor and victim. Their plots were not simply driven by the events that had occurred, but also guided by tacit standards for what made a good and, above all, believable story.<sup>25</sup> Although the drama of the performance of storytelling is lost to us, Darnton similarly argues that the written texts of folktales can reveal how their tellers framed danger and deprivation, and in turn, how those perspectives evolved as the tales were told and re-told over the course of generations.<sup>26</sup> Stories, in other words, have been revealed as powerful tools for the study of the mentalities of ordinary early modern people, capable of evoking elements of inner lives that had long been assumed to be utterly inaccessible.

Yet for all the attention that stories have garnered from historians of early modern Europe, these methods of analysis have not been applied to the

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*A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chapter 4; William Cronon, "Storytelling," *American Historical Review* 118 (2013): 1–19; and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

23. Robert Darnton, "An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 2 and 14–15.

24. This phenomenon is central to the argument of Rebecca Wagner Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

25. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*. See also Robert Muchembled, *La violence au village: Sociabilité et comportements populaires en Artois du XV<sup>e</sup> au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), chapter 1.

26. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), chapter 1.

accounts of sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs. At first glance, this might reflect hesitance to call into question texts that remain beloved—although as Davis notes, to treat a text as a story is not necessarily to dismiss it as false, but to seek to understand how and why it was told.<sup>27</sup> Upon closer examination, however, many martyrological texts have proven resistant to this line of inquiry. The methods through which a story was crafted most often emerge by viewing it within the framework of other texts. The conventions that shaped a notary's narrative, for example, emerge in light of the manuals that guided his craft; the strategies of those who told the pardon tales become clear in concert with the stories contained in the very different genres of the published crime pamphlet and the *nouvelle*.<sup>28</sup> Often, martyrological texts appear almost in isolation from other sources through which the context of their telling might be reconstructed, and the most vibrant details—the conversations recorded verbatim, the final words spoken at the stake—survive only in the martyrological literature itself. In many cases, interrogation records do not survive, if they were ever kept at all, and the only archival evidence of a martyrdom that has come down to us is a record of a sentence: a document that notes the offense and penalty but few other details of the case.<sup>29</sup> The outlines sketched through these legal sources confirm the basic elements of many martyrs' accounts.<sup>30</sup> The singularity of the martyrs' voices, however, paradoxically obscures their power as storytellers.

Evidence for one particular dimension of the telling of martyr stories—their spread and persistence within Anabaptist communities—survives in abundance.<sup>31</sup> Scholarship on Anabaptist print culture has begun to reveal the complexity of those processes by tracing the paths martyrological texts took

27. I adopt Davis's definition of "fiction," which focuses not on invention but rather on "forming, shaping, and molding." *Fiction in the Archives*, 3.

28. Kathryn Burns, "Notaries, Truth, and Consequences," *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 350–79; Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 63–70. On the ways in which the conventions of storytelling shaped such pamphlet literature, see also Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 1999).

29. Detailed records survive in Amsterdam: see A. F. Mellink, ed., *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica* (Leiden: Brill, 1975–95), vols. 2 and 5.

30. Cramer, "De geloofwaardigheid van Van Braght" and "Nogmaals de geloofwaardigheid van Van Braght."

31. See Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, as well as Keith L. Sprunger, "Dutch Anabaptists and the Telling of Martyr Stories," *MQR* 80 (2006): 149–83. Gary Waite provides an example in which martyrological narratives can be compared with trial records; see *Eradicating the Devil's Minions*, 71–72.

from prison to press. Most often, the original manuscripts of individual martyrs' accounts have long been lost.<sup>32</sup> However, the rare survival of an autograph copy, as well as exempla in manuscripts or in pamphlets printed soon after a martyr's death, suggest that the texts were transmitted unaltered until they were included in *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, sometimes decades after a martyr's execution.<sup>33</sup> Meticulously kept and copied, those words were preserved within the clandestine culture of sixteenth-century Dutch Anabaptism. Collected in *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, a martyrology that began with the crucifixion of Christ and progressed through the executions of the 1550s, those individuals' accounts were framed within a broader narrative of persecution that continues to shape readings of the martyrological literature.<sup>34</sup> However, the structure of the martyrology itself often obscures the nature of the accounts it contains, particularly when viewed in light of Hayden White's arguments about varieties of historical narration. *The Sacrifice unto the Lord* appears as a chronicle—a history that, by White's definition, presents a series of events and implies a chronological progression, but ends without resolution at the author's own historical moment.<sup>35</sup> White contrasts this with "true history," a narrative that orders events to lead to the conclusion determined by the author.<sup>36</sup> We know much about the martyrology as chronicle of martyrdoms, in other words, but this knowledge has often come at the cost of understanding the subjective processes of narration that gave rise to the individual accounts within it.

With a large body of surviving evidence, the case of Adrian Cornelis provides a rare opportunity to reconstruct the ways in which a martyr developed his own story. As we shall see, Leiden's archive contains only brief mentions of Cornelis, but those glimpses begin to evoke the authorial decisions he made. His choices are thrown into relief in the pardon letter of his friend Claes Gerrits. While Cornelis's prison letter has long been taken as a source of

32. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 355–56; Piet Visser, "Zes onbekende martelaarsbrieven van Jeronimus Segers (†1551)," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*, 29 (2003): 195–96.

33. Piet Visser, "De bedrieglijk onbewogen bestaan van brieven: Een editorische vergelijking tussen de geschreven en de gedrukte martelaarsteksten van Jeronimus en Lysken Segers," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 29 (2003): 65–89.

34. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 229–30.

35. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 9 and 20.

36. White, "The Value of Narrativity," 23.

information about his martyrdom, Gerrits's request for remission provides an alternative way of viewing the same set of events, and in so doing, reveals how we might understand Cornelis as not only a martyr but also a storyteller.<sup>37</sup>

### The martyr

As with most Anabaptist martyrs, virtually all that we know of Adrian Cornelis's life comes from martyrologies. A glassmaker, he came from Schoonhoven and settled in Delft.<sup>38</sup> As for how he became an Anabaptist, no evidence survives. Cornelis left a detailed account, however, of his last weeks. While in prison in Leiden, he wrote a prayer, an admonition to his fellow believers, and an account of his arrest and interrogation. Presumably, a sympathetic visitor or guard smuggled the handwritten pages out of the prison.<sup>39</sup> A decade after Cornelis's death, his writings appeared in the first edition of *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*.<sup>40</sup>

Cornelis began his prison account with his arrival in Leiden, where he met with a friend and discussed Anabaptists held in the city's jail. One morning, Cornelis decided to go to the prison to ask Jan van Delft, the sheriff (*schout*), how the prisoners fared and whether they were soon to be "offered up." Van Delft answered that he did not know the prisoners' fates, but Cornelis continued to press for more information as the two walked through Leiden. Taking van Delft's willingness to converse as a sign that he might be in sympathy with Anabaptism, Cornelis asked whether the sheriff might set the prisoners free. Cornelis also told the story of the miraculous liberation of Paul and Silas and the conversion of their jailer. Van Delft, in turn, seemed curious about Cornelis, asking him about his background and his friends in Leiden. The two wandered for a long time and finally returned to the prison. Van Delft asked Cornelis if he would like to speak to the prisoners and Cornelis gladly accepted, thinking that the former had been moved by his testimony. Only as he heard the guards speaking quietly to one another did he realize that he had been trapped. The guards invited Cornelis to go further inside to visit prisoners in another cell,

37. On the distinction between recording information and shaping a narrative, see the work of Hayden White, especially "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological," in *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means*, ed. Robert Newman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 58–78.

38. *Offer*, 205.

39. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 112.

40. *Offer*, 195–215.

and again, he agreed. After all, his letter noted, things could not get any worse. Soon, Cornelis found himself locked in.<sup>41</sup>

Alone in his cell, Cornelis sang a hymn, *O truth, how you are now betrayed (O waerheyt, hoe zijt ghy nu vertreden)*, which underscored his plight. The remainder of his account describes in detail the suffering that resulted from his decision to trust van Delft. His personal effects—a Bible and a copy of a song he had written—were confiscated as evidence against him. He was then brought before the entire council. Cornelis's writings preserve the only record of his interrogation, and by his account, he resisted questioning. Asked if he had been re-baptized, Cornelis answered that he had received only one true baptism. One of the inquisitors asked who performed this baptism; in response, Cornelis asked the councilman if he would like to be re-baptized himself. Three days later, a second round of questioning occurred, but Cornelis gives a much less detailed account of it, stating that the inquisitors asked many questions that he did not wish to answer and he provided only vague responses. A third session took place in the torture chamber. In the executioner's presence, the inquisitors asked Cornelis if he had thought of any information he wished to offer. Cornelis did not answer, but instead began to admonish them with quotations from Scripture. The executioner stripped him and began to torture him with the *strappado*. Once again, Cornelis resisted: asked if he had previously visited Leiden with six friends, he refused to confirm or deny the accusation. In response, he was blindfolded and beaten. Still, Cornelis refused to disclose the names of his friends. When Cornelis again declined to answer after further beatings, his torturers poured water into his mouth and nose until he feared he might faint.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, having achieved little result from torture, the inquisitors revealed that they had already amassed extensive information about Cornelis. They described how he visited the prison with six of his friends, preached to the prisoners, and encouraged them to resist and remain steadfast in their faith. The inquisitors had also received information that Cornelis gave six *stuivers* to one of the guards. They knew where Cornelis slept in Leiden, and where his friends gathered to read Scripture. They knew so much that Cornelis could only

41. *Offer*, 205–06.

42. *Offer*, 206–09.

affirm the accusations. He did, he noted, try to remove blame from his friends, whose names the court already knew.<sup>43</sup>

Cornelis withstood the torture, he wrote, because Christ offered him comfort; through his torment, he bore the marks of Jesus's own suffering on his body. The next morning, the officials read Cornelis's confession to him. When asked if his earlier statements were true, Cornelis asked the interrogator if he was sated with the blood of the innocent. His retort sparked a debate about the government's power to execute its citizens.<sup>44</sup> Finally, after three more weeks in jail, Cornelis was asked if he wished to recant. He declined, but he and his fellow prisoners agreed to speak with a priest. Cornelis gives an extensive narrative of their debates, but his account ends abruptly: perhaps he ran out of paper, as he noted that he might, or perhaps his writing was cut short by his execution.<sup>45</sup>

### The legal record

Thus has Adrian Cornelis been remembered for over four centuries. Like other martyrological texts, his account reveals much about his final weeks, and it provides a window into the conduct of heresy trials in a city for which no records of interrogations survive. Yet the few mentions of Cornelis that appear in Leiden's archive add further details to the events he recounted in his prison text, and in turn, begin to suggest how he shaped that narrative. In Cornelis's own telling, the story begins in the fall of 1552. However, he first appears in the court's written record earlier that summer during a time of unrest in Leiden. In the city's jail, a group of Anabaptists awaited sentencing. As the prisoners sang in their dark cells, citizens of Leiden gathered to listen. Day and night, the observers called out to the prisoners. Finally, Leiden's council could no longer ignore the public disturbances and announced that any who continued to gather were to be fined. Those who were too poor to pay were to be imprisoned until the court saw fit to release them.<sup>46</sup> Hence tensions were high when, on

43. *Offer*, 209.

44. *Offer*, 210–11.

45. *Offer*, 212–15.

46. Regionaal Archief (hereafter RA) Leiden, Archief der secretarie van de stad Leiden, 388 B, Aflezingsboek, fol. 189r. On these events, see also L. Knappert, *De opkomst van het protestantisme in eene Noord-Nederlandsche stad: Geschiedenis van de hervorming binnen Leiden van den aanvang tot op het beleg* (Leiden: S.C. van Doesburgh, 1908), 192–93.

21 August, six Anabaptists were put to death.<sup>47</sup> That day, Adrian Cornelis ran through the streets of Leiden, shouting and singing in protest. His songs criticized the city's officials and described the condemned as doves whose blood was unjustly shed. Cornelis was arrested for the public disturbance, sentenced to walk in a penitential procession on 25 October, and banished.<sup>48</sup>

Just weeks later, on 25 November, Leiden's council issued a proclamation that certain residents were known to have harboured notorious Anabaptists, many of whom were strangers to the city.<sup>49</sup> Despite his banishment, Cornelis was evidently among those visitors and he was soon in prison again. Although the legal archive preserves no trace of the circumstances of his arrest, he appears again in the city's records of criminal sentences, where an entry confirms that he confessed that he had been re-baptized. He also admitted that he had taken part in clandestine gatherings and held heretical beliefs about the Eucharist. He was sentenced to be strangled and burned, or, if he chose to recant, to death by beheading. On 28 November, he was executed, along with several others.<sup>50</sup>

In light of Leiden's records, several key events were strikingly omitted from Cornelis's account. He makes no mention of his first brush with the law, and in turn, obscures the reasons for his second arrest. In Cornelis's own telling, he was duped by a jailer who had at first seemed receptive to evangelization; his arrest and interrogation, in this frame, were inherently unjust, the tragic result of his attempt to save Jan van Delft's soul. The omitted information suggests different motives. No matter how sympathetic van Delft might have seemed—and indeed, it is plausible that the sheriff encouraged Cornelis to come into the prison in order to bring him into custody—his arrest was not a surprising outcome of his return to Leiden and visit to the jail. In Cornelis's prison account, the only allusion to the earlier banishment is his reflection that he had had a feeling that his trip to Leiden would prove to be an unhappy

47. RA Leiden, Rechterlijk Archief, Inv. 3 (1), Criminele Vonnisboek 1533–1584, fol. 78r–v.

48. RA Leiden, Rechterlijk Archief, Inv. 3 (1), Criminele Vonnisboek 1533–1584, fol. 80r. To sixteenth-century observers, his actions may have recalled the famous disturbance of the *naaktlopers*, a group of Anabaptists who ran through the streets of Amsterdam in 1535. On them, see Ralf Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 223.

49. RA Leiden, Archief der secretarie van de stad Leiden, 388 B, Aflezingsboek, fol. 190v.

50. RA Leiden, Rechterlijk Archief, Inv. 3 (1), Criminele Vonnisboek 1533–1584, fols. 81r–82v.

one.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the basis for Cornelis's tragic tale was van Delft's duplicity: in his telling, a predictable series of events became a dramatic tale of persecution.

Cornelis's account, then, contains much more than meets the eye. While the martyrology presents an account of persecution in which Cornelis is a passive subject, the court's documents begin to reveal that narrative as one that Cornelis himself helped to construct. His prison account, as a result, provides an unusual opportunity to reconstruct the creative process through which it took shape, and in turn, to reveal how a martyr consciously shaped the historical record on which modern narratives continue to rely. In order to do so, we must thus excavate the traditions of storytelling that shaped his writing—traditions that emerge through another authorial voice, which tells a very different story of Adrian Cornelis.

### The pardon seeker

As noted above, letters of remission have been accepted much more readily than martyrological narratives as examples of storytelling and as evidence of the subjectivity of their authors. More precisely, as Davis notes, they can be taken as evidence for fiction-writing—not as fabrications, but as narratives carefully developed through conventions that governed the crafting of stories. By turning to Claes Gerrits's remission case, as a result, we can learn much about the narrative traditions that may have likewise shaped Cornelis's writing. The composition of a letter of remission inherently involved multiple authorial voices engaged in layers of storytelling. The supplicant first related his or her experiences to a notary.<sup>52</sup> Through this telling, the supplicant's recollection of the events that led to his arrest—perhaps based on hazy memories or uncomfortable truths—was shaped into a coherent explanation. That narrative then underwent further transformation as the notary placed the supplicant's account within the formulaic confines of the letter of remission, and most importantly, helped to mould it in order to convince officials of the supplicant's innocence. In letters of remission, as Davis argues, we encounter storytelling in action.

51. *Offer*, 206.

52. On the French process, see Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 8–15. See also Muchembled, chapter 1. On the composition of Dutch letters of pardon, see Vrolijk, 43–44.



With the help of his advocate, Gerrits's recollections were thus formed into a tale of good intentions with unfortunate consequences. By comparing his letter with Leiden's legal record and Cornelis's martyrological account, we come to a richer understanding of the ways in which two very different men—one who maintained his faith unto death and another who abjured it—used similar techniques of tale-telling. The letter of remission recounts how, after their initial acquaintance in Delft, Gerrits and Cornelis travelled together to Leiden along with three friends. Arriving in the middle of the night, the men joined a gathering hosted by "certain residents" of the city whose names Gerrits did not know, and Cornelis read from the Bible. The following morning, Gerrits left the house to visit his father-in-law, but he soon re-joined his friends outside Leiden's jail. The travellers' objective in the city, Gerrits's request for pardon briefly explained, was to visit a group of prisoners—presumably those who also played a role in Cornelis's narrative. Gerrits and Cornelis then returned to Delft in the company of a sheriff from Leiden, to whom Cornelis read from the Gospels as they travelled. Although Gerrits did not name the sheriff, we can presume that this was Jan van Delft, one of the central figures in the drama of Cornelis's prison letter. In Delft, Gerrits parted company with his friends and travelled back to his home in Middelburg. He did not remain long in Zeeland, however, and soon returned to Leiden, where he found Cornelis gathered with a few others. There, Cornelis and his friends forged a plot to bribe the jailers into releasing the Anabaptists held in Leiden's prison.<sup>53</sup>

The attempt to bribe the guards marks Cornelis's last appearance in the pardon letter. Gerrits left Leiden once more; there is no evidence that the two men ever saw one another again. However, Gerrits continued to find his way to clandestine meetings. He travelled on to Dordrecht, where he joined gatherings in several homes, learned biblical principles, and acquired his own copy of the Gospels. Despite these activities, the letter of remission maintains that Gerrits had always behaved as a faithful Christian should. He admits that he had had dealings with people "infected with heresy," but it was only after he learned that Cornelis had been executed that Gerrits realized that his friend was not what he had seemed. The letter also admits that Gerrits had read and listened to the Gospels and Epistles in Dutch, but he had not understood his wrongdoing. For all of his faults, the letter notes, at least Gerrits was no longer

53. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238v.

a drunk or a gambler.<sup>54</sup> He was merely a man who had tried to mend his ways, with unforeseen and unfortunate consequences. After debating the evidence and seeking the advice of Dordrecht's officials, the officials issued a pardon on the condition that Gerrits pay a fine and bear the costs of his case.<sup>55</sup>

### Shaping stories, guiding readers

By telling his story, Gerrits and his advocate sought to explain why he was not culpable for his crime. While he could not deny that he attended illegal gatherings, his letter successfully convinced the court that he had not intended to do harm, and indeed, that he had been led astray by false friends. A closer analysis shows how the letter was carefully constructed to lead to this conclusion. In turn, it reveals more about the events in Leiden, the figure of Cornelis, and the shaping of his martyrological account. Gerrits's letter of remission follows the basic sequence of events outlined in Leiden's archive: the gatherings at the prison, the arrest of Cornelis. Gerrits and his advocate, however, framed those events in order to place his case in the best possible light. Often, Gerrits's version of the story glosses over events that stand out in the legal records. The authorities' description of gatherings at the prison, for example, confirms that Gerrits's participation would detract from his case. In the letter, silences occur at such moments, which might have proven particularly incriminating. Gerrits admits that he visited the jail, but provides no further details. Often, a sudden change of pace in the narrative flags a detail that might otherwise damage Gerrits's pardon case. After attending a clandestine midnight gathering, Gerrits leaves for an innocuous visit to his father-in-law, emphasizing that he had a lawful purpose for his presence in Leiden. The letter mentions a plot to bribe the jailer, but again, Gerrits makes a rapid exit from the scene of his friends' misdeeds, setting off on a journey away from Leiden.<sup>56</sup> By emphasizing certain events and glossing over others, the letter places Gerrits on the fringes of the heretical activities with which he had been charged, casting him as a bystander or passer-by rather than one who had consciously chosen to break the law.

54. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fols. 238v–239r.

55. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 241r.

56. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238v.

Gerrits may, indeed, have told the truth: it is possible, and even likely, that his acquaintance with Anabaptism was only casual, occurring through chance meetings and networks of friends. The letter's treatment of Cornelis, however, reveals how Gerrits and his advocate actively sought to enhance that appearance.<sup>57</sup> The remission request's writers carefully crafted the characters of Cornelis and the other Anabaptists Gerrits encountered in his travels. Throughout the letter, the figure of Cornelis evolves: he first appears as a comforter in Gerrits's time of need, and later, as the tempter who led poor Gerrits astray. Similarly, the other friends Gerrits met in his travels—including Digna Pieters, who was martyred in Dordrecht in 1555—appear as wolves in sheep's clothing, welcoming Gerrits into their homes and presenting him with his own copy of the Gospels to aid him in his turn towards faith. By placing the focus on his friends—some of them notorious, dead, and unable to contradict his narrative—Gerrits's letter makes it clear that he was, by contrast, an innocent victim. In the course of the letter, readers follow his growing awareness of the plight in which he found himself: with nowhere to turn, he found hope in a man who seemed to be his friend, only to realize too late that he had fallen into another sort of sin. Gerrits, the letter implicitly argues, was nothing more than a hapless victim; he was worthy of pity, not punishment.

Gerrits's letter, then, reveals much about the events that took place in Leiden, but it does so through an artful narrative that sought to lead the reader to a specific conclusion. In the process, it depicts an Adrian Cornelis very different from the martyr we meet in *The Sacrifice unto the Lord* and provides clues to the ways in which Cornelis might have used similar narrative techniques himself. The two accounts are fundamentally similar in shape: both Cornelis and Gerrits told stories of trickery and deceit. In Cornelis's prison text, his misfortune resulted from the deception of Jan van Delft, who had presented himself as a friend only to lull Cornelis into a false sense of security. Gerrits's arrest, similarly, resulted from the deception of Cornelis himself. For both, the trickery of a false friend made for a compelling story—a story that would cast its protagonist in a particular light. Both Cornelis and Gerrits, in their own tellings, came to harm as a result of their efforts to do good. Gerrits was led astray, his letter asserts, while trying to improve his life and give up his

57. Indeed, as Davis notes, a letter of remission might serve the psychological purpose of distancing oneself from a crime, no matter the response it received. *Fiction in the Archives*, 114.

bad habits. Similarly, to the sympathetic readers of his martyrological account, Cornelis's suffering resulted from his attempt to convert a seemingly receptive man to the true faith. While the parallels between their circumstances might be coincidental, the centrality of deception to both written accounts suggests that their authors shared assumptions about what made a compelling story.

Cornelis's prison account, in this light, drew upon narrative models that were understood to prompt particular responses from readers. A closer comparison of his account with that of Gerrits suggests that within this framework, at least one of the authors shaped the sequence of events in order to make his story all the more gripping, or perhaps to gloss over the extent of his wrongdoing. Although Cornelis never named the friends with whom he visited the prison, Gerrits's letter of remission suggests that he was among them. Conflicting details in the two letters make it clear that both men had different memories of that event, or perhaps took liberties in their stories. Both described a walk with a prison official, during which Cornelis recited Scripture. Notably, Cornelis's account implies that he and van Delft walked alone; again, Gerrits, incidental to the drama of martyr and jailer, is absent from his story. While Gerrits claimed that the men travelled to Delft, Cornelis described wandering in the streets of Leiden, circling back to the prison. It is uncertain whether the men described different events, or whether one of them altered his account of a single occurrence. Regardless, inconsistencies between the letters confirm that at least one of the authors modified the timeline in which the events took place. Gerrits's letter of remission describes two separate visits to the jail: during the first, the men walked with the sheriff, and on their return visit, they attempted to bribe the guards.<sup>58</sup> However, Cornelis's letter includes only one such visit. In his narrative, all of the events leading up to his arrest, from his stroll with the sheriff to his entrapment in the prison, take place in quick succession on a single day. It is possible that Cornelis condensed multiple events into one in order to heighten the drama of his narrative, or alternatively, that Gerrits, writing four years later, misremembered the sequence of events or altered them to place his case in a better light. It is perhaps particularly telling, however, that Cornelis only alluded to the attempted bribe in his recounting of his torture—a point in the narrative at which his jailers most clearly appear as brutal enemies—and instead described a failed attempt at van Delft's conversion

58. NL-HaNA, Hof van Holland, 3.03.01.01, inv. nr. 3558, fol. 238v.

in much greater detail. In Gerrits's narrative, meanwhile, the bribe occurs just before his departure from Leiden, implicitly appearing to precipitate his parting from Cornelis and the beginning of his realization that his new friends were not what they seemed.

Like Gerrits and his advocate, then, Cornelis attended to pacing and plot, constructing the dramatic scene of his capture. Just as Gerrits and his advocate sought to tell a story that would be compelling to the officials who might grant a pardon, Cornelis composed his prison writings in anticipation of sympathetic readers who faced ongoing persecution. Indeed, he often broke from his narrative to address these readers. The revelation that information about him had already been betrayed to the authorities became a cautionary tale about the dangers of gossip. His readers were to be careful of friends who asked too many questions; it was dangerous to know too much.<sup>59</sup> His torture, described with such care that readers might envision each blow, was immediately followed in his letter by instructions to his "dear friends" about the help God provided in times of suffering.<sup>60</sup> His entrapment, too, became a lesson in the authorities' trickery and the necessity of speaking with caution at all times.<sup>61</sup> His audience was meant not only to read but also to envision themselves in a similar plight and use Cornelis's story to guide their actions.

In particular, Cornelis provided details in his account that might prompt specific devotional actions from its readers—actions that would help them view the events he related in a particular light. While he related his own experiences, he placed them in the framework of biblical history and relied on conventions that had, as his text confirms, already come to govern martyrological devotions by the 1550s. Strikingly, Cornelis implied parallels between his own narrative and biblical history a decade before *The Sacrifice unto the Lord* formalized these connections through its organizational framework. When the inquisitors accused Cornelis of drunkenness, for example, he drew a comparison with Acts 2, in which the Apostles were mocked as drunks when they spoke in tongues on Pentecost.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the attempt to convert Jan van Delft prompted a reference

59. *Offer*, 213–14.

60. *Offer*, 210.

61. *Offer*, 213–14.

62. Acts 2:12; *Offer*, 207. On the biblicism of martyrological texts, see Brad S. Gregory, ed., *The Forgotten Writings of the Mennonite Martyrs* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), xxxi–xxxiii.

to Paul and Silas, who were freed when an earthquake broke open their cell and the jailer trembled in fear before God.<sup>63</sup> In Cornelis's account, the wounds of his torture are transformed into the marks of Christ's suffering, which promised protection to the faithful in Galatians 6:17.<sup>64</sup>

Such references suggest a keen awareness of the ways in which his text was to be read by those outside the prison walls. Cornelis's references to scriptural passages are often oblique, including only the biblical chapter or alluding to familiar stories without citing them. As Piet Visser has noted, such vague references, which are common throughout martyrological literature, might reflect the writer's lack of a Bible to which to refer in prison; indeed, Cornelis notes that the copy he carried was confiscated as evidence against him.<sup>65</sup> He thus presumed that readers would readily recognize the references he made, or might read his text alongside the Bible in order to decipher them—a practice that, as Visser notes, ultimately led to the extensive biblical marginalia in *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*.<sup>66</sup> The structure of Cornelis's narrative, in other words, prompted specific reading practices in which a martyr's account was directly compared with the biblical texts that undergirded it. It was only through the actions of its readers that the significance of Cornelis's story emerged in full.

Still more overtly, song built common ties between Cornelis's experience in prison and the devotions of ordinary Anabaptists in their clandestine gatherings. The song Cornelis sang in his cell, *O truth, how you are now betrayed*, was first printed in a hymnal likely published in the same year as his execution.<sup>67</sup> Although Cornelis's letter mentioned only the song's first line, its text provided commentary on his betrayal, and implicitly, on the precarious position of the martyrology's readers. The truth, the hymn stated, had been slaughtered in the street; Christians were constantly hunted. The hymn then offered assurance that Christ was always present no matter where his followers

63. Acts 16:25–31; *Offer*, 205.

64. *Offer*, 210.

65. Visser, "De bedrieglijk onbewogen bestaan van brieven," 81–82.

66. Visser, "De bedrieglijk onbewogen bestaan van brieven."

67. *Veelderhande schriftuerlijcke Liedekens ghemaect uut den ouden ende nieuwen testamente, nu nyeus anderwerf gecorrigeert ende verbeteret ende vermeerdert met meer ander godlijcke Liedekens, die noyt In Printe en zijn gheweest, ende zijn op den A, B, C, by den andern ghevoecht.* (Antwerp: Frans Fraet, 1552–54), sig. T4v.

gathered.<sup>68</sup> Together, the song and the martyrological account added layers to one another, and it was only in the practices of his readers that the full import of Cornelis's account emerged. While the professed purpose of his prison writing was to record his experiences, he did so with the intent of prompting others to undertake particular practices of storytelling themselves.

### Singing the story

In his prison account, Cornelis thus built upon his readers' engagement with other stories, whether in the form of biblical narratives or songs. His text also invoked particular practices among its readers in order to transform a narrative of persecution into a moral tale of Christ-like suffering and undeserved betrayal. More broadly, the incorporation of song into Cornelis's martyrological account, from his prison cell to the pages of *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, reveals much about how the story he told came to be understood as the truth.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, singing served as a mode of storytelling that uniquely ensured that a story survived. Easily memorized with the aid of a rhyming text, a song was endlessly reproducible and left few traces; it could be carried into a gathering of new friends to bring to life a martyr's death.<sup>70</sup> The song might be carried, in turn, into prison to provide comfort, even if one's books were confiscated as Cornelis's had been. In a clandestine community, song thus played a vital role in both devotion and communication. Most importantly, songs united many voices together as one, no matter where a few friends might meet. Together in song, strangers with experiences as different as those of Cornelis and Gerrits might become a community, with words and melody as the ties that bound

68. *Veelderhande schriftuerlijcke Liedekens*, sigs. T4v–T5r.

69. The scholarship on Anabaptist song is vast. For general studies, see Rudolf von Wolkan, *Die Lieder der Wiedertäufer: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen und niederländischen Litteratur- und Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin: Behr, 1903; reprint, Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1965); Albert John Ramaker, "Hymns and Hymn Writers among the Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," *MQR* 3 (1929): 93–131; Harold S. Bender, "The Hymnology of the Anabaptists," *MQR* 31 (1957): 5–10; and Ursula Lieseberg, *Studien zum Märtyrerlied der Täufer im 16. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991). For consideration of Anabaptist hymnody within the broader context of Dutch religious song, see Bert Hofman, *Liedekens vol gheestich confoort: Een bijdrage tot de kennis van de zestiende-eeuwse Schriftuerlijcke lyriek* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993).

70. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 199.

them in the present by constructing a commonly-held past.<sup>71</sup> And as another text written by Cornelis himself attests, song might divorce that story from the apparent facts of the archive, ultimately transforming the way a community's history has been preserved.

In his prison account, Cornelis refers to a song he had written about his four friends who had been executed in Leiden in August 1552, sparking his initial arrest for public disturbance.<sup>72</sup> Although Cornelis's copy of the song was confiscated upon his arrest in November, the text evidently survived and spread: it appeared in a songbook printed in 1562, and a year later, it was incorporated into the collection of songs appended to *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*.<sup>73</sup> It is possible, therefore, that readers of Cornelis's account were familiar with the song, giving greater meaning to his passing reference. Each verse described a single martyr's death and incorporated his or her final words. Mariken Jans, for example, asked God to "receive [her] spirit." Another woman, Dieuwerken, came singing from the prison, while a third, also named Mariken, called for the light of God to shine upon her. Cornelis's song preserved the individual martyrs' words in writing, but also cast them as the collective prayer of their singers; much of the song is written in the first-person plural. One of the martyrs, for example, states that "we do not suffer like thieves"; the song then asserts that "although we now suffer, it is not for any sect."<sup>74</sup> The performance of Cornelis's song transformed the words of a few martyrs into the statements of a broader community.

And thus was the story told, sung over and over again in the secretive gatherings of those who feared arrest and martyrdom themselves. Yet the story they sang was not as Leiden's legal records suggest it occurred. According to Cornelis's song, four martyrs died in August 1552. Leiden's legal records, however, tell us that six were convicted. While the four in Cornelis's song can be identified as Mariken Jans, Mariken Adriaens, Dieuwerken Jans, and Willem Matthijs, his text makes no reference to Pieter and Jannetgen Matthijs. Both were sentenced to death, Pieter by fire if he remained steadfast or by sword

71. On this function of song, see Erin Lambert, *Singing the Resurrection: Body, Community, and Belief in Reformation Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 3.

72. *Offer*, 207.

73. *Een nieu Lieden Boeck van alle nieuwe ghedichte liedekens, die noyt in druck en zijn* (s.l.: s.n., 1562), fol. 107v; *Offer*, 579–80.

74. *Offer*, 579–80.



if he recanted, and Jannetgen by drowning.<sup>75</sup> Beyond this, we know nothing of their lives or deaths; it is possible, but not certain, that they were siblings of their fellow prisoner Willem Matthijs. The reasons for their omission from Cornelis's song are equally obscure. It is possible that their executions took place on a different day, or perhaps Cornelis had his own reasons for limiting his song to four martyrs.<sup>76</sup> It is uncertain, as a result, which account—the archival documents or Cornelis's song—preserves the events as they actually occurred.<sup>77</sup> The truth, perhaps, lies between the songs and the sentences.

Regardless of how many martyrs died that day in August, it was the telling preserved in Cornelis's song that forged the historical memory of the event. Sung in secret gatherings, the story of the four martyrs thus persisted, their last words kept alive by the voices of those who remembered them. Jannetgen and Pieter Matthijs faded into obscurity, their names hidden away in the archive while the others were spoken and sung again and again over the course of decades. By the time that the martyrologies of the seventeenth century reached print, the deeds that led to their death sentences were forgotten, while Cornelis's story of the other four martyrs lived on.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

The stories of Adrian Cornelis and other martyrs that have been recounted for over four centuries came to be understood as truth through tellings in the voices that read Bible verses and sang a song that lamented the treachery of their persecutors. Those voices, most of them belonging to individuals whose identities we will never know, are among the authors of Anabaptism's history, although they rarely appear in historians' narratives. The narrative that has come down to us is but one possibility out of many, a reflection of the traditions through which that story was told as much as a recording of the circumstances it relates. The power of the martyrs' stories thus lies not only in the drama of their experiences, but in those acts of telling and the many different voices they

75. RA Leiden, Rechterlijk Archief, Inv. 3 (1), Criminele Vonnisboek 1533–1584, fols. 78r–v.

76. *Offer*, 578n1.

77. Indeed, as Jesse Spohnholz has recently noted, “archives not only inherently silence parts of the past, but they can also remember events that never happened.” “Archiving and Narration in Post-Reformation German and the Netherlands,” *Past and Present* 230, suppl. 11 (2016): 348.

78. *Offer*, 578n1.

invoke. It was not simply their compelling content that ensured that these stories would endure, preserving an unaltered image of the events of the past; instead, it was the mutability of a story, the subjectivity of its telling and its reception, that enabled a martyr such as Cornelis to become so deeply enmeshed in a community's understanding of itself.<sup>79</sup> In turn, attending to sixteenth-century Anabaptists' practices of storytelling thus enriches our understanding of that community in multiple ways. First, it recognizes the role that martyrs played, not in their deaths, but in their actions as writers of the earliest histories of Anabaptism. Viewed as a storyteller, Cornelis was much more than a victim or a witness to a history of persecution; instead, he emerges as one of its authors. While he still lived, he determined the contours of the memory of his death, and, more broadly, shaped a community's sense of its own relationship to persecution. By crafting a story of deception, grounded in biblical history and familiar patterns of drama, he shaped the history that has become familiar to us—a history that does not necessarily tell us what occurred, but which reveals much about how it came to be as we know it.

The process through which that story took shape emerges only as martyrs are placed in the wider context of a highly variegated Anabaptist community. In his pleas to his readers, Cornelis addressed individuals like Gerrits as much as—and perhaps even more than—willing martyrs such as himself, seeking to convert them to faith and compel them to action. To understand the full import of a martyr's account is thus to reconsider its author's exceptional piety and instead view his common ties with those who were uncommitted, frightened, or confused. To do so is not to disparage the martyr's sacrifice. Instead, the common bond of storytelling tells us about the inner workings of the community to which martyrs became so vital, and most importantly, about the unspoken assumptions and perceptions that bound its members together. In place of adult baptism or martyrdom as measures of membership in the Anabaptist community, reconsidering martyrological accounts in this way helps us to re-envision Anabaptism as a communal bond and a devotional culture.

Much more work is needed to recover the acts of storytelling that lie beneath the surface of other martyrological accounts, as well as their potential

79. The stories of other martyrs proved remarkably adaptable to changing historical circumstances, as Weaver-Zercher argues in his examination of the case of Dirk Willems. See especially 276–82, on how Willems's story provided a rationale for conscientious objectors in the twentieth century.

resonances with other sixteenth-century narratives. The accounts of Gerrits and Cornelis make it clear, however, that approaching the sources of early Dutch Anabaptism in this way might bring new perspectives into the history of Anabaptism. Understanding how martyrs' accounts reflect the implicit principles that shaped this community demands we attend to the voices of individuals such as Claes Gerrits, who does not fit within it under the metric of martyrdom, as much as those that fill the pages of the *Sacrifice unto the Lord* and the *Martyrs' Mirror*. Like Gerrits in the gatherings at Leiden's prison, they are present in our sources, even if they remain largely silent. While that silence has, seemingly out of necessity, made them passive figures in our histories, the invocation of their voices in Cornelis's writings suggests that we must instead begin to view them among that history's authors. Cornelis's authorial voice was a powerful influence, but his telling only came to be held as true through the actions of a host of readers and singers who affirmed his narrative each time it was retold. It was their voices, almost as much as those of the martyrs they remembered, that have shaped Anabaptism's history. They did much more than perpetuate the events as they occurred; instead, they inscribed a particular telling as truth. In so doing, they reveal the power of stories that remained very much alive, whether in the clandestine gatherings of sixteenth-century friends, between the covers of van Braght's *Martyrs' Mirror*, or in the scholarly histories of a community about whose diversity and vitality we still have much to learn.