

"Cheap Print and Popular Polemic in the Marprelate Controversy"
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It would probably be useful at the start of this presentation to clarify a couple of things about Martin Marprelate, mainly who he was. The answer: he was either Job Throckmorton or John Penry or Nicholas Waldegrave or the Earl of Oxford (for the more conspiratorially minded among us), or some combination of these four. In short, he was a pseudonym for a writer or a set of writers of pamphlets against the Established Church of England during the late 1580s. Some have even turned to the expedient of calling Martin an “author-function,” i.e., an illusory author whose presence is intended to obscure rather than reveal authorial presence. Whoever he was, his 7 pamphlets appeared in 1588 and 89, causing an uproar among the bishops and giving rise to some of the famed Tudor institutions of repression, i.e., press censorship. It's important to understand that Martin spoke for the nonconformist party—the Godly, or the Presbyterians, or the Puritans, depending on your preferences in terminology. At issue, even from the time of Henry VIII, was the pace of reform in English religious institutions; the writing of Thomas Cartwright, the Admonition Controversy of the 1570s, and then the Vestarian and Marprelate Controversies, all sought to determine the relative importance of the church prelacy and the relative authority of scripture. At the end of the Marian regime, as protestant exiles began to return from Geneva and other points on the continent, the expectation was that Godly Reformation would be redoubled in speed and reach. Those hopes were stymied, as progress in the above areas failed to materialize. This only made calls for further reform increasingly strident and widespread, and led the bishops of the elizabethan church hierarchy to brand dissent as outright rebellion against all brands of rightful authority.

Martin Marprelate, then, is a writer whose major aim is to “mar” the “prelates,” the bishops whose authority, the Godly claim, is unscriptural in theory and oppressive in practice. Martin's pamphlets are interventions in a long-standing and highly learned debate about church history, scriptural exegesis, and ecclesiology.

I. The Terms of Argument

Now I need to turn to a common Renaissance representation of the art of rhetoric: the Hercules Gallicus. According to Lucian's account, there was a depiction of Hercules in a temple at Marseille in which he was identified with Mercury, the god of eloquence, and represented as leading his followers by means of slender chains of gold and amber connecting his tongue to their ears. (Emperor of Men's Minds, 66) [SHOW IMAGE]

The image reveals two things to us, both of which prove immensely important to the Renaissance understanding of Rhetoric in general: rhetoric offers great power to the learned practitioner, but it just as surely ties him to the judgment of his auditors. And that judgment, even more distressingly, proves slippery: if rhetoric, following Cicero's definition, is to teach, to delight, and to move, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that delighting and moving are the means by which the persuasion or teaching gets done (Sperone Speroni, Dialogo 90; Agricola, de inventione 1-3, 328-32). The orator aims to move either emotions or will—neither of which necessarily submit to the rule of reason. And furthermore, for all the sophistication and development of the arts of oratory, outcomes—in terms of persuasion—are fundamentally outside the orator's immediate control.

The second item I would like to point to is from a sermon preached by Richard Bancroft at Paul's Cross on February 9, 1589. In it, he uses I John 4:1 to explicitly attack the Puritan, or radical protestant, party--and in particular, the infamous *Martin Marprelate*:

Now of the qualitie of those prophets: they are false: false in doctrine, and false in conversation. In respect of their doctrine, they are called in the Scriptures Spirits of error, seducers, deceivers, jugglers, authors of divers sects, false speakers, and the children of the devil, who is the father of all falsehood. In respect of their conversation they are said to be humble and lowly in outward show, but yet of nature very contentious and unquiet, doting about questions and strife of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, and evil surmisings. Their mouths do speak proud things and swelling words of vanity: likewise dangerous things. They are bold and stand in their own conceit; they despise government and fear not to speak evil of them that are in dignity and authority; whereas the angels which are greater both in power and might give not railing judgment against them before the Lord. They are Libellers, and do speak evil of those things which

they know not. They are bolder in avouching their untruths, and in depraving their superiors than Michael the Archangel durst be when he strove against the devil. (p. 4-5)

Note how much of the criticism is couched in terms of tone. And even if we know very little about Martin or his theology, we can see pretty quickly where this antipathy for him comes from: he picks fights. In fact, he's really really good at picking fights, and he does so publicly. From the opening of his first pamphlet, *The Epistle* (1588), he flings jeering epithets: **“bouncing priests;” “right poisoned, persecuting, and terrible priests;”** and so forth. Then there’s some snickering about John Bridges’s book (*The Defense of the Government Established [1587]*) being unreadable—**“you are to understand that Doctor Bridges hath written in your defence a most senseless book, and I cannot very often at one breath come to a full point when I read the same”** (*Epistle*, 4). This is how he introduces himself into a controversy about church government that has been simmering for decades. To address one’s social and political superiors with such impudence, to call them petty popes and Antichrists, is to provoke a brawl, not a debate. When Martin moves to insinuations about card-playing, simony, marital discord, and other *ad hominem* attacks, we are sure that far from inviting an actual dialogue about the proper form of church government—though that is his nominal topic—he is shrewdly hoping to provoke a combative, immoderate response. Hoping, really, to drag a Thomas Cooper or a John Bridges into a brawl. As one historian of the controversy remarks, **“a dignified silence seems not to have been an option”** (Black 1997, p. 710)

Why isn't it an option? I would submit that the reason is the one implicit in both items above: the vast undifferentiated audience, a mass of observers that can potentially be guided in one direction or another, but that just as surely has its own reasons for listening or ignoring, submitting or resisting. One of the most useful descriptions of the rhetorical situation is from Joseph Black, who says that Martin's goal was to *popularize the Presbyterian agenda by using notoriously racy prose.*

Because of Martin's provocations, the conflict quickly became a matter of accusations and counter-accusations about who was speaking properly and who had the right to speak at all. This tactic of disputing the grounds of speech, if it works, works because of a rhetorical commonplace: one's rhetorical register relative to the opponent can be seen as an index to moral and intellectual rectitude—an index that can be used whether one is in a mode of attack or defense. This notion of decorum works especially well where religion is the point of conflict, because extra stringent criteria of rectitude carry enormous authority: the Reformation itself was, after all, a matter of language, both in writing and in ritual. In this case, Martin is the one with the street and gutter language, so depending on your point of view, he has a practical advantage or a moral problem. Martin's approach, and in many ways the key to his influence on later writers, is to use his gutter position as an advantage. With no innate status or social position to preserve, he can lash out whenever and however he wishes, and whether he gains notoriety or infamy, his reputation can only grow—especially since he only really exists as words on a printed page.

Rhetorical self-consciousness, both in terms of style and of venue, is Martin's stock-in-trade. He makes the contrast between his own mode of expression and the mode he finds ridiculous in his opponents a major reinforcing point for his ecclesiological and theological arguments. To return to his first salvo, for instance, and its malapert mockery of Dr. Bridges and his book, he cites the Doctor's "**absurdity**" as the source of his own alleged (and freely admitted) "**indecorum**":

Again, it may please you to give me leave to play the dunce for the nonce as well as he; otherwise, dealing with Master Doctor's book, I cannot keep *decorum personae*. And may it please you, if I be too absurd in any place (either in this epistle or that epitome), to ride to Sarum and thank his deanship for it, because I could not deal with his book commendably according to order unless I should be sometimes tediously dunstical and absurd. (Epistle 4)

The mockery focuses on Bridges's admittedly ponderous style (hence the *dunstical* reference), which depending on your point of view (and sympathy for the authority of the High Commission)

may demonstrate high moral seriousness, but just as easily demonstrate outright dullness. Martin obviously chooses to read it as the latter, hence his loving nicknames for Bridges: **“John of Cant,” “John Canter,” “his Grace of Cant.”** (Thomas Cooper, a later adversary, gets **“Profane T C,”** to differentiate him from the Puritan intellectual Thomas Cartwright). Without wading into pages and pages of densely argued and topical text, suffice it to say that though Martin does make specific arguments about theology and scriptural hermeneutics, one need not strain to imagine which part of the pamphlet would garner the most attention.

Martin's next pamphlet, *The Epitome*, expands this line of argument, signaling that he has staked out some useful territory:

The Puritans are angry with me (I mean the Puritan preachers). And why? Because I am too open. Because I jest. I jested because I dealt against a worshipful jester. Doctor Bridges, whose writings and sermons tend to no other end than to make men laugh. I did think that Martin should not have been blamed of the Puritans for telling the truth openly. For may I not say that John of Canterbury is a petty pope, seeing he is so? You must then bear with my ingramness. I am plain. I must needs call a spade a spade, a pope a pope.

You will note how careful he is to point out that whatever one might find shocking in his writing, he is not being taken by surprise. If there is an effect, it's meant to be there. In one of his later pamphlets, *Hay Any Worke for Cooper*, he defends himself from both his nominal adversaries and from his fellow-travelers who find themselves uncomfortable with his methods--significantly, not his matter, but the manner of his speaking:

I am called Martin Marprelate. There be many that greatly dislike of my doings. I may have my wants, I know. For I am a man. But my course I know to be ordinary and lawful. I saw the cause of Christ's government and of the bishops' antichristian dealing to be hidden. The most part of men could not be gotten to read anything written in the defense of one, and against the other. I bethought me, therefore, of a way whereby men might be drawn to do both, perceiving the humors of men in these times (especially of those that are in any place) to be given to mirth. I took that course. I might lawfully do it. Ay, for jesting is lawful by circumstances, even in the greatest matters. The circumstances of time, place and persons urged me thereunto. I never profaned the Word in any jest. Other mirth I used as a covert, wherein I could bring the truth into light. The Lord being the author both of mirth and gravity, is it not lawful in itself for the truth to use either of these ways when the circumstances do make it lawful?

This passage also reveals just how shrewd a rhetorician Martin actually is. This is a completely somber defense of jesting based on classical rhetorical authorities (cf. C. Holcomb), and is thus impossible to gainsay from that perspective (it even forms a subsection of the *ars praedicandi*). Cicero, Quintilian and Thomas Wilson, by extension, all agree that jesting is admissible for particular reasons and in particular instances, especially when you want to get people to listen to you. Wilson quips, in his *English Rhetoric*, that **“except men find delight, they will not long abide: delight them, and win them, weary them, and you lose them forever. And that is the reason that men commonly tarry the end of a merry play and cannot abide the half-hearing of a sour-checking sermon.”** It is not an accident that the sermon and the play are so juxtaposed; even Cicero did the same—and as Ritchie Kendall points out in his account of this period, *The Drama of Dissent*, the very theatricality of 'Godly' polemic, especially as embodied in Martin, is one of its most distinctive characteristics.

This is a fairly clear attempt on Martin's part to reshape the arena of combat, reinterpreting what others might call railing or indecorum or irreverence as lawful, admissible, even welcome wit and mirth in the service of Godly ends. He emphasizes that he jokes precisely because a reading public with plenty of printed material at its disposal needs to be drawn to consume the object. This is one of the most common lessons in Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and the myriad rhetorical manuals written in the period—there is a practical issue at stake; if you cannot lure people into reading, you may as well not say anything at all. Martin uses a jesting tone because he wants his work to be read. And in that way, he crows, he is well ahead of blustering bishops, who only have their standing to recommend them. There are, in other words, two ways to conceive of the decorum that obtains in a conflict like this. Bancroft and Cooper show that they are committed to keeping the discourse elevated because railing, scoffing, mockery and the like shows a heart set against rightful authority: shape of rhetoric reveals the shape of the heart. To talk about things of God in the language of the stage, as Francis Bacon later complains, should simply be out of bounds. For Martin, however, the issue of decorum is entirely different—it is a

question of being read, and apparently hoping that mockery would give rise to contempt, contempt resistance, and resistance further Godly reform.

II. Aftermath

One might think of the effects of Martin's writing in reference to the law of unintended consequences: Notoriety is not exactly predictable in its effects. It's not an accident that *fortuna* is depicted with her famous wheel. As a corollary to that assertion, I'll further assert that it's the nature of print to give rise to more print. This proved difficult for the bishops to match; their sober responses to purposefully outrageous mockery, like Thomas Cooper's *Admonition* (1588) and Bancroft's Sermon that I quoted earlier, may be well-reasoned and logical, but they don't really answer Martin. By that measure, he carried the day; the bishops were forced to fall back on the likes of Lyly and Nashe to do their arguing for them in pamphlets like *A Countercuffe for Martin*

Jr. or *A Whip for an Ape* or *A Myrror for Martinists*. To give you an idea of the extent of imitation: I profess railing, and think it as good a cudgel for a Martin as a stone for a dog, or a whip for an ape, or poison for a rat. (*Pap with a Hatchet*, par.2)

If they be answered by the gravity of learned prelates, they presently reply with railings, which argueth their intent to be far from the truth of devotion as their writings from mildness of spirit. It is said that camels never drink till they have troubled the water with their feet, & it seems these Martins cannot carouse the sap of the church till by faction they make tumults in religion. Seeing then either they expect no grave reply, or that they are settled with railing to reply, I thought it more convenient to give them a whisk with their own wand than to have them spurred with deeper learning (*Pap with a Hatchet*, "To the Indifferent Reader.")

If thou refuse learning, and stick to libelling, if nothing come out of those lavish lips but taunts not without bitterness, yet without wit, railing, not without spite, yet without cause, then give me thy hand: thou and I will try it out at the cucking stool. I'll make the to forget Bishop's English, and weep Irish; next hanging, there is no better revenge on Martin than to make him cry for anger, for there is no more sullen beast than a he-drab. I'll make him pull his pouting cross-cloth over his beetle brows for melancholy, and then my next book shall be *Martin in his Mubble-fubbles*. (*Pap with a Hatchet*, p.13)

Thus, Martin in fact did set the bar for a kind of rhetorical success, and in so doing spawned an entire industry of railing. And even from the slim evidence above, I think we can all see why H.S. Bennett (1965) quipped that once Lyly and Nashe and their ilk got involved in the controversy, they "left serious argument to look after itself" (85).

On the other hand, however, Martin certainly didn't win many friends or influence many people with his arguments—even his natural allies among the Godly. And then of course there was the official repression, the attempts to silence the secret presses that turned out the infamous pamphlets. The eminent church historian Patrick Collinson even goes so far as to attribute the hue and cry after Martin as a major reason for the collapse of Presbyterianism in Elizabeth's reign. From that angle, it appears that he did not manage to help the cause. And yet, it is Martin's rhetoric that we remember, and it is Martin's rhetoric that is credited with launching the career of a truly singular figure—Thomas Nashe, who may be the only writer from the period whose reputation matches Martin's.

III. Martin's Rules for Fighting Fair

1. There is no such thing as a fair fight. Fair arguments, yes, but we're not talking about arguments; Martin never meant to engage the bishops on their own terms.

2. In the world of print, where context may or may not be clear, the writer absolutely needs to demonstrate his wit; thus, it is perfectly legitimate to change the topic from theology and ecclesiology to matters of style.

3. In the world of print, it is much more piercing & powerful to focus on matters of character rather than the legitimacy of institutions. As I've already said, Martin has no institution to defend (and was even repudiated by his Godly brethren), and furthermore, he's anonymous. From that position, it is easier to level the scurrilous accusations of card-playing, bowling, simony and so on. Likewise, the *Countercuff to Martin Junior* returns the favor by exposing the abuses of wayward and ignorant Puritan preachers.

4. In the world of print, success is a matter of gaining eyes. Infamy, populism, syllogism—all legitimate inasmuch as they work toward gaining a reading audience. This helps explain the strong affective inflection of Martin's work, and certainly the Antimartinist reaction to him, written, one might legitimately argue, by opportunists whose religious motivations may or may not have been pure. In fact, to return to Bacon's "Advertisement," one of the concerns he has about

the roots of the Marprelate and related controversies is that it allows young university hotheads in search of nothing more than trouble a voice out of proportion to their importance. This is also why Bacon comes to mistrust “zeal” in this context: in its effects, it doesn’t lead to the kinds of results we want to see. It is not only the puritan pamphleteers that come in for Bacon’s censure—he diagnoses on both sides increasing rigidity, unbrotherly proceeding, unfair accusations, unjust proceedings, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and best outlet for “zeal.” As for the latter, Bacon wishes very much that the combatants would adopt a character of “love/charity” rather than zeal. One might conclude, especially given the lukewarm reception Martin himself received from his alleged fellow-travelers, and given the dismay with which the bishops viewed the rapidly mounting strain of “martinism” that the Antimartinists themselves released, that this clarifies for many just how much “zeal” they were willing to take.

IV. Postscript

Based on my predilections and my habitual ways of reading, I've spent most of this presentation offering a *rhetorical* reading of Martin Marprelate and the controversy surrounding his work. I do wish to explicitly mention, however, that most of what I've said takes for granted the impact of print culture on religious discourse, especially as explored by Elizabeth Eisenstein and Tessa Watt. In her book *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, Watt makes a point I think is worth mentioning in relation to Martin. Protestant reformers, according to Watt, used cheap print (ballads and broadsheets, by her definition) to push for further reform during the early Tudor period. But by the middle of Elizabeth's reign, evidently, they began to abandon the religio-political message in favor of devotional writing and texts on practical piety—this at about the same time that Hooker was writing his magisterial *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in answer to a question that frankly had already been answered.

In other words, Martin's appearance was the convergence of theological pressures and the unique opportunities afforded by print publication. It was also the last gasp for the presbyterian

reformers and their pamphlet war with the church authority, at least during Elizabeth's reign. Some students of the controversy detect in Martin's **railing** a sense of desperation. It may not have been out of place—the bishops did win in just about every meaningful way. Except, that is, the mode of satire and argument that Martin puts in play, the mode that even the Bishop's Ban of 1599, ten years later, can completely quell.