The Martin Marprelate tracts are the most famous pamphlets of the English Renaissance; to their contemporaries, they were the most notorious. Printed in 1588 and 1589 on a secret press carted across the English countryside from one sympathetic household to another, the seven tracts attack the Church of England, particularly its bishops (hence the pseudonym, “Mar-prelate”), and advocate a Presbyterian system of church government. Scandalously witty, racy, and irreverent, the Marprelate tracts are the finest prose satires of their era. Their colloquial style and playfully self-dramatizing manner influenced the fiction and theatre of the Elizabethan Golden Age. As historical and social texts, they provide an important link in a tradition of oppositional writing in England from the early Reformation through to the civil wars of the 1640s, and their appeal to a popular audience contributed to the development in England of a public sphere of debate. This is the first fully annotated edition of the tracts to appear in almost a century. A lightly modernized text makes Martin Marprelate’s famous voice easily accessible, and a full introduction details the background, sources, production, authorship, and seventeenth-century afterlife of the tracts.

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Acknowledgments

The Martin Marprelate tracts were written, printed on a hand press that had to be carted slowly on bad roads in long journeys from one sympathetic household to another, and then distributed by foot and horseback across an entire country, all in far less time than it took me to edit them. This book’s journey began at the University of Toronto, where Hugo de Quehen, Germaine Warkentin, and the interdisciplinary community of scholars at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies offered advice, inspiration, and support. Jonquil Bevan and the Centre for the History of the Book at the University of Edinburgh were generous hosts for a summer in Scotland. The Department of English at the University of Tennessee provided support for research and for an assistantship that allowed Rich Bryant to type original-spelling versions of all the tracts, an unenviable job that he performed with remarkable accuracy. New colleagues at the University of Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Center for Renaissance Studies have helped in the final stages. Funding was provided by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Bibliographical Society of America. Knowledgeable librarians at many institutions have helped over the years, and I am particularly grateful to staff at the Lambeth Palace Library, the Huntington Library, the National Library of Wales, the Surrey History Centre, the Warwickshire County Record Office, and the Union Theological Library for their generous replies to questions. In addition, the Lambeth Palace Library, the Houghton Library, the Beinecke Library, the Huntington Library, the Surrey History Centre, and the Canterbury Cathedral Archives have kindly given permission to reproduce images of their books or to quote from manuscripts in their collections. Allen Carroll, Arthur Kinney, Eugene Hill, Urmila Seshagiri, and Jane Degenhardt read parts of the manuscript and made many useful suggestions. Reports by Alastair Bellany and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press also prompted much-needed changes. Working with Cambridge University Press has been a
pleasure. Sarah Stanton, Rebecca Jones, and Elizabeth Davey were unfailingly helpful throughout the process, and Jacque French provided meticulous copyediting. Finally, my greatest obligation is to Lisa Celovsky, who with patience and good humor saw this book through every stage of its journey, and who read the manuscript with expertise.
Notes on conventions

The Edition

This edition offers lightly modernized texts of the seven Martin Marprelate tracts. For a full discussion of the editorial procedures employed, see the Textual Introduction (cxiii–cxvi). Annotations are printed as endnotes at the back of the volume; marginal notes in the original editions are reproduced as footnotes, signaled in the text with superscript letters. Each of the seven tracts opens with a short introduction that sketches that tract’s main features and concerns. The general introduction provides more detailed information about their collective content, style, printing history, and authorship.

Quotations and Citations

References to and quotations from the Marprelate tracts are to this edition. Unless otherwise noted, classical texts are cited from the Loeb editions. Biblical quotations are from The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). Statutes are quoted from The Whole Volume of Statutes at Large (1587), the most complete edition available prior to the publication of the Marprelate tracts. References to Shakespeare’s plays are to David Bevington, ed., The Complete Works of Shakespeare, updated fourth edition (New York: Longman, 1997). Annotations drawn from the Oxford English Dictionary provide the full OED reference only if needed to clarify the particular meaning cited within a long entry. Quotations from early printed books and manuscript documents retain their original spelling and punctuation, except that contractions are silently expanded and u/v and i/j regularized. For early books, place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.
Many (but not all) of the manuscript documents connected with the Marprelate tracts are printed in either Edward Arber’s *Introductory Sketch to the Martin Marprelate Controversy* (1879) or William Pierce’s *An Historical Introduction to the Marprelate Tracts* (1908). These manuscripts are cited here from the versions printed in Arber and Pierce. While their editions do not offer perfect transcriptions (the original manuscripts were all consulted), they have become the standard sources used in almost all work on the Marprelate tracts, and are easily accessible to readers who want to examine the full textual context of any given citation.
### Abbreviations

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<td>Thomas Cooper, <em>An Admonition to the People of England</em> (1589), first issue, <em>STC</em> 5683a</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCP Book of Common Prayer</td>
<td>(1559)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bancroft, Sermon</td>
<td>Richard Bancroft, <em>A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse</em> (1589)</td>
</tr>
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<td>BL British Library</td>
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<td>Bridges, Defence</td>
<td>John Bridges, <em>A Defence of the Government Established in the Church of Englane for Ecclesiasticall Matters</em> (1587)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSL The Dictionary of the Scots Language</td>
<td>Victor Skretkowicz (project director), Susan Rennie (project editor), University of Dundee, 2004. Online text: <a href="http://www.dsl.ac.uk/dsl">www.dsl.ac.uk/dsl</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL Huntington Library</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>HMC</td>
<td>Historical Manuscripts Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pierce, Historical Introduction</td>
<td>William Pierce, An Historical Introduction to the Marprelate Tracts (London: Archibald Constable, 1908)</td>
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<td>Pierce, Marprelate Tracts</td>
<td>The Marprelate Tracts 1588, 1589, ed. William Pierce (London: James Clark, 1911)</td>
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<td>PRO</td>
<td>Public Record Office</td>
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<td>SP Dom.</td>
<td>State Papers Domestic</td>
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<td>SPR</td>
<td>The Seconde Parte of a Register: Being a Calendar of Manuscripts under that Title intended for Publication by the Puritans about 1593, and now in Dr Williams's Library, London, ed. Albert Peel, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915)</td>
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<td>Sutcliffe, Answere</td>
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List of abbreviations

Tilley

Wing
Introduction

“I think the like was never committed to press or paper...”
Thomas Cooper, *An Admonition to the People of England* (1589)

“SCURRILOUS PAMPHLETTS”

In June 1637, Nicholas Darton, the vicar of Kilsby, Northamptonshire, petitioned Archbishop William Laud for help in bringing his unruly and disaffected parishioners to order: they were refusing to pay tithes, openly mocking the church hierarchy, and seditiously withholding the unpopular tax of ship money. The cause of these “tumultuous outrages,” Darton suggested, was the availability in Kilsby of dangerous books. For years, Darton had reproved the “haveing and reading (amongst some of his parishioners) of certaine scurrilous pamphlets, supprest by authoritie, utter enemies to the present State.” These pamphlets, he reported, were read aloud to public approval, the audience “geering and sporting themselves, when ever any thing was read which inveighed against the Jurisdiction Episcopall.” Darton’s factious flock had even attempted to use these readings to “pervert the minde of your most humble petitioner, from the discipline of our Church of England.” Could the archbishop help? The archbishop was a busy man, but notes and confessions attached to the original petition testify to a thorough official response, a response encouraged by other recent reminders that oppositional texts were circulating among the population at large. As Laud noted in his personal diary, that same June the polemists John Bastwick, William Prynne, and Henry Burton were punished with the loss of their ears for publishing “Libells against the Hierarchy of the Church”; soon afterward, manuscript verses were posted around London celebrating the martyrdom of this puritan triumvirate and attacking Laud as the bloody-handed archwolff of Canterbury. Suspicious reading matter demanded investigation: the wrong books could infect entire communities with subversive ideas, and the pamphlets causing the troubles in Kilsby were not ones
Laud wanted in circulation, particularly at a time of public agitation against political and religious authorities. The writer who confronted the archbishop in the pages of the vicar’s petition was not one of his recently punished opponents. He was in fact an old enemy of the established church, an adversary who almost fifty years earlier had prophesied that the oppositional force he represented would see the end of archiepiscopal power. His name was Martin Marprelate.

The pseudonymous Martin Marprelate tracts are the most famous pamphlets of the English Renaissance; to contemporaries, they were the most notorious. There are seven tracts altogether, a broadsheet and six short books ranging from thirty pages of text in octavo format to fifty-six in quarto, all printed on a secret and peripatetic press between October 1588 and September 1589. They attack the Elizabethan church, particularly church government by bishops (hence the pseudonym, Mar-prelate), and advocate instead an alternative, Presbyterian polity. Even in an age accustomed to aggressively partisan pamphlet warfare, the writings of Martin Marprelate provoked immediate and widespread scandal. “I think the like was never committed to presse or paper, no not against the vilest sort of men, that have lived upon the earth,” exclaimed Thomas Cooper, the bishop of Winchester and one of Martin’s targets. But the novelty of the Marprelate tracts did not lie in the substance of their arguments: the reform agenda they proposed had been honed over decades of Presbyterian opposition to the established church. Instead, what seemed shockingly new was Martin’s method of presentation. With his wittily irreverent and conversational prose, ironic modes of argument, swashbuckling persona, playful experiments with the conventions of print controversy, and willingness to name names and to tell unflattering stories about his opponents, Martin shattered conventions of decorum that had governed debates about the church since the Elizabethan Settlement. Some elements of Martinist style would have seemed familiar to readers whose memories stretched back before Elizabeth to the vehement exchanges of the earlier Reformation. But even with these possible models in mind, nobody in England had ever read anything quite like these publications. The appearance of the first tract sparked a nation-wide manhunt, accompanied by a multimedia campaign in which church and state joined forces to counter the influence of what Martin and his opponents both termed “Martinism” – the public jeering of authority that Nicholas Darton heard decades later among his pamphlet-reading parishioners.

The Marprelate tracts continued to be denounced as base, scurrilous invective for centuries after the underground press was discovered and
Beginning in the later nineteenth century, however, pioneering research by Edward Arber, William Pierce, J. Dover Wilson, Ronald B. McKerrow, and Georges Bonnard won the tracts a new reputation not only as some of the finest Elizabethan prose satires, worthy of their own chapter in the literary history of the sixteenth century, but also as significant texts in the religious, political, legal, and social history of the English Renaissance. By uncovering the operations of the Marprelate project and recuperating its aims, context, and consequences, these scholars provided the foundation for an extensive and rapidly growing body of subsequent research, and their work remains indispensable for any study of the tracts.

Accounts of the Marprelate controversy published over the past few decades address a broad range of interconnected literary, historical, and social issues. Martinist style remains the focus of many articles and shorter treatments, particularly the influence of Martin’s comic prose on the literature of the Elizabethan Golden Age of the 1590s. But the tracts are also increasingly recognized as playing a key role in the broader history of Renaissance English pamphlet warfare. They initiated influential debates concerning libel and decorum, provoked responses that crystallized contemporary anxieties over the uses of print, and probably contributed to the development in England of a proto-public sphere of debate. More generally, the tracts helped create a tradition of oppositional writing that extended from the earliest stages of the English Reformation through to the civil wars, and spurred counterarguments that would become standard weapons in future campaigns against religious and political opposition. In addition, the anti-Martinist campaign generated evidence unmatched for this period for many aspects of the history of books and reading. Depositions and trial records provide extraordinarily detailed information about how the tracts were printed on the run, distributed across the country, sold under the counter in London shops or out of back doors by sympathetic local officials, and discussed in underground reading groups. Furthermore, references to the tracts at the time of their appearance and throughout their seventeenth-century afterlife illuminate contemporary perspectives on complex issues of authorship and collaboration, and document the intersections of popular and learned readerships, popular and elite kinds of texts, and print, manuscript, and oral cultures. From the 1590s through the 1640s and well into the Restoration, Martin retained his reputation as a dangerous writer whose violations of acceptable discourse threatened all forms of authority. As Darton’s outrage and his parishioners’ disobedient sporting both suggest, this reputation informs all later engagements with Martin Marprelate: for almost a century, uses of...
The primary aim of the Marprelate project was to publicize a Presbyterian system of church government. To the Elizabethan reform movement, the state church established in 1559 at the accession of Elizabeth was an unsatisfactory compromise that retained a fundamentally Catholic structure and liturgy as well as a fundamentally Catholic attitude toward ecclesiastical polity. Presbyterian reformers believed that the New Testament established a single, unambiguous, and immutable apostolic model for church organization. This model sanctioned four church offices, each with a role at the parish level: pastors (to exhort, preach, and administer the sacraments), doctors (to teach and expound scripture), elders (to govern, and oversee discipline), and deacons (to administer finances and poor relief). All other offices – archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons, chancellors, vicars general, canons, prebendaries, the entire traditional apparatus that Martin dismisses, with glib exaggeration, as the “24 orders of bishops” (Schoolpoints, 92) – were unnecessary human inventions, parasitical accretions on the body of the true church. Ministers were to be equal in standing: scripture offered no warrant for clerical hierarchy, for ecclesiastical “lords” who ruled over inferiors and did not themselves minister in a parish. Clergy furthermore were not to hold civil office or fulfill other functions properly belonging to the magistrate, a prohibition that challenged church courts as well as more obvious targets, such as the presence of clerics on the privy council. On the other side of these debates, defenders of the church questioned the reformers’ reading of scripture and noted that the early church contained episcopal as well as Presbyterian elements. In the clear absence of a binding divine blueprint, they argued, the church in these matters was a human institution: forms of worship and church organization were subject to human authority, to be changed, or not, as those authorities saw fit. Such ideas were anathema to Martin Marprelate, who defends the Presbyterian discipline throughout the tracts as the divinely sanctioned but suppressed ideal.

These four arguments – immutability of scripture, the fourfold ministry, ministerial equality, and separation of ministry and magistracy – were the foundational principles of Presbyterianism. But reformers with uncompromisingly sticky consciences also objected to many specific elements of church ceremony. They challenged the Book of Common Prayer,
particularly its use of texts from the Apocrypha, which they considered a collection of corrupt human writings, not divinely inspired ones. They denounced the reading of homilies as a substitute for genuine preaching, which they saw as the ordinary means of salvation. They resisted clerical vestments, because distinctive clothing functioned as a sign of hierarchy and spiritual set-apartness. Finally, they opposed kneeling at communion, the use of “priest” for minister, organ music and counterpoint choral singing in church services, the ring in the wedding service, the sign of the cross and “interrogation of infants” in baptism, and the ceremony of “churching” women after childbirth: all these and other such practices, Presbyterians argued, were sacramental leftovers, dangerous remnants of Catholic ritual. More broadly, many Presbyterians also allied themselves with older traditions of reform agitation by buttressing anti-episcopal arguments with the perennially popular tropes of anticlerical complaint, denouncing such abuses as non-residency, pluralism, and simony, and accusing the “higher” clergy of pride, ambition, greed, lordliness, and various misuses of spiritual and secular power. All of these arguments, objections, and accusations appear throughout the Marprelate tracts.

Despite their overarching focus on issues connected with the church, however, the Marprelate tracts are not in essence works of doctrinal controversy: to a greater or lesser degree, Calvinism was the shared theological standard of conformist and reformer alike throughout this period. The primary subject of Elizabethan debates between the established church and its Protestant critics was not religion per se but polity. How should the church be structured and governed? What was its proper relationship to the state? What elements of worship and ceremony accorded best with scripture? On these questions, Martin Marprelate makes no original contributions. The tracts faithfully lay out the Presbyterian platform as presented in England by Thomas Cartwright in his 1570 Cambridge lectures, unveiled to the English public by John Field and Thomas Wilcox in the Admonition to the Parliament (1572), defended at length by Cartwright in polemical battle with John Whitgift throughout the 1570s, and fine-tuned over almost two decades in numerous publications, in Latin and in English, in learned scholarship and in heated manifestos, in sermons, petitions, and popularizing dialogues, not to mention in countless manuscript documents, unprinted sermons, and other communications within a highly organized community. Martin’s originality lay in his polemical aggressiveness, not his ecclesiology. Like any broad social movement, Presbyterianism itself was not unified and immutable: it encompassed a range of attitudes toward reform, accommodation, and acceptable ways to
advocate change, attitudes that furthermore shifted over time, in many cases in the direction of more moderate positions. The Marprelate tracts were the radical culmination of Elizabethan Presbyterian lobbying, and their aggressiveness reflected a discontent verging on desperation within the movement’s radicalized core as it witnessed the ongoing inefficacy of more moderate approaches.

A final note concerning terminology and the Presbyterian platform. The word “Presbyterian” does not appear in the tracts, nor does it appear in the published accounts that preceded Martin of the “discipline” (a word reformers themselves used to describe their model). As terms for a specific ecclesiology, “Presbyterian” and its analogues were not yet in common use in England. Drawing on vocabulary available at the time, Martin identifies the Presbyterian cause as that advocated by his “puritan” brethren. As commentators from the seventeenth century to the present have pointed out, “puritan” is a term of abuse, a hostile label applied imprecisely to a range of social, devotional, and ecclesiological stances. Nevertheless, as Peter Lake observes, “all presbyterians were puritans,” even if “not all puritans were presbyterians.”

Presbyterians sought changes that would push the church well beyond the Elizabethan Settlement: they are by definition to be included among the “godly,” “advanced,” “forward,” “zealous,” or “hotter sort of” Protestant reformers commonly labeled puritans. Some accounts treat the labels as nearly synonymous (“Puritan-Presbyterians”); others distinguish Presbyterians as “radical puritans.” One potential source of confusion is Separatism (“Brownism” at the time, Congregationalism or Independency later), the main form of non-Presbyterian puritanism. In theory at least, Presbyterians espoused a state church, like that established in Scotland: Martin himself distinguishes his “puritans” from the disdained Separatist “sectaries” who had abandoned the ideal of national uniformity.

In practice, however, the lines that separated the two groups blurred, primarily because of English Presbyterianism’s congregationalist emphasis. While some Presbyterian reformers dutifully explained the national structures of their ideal church, most – like Martin – focused their passions on the fate of devotional life at the parish level.

The religio-political frustrations that would culminate in the Marprelate campaign began in 1583, when John Whitgift, an old opponent of reform, was named archbishop of Canterbury. In his polemical battles with Thomas Cartwright in the 1570s, Whitgift had formulated the basic elements of the Elizabethan conformist position, an approach to polity he now had the opportunity not just to argue but to implement.
reaction to the perceived leniency of his predecessor, Edmund Grindal, Whitgift initiated sweeping efforts to clamp down on dissent and impose uniformity within the church. Whitgift’s inaugural sermon stressed the necessity of obedience to all higher powers, a theme he soon repeated in the more concrete form of a demand that all ministers subscribe to three articles of belief. Agreeing to royal supremacy and the church’s articles of religion raised few objections. The trouble was the second article: agreeing that the Book of Common Prayer contained nothing contrary to scripture. This requirement targeted the scruples of a broad range of moderate puritan incumbents, who objected to the prayer book’s use of apocryphal texts and its prescriptions concerning vestments and other elements of ceremony and worship. The ensuing subscription crisis pitted an archbishop confident that most ministers would return to the fold when faced with deprivation against a reform movement determined to use the occasion to generate an anti-episcopal revolt. Whitgift’s seeming intransigence aroused widespread discontent, even within the privy council, and Presbyterian polemic of the time eagerly encouraged readers to identify the general cause of the “Godly disaffected” with their platform.

Whitgift’s tactics were a gamble: between three and four hundred ministers refused to subscribe immediately, numbers that might easily have formed the core of a genuinely popular opposition movement. In the end, however, the archbishop wisely distinguished between moderate and radical elements among the non-subscribers. With adroit offers of concession and conditional subscription, he convinced most of these ministers to sign and thereby undermined the possibility of a united front in the puritan camp. Martin would continue to fight the battle over subscription five years later, repeatedly demanding the return of the deprived ministers and insisting that “uncle Canterbury’s drift in urging subscription is not the unity of the church (as he would pretend) but the maintenance of his own pride and corruption” (Epistle, 39). But for English Presbyterianism the subscription crisis was an opportunity lost. The movement regrouped sufficiently two years later to campaign on behalf of bills introduced in the 1586 Parliament, and the ambitious “Survey of the Ministry” compiled at the time to document the pressing need for reform reveals the continued effectiveness of Presbyterian grass-roots organization. But while the threat of underground support remained potent, Whitgift made it increasingly difficult for the movement to gain access to other channels of influence. He tightened restrictions on printing, with the Star Chamber decree of 1586 enacting his suggestion to require licensing of many books by the archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of London, or other church authorities. He helped
block parliamentary discussion of the Presbyterian agenda. Finally, he gave
court of high commission investigatory
powers that even Lord Burghley, the Queen’s chief minister, described as too
“much savouring of the Romish Inquisition.” Burghley was referring in
particular to the notorious oath ex officio, which enabled courts to convict
without the testimony of witnesses by demanding that the accused answer
self-implicating questions; Burghley termed the policy “a device to seek for
offenders then to reform any.”

The Marprelate tracts dwell on Whitgift’s initiatives of the 1580s,
denouncing the ex officio oath and the suppression of godly books through-
out the tracts: to Presbyterians, these constraints proved that the church
sought to prevent any discussion of reform for fear of exposing the fragile
foundations on which its authority rested. Unrestricted public debate had
been a key Presbyterian demand ever since the movement’s 1572 manifesto,
the Admonition to the Parliament, had asked for “free conference in these
matters.” Reformers believed that open discussion would inevitably
validate their reading of scripture. Furthermore, an anti-hierarchical polity
required individuals to take some responsibility for their own understand-
ing of religious practice: interpretation was not something handed down
from above, but a process to which all contributed. The traditional figure
of the scripture-literate ploughman was the ideal toward which the move-
ment aimed. In a tract printed on the Marprelate press, John Udall
announced that Presbyterian writings were designed to “manage” their
cause so “that many ploughmen, artificers, and children do see it, and
know it, & are able by the worde of God to justifie it.” With the options
available to Presbyterian lobbying becoming increasingly limited, Martin
Marprelate set out to force the public discussion on reform he believed
John Whitgift was using all possible means to suppress.

The chain of published attack and counterattack that preceded the first
Marprelate tract recapitulated these concerns and helped shape “Martinist”
polemical strategies. The exchange began with two contributions to the
subscription crisis: William Fulke’s Briefe and Plaine Declaration (1584),
usually known as The Learned Discourse, and Theodore Beza’s The
Judgement of a Most Reverend and Learned Man . . . Concerning a Threefold
Order of Bishops (c. 1585). Both were printed by Robert Waldegrave, who
would print the first four Marprelate tracts, and both were seen into print by
John Field, who translated Beza’s work and probably wrote the polemical
preface to Fulke’s. Originally written in the early 1570s, the Briefe and Plaine
Declaration accorded greater decision-making power to the “whole multi-
tude” of each congregation than had been the norm in Presbyterian thought,
and Fulke’s innovative insistence on collective governance was perhaps why the book had been withheld initially from publication. With subscription now threatening the unity of the church, Fulke’s idea of the interpretative community was now offered to the public as the best means to settle the issue of reform. According to the preface, the “best learned, most Godly & moderate men” on both sides should meet in debate modeled on the deliberations of Presbyterian assemblies, in which there bee much searching of the truth by sufficient reasoning without all by matters, quarrels, evasions and colours whatsoever, that there be much order, when the spirite of everye prophet shall be subject unto the spirits of the other prophets, & the judgement of al shalbe sufficiently heard, without stopping of free & sufficient answere, without Lordly carrying away of the matter. (A3r)

Summarizing Fulke, Field here prescribes a distinctly Presbyterian scheme of conflict resolution, one which legitimated individual contributions and presented truth as a product of consensus among equals, not a magisterial prerogative.

The French Calvinist Beza offered a similar program, and from a position of authority within the Continental Reform tradition: he, not Calvin, was the first to argue that Presbyterianism “was the only legitimate form” of church government, and his name appears repeatedly throughout Elizabethan debates concerning the church. Beza’s Judgement began with the problem of episcopacy. The “threefold order” of his title comprised the bishop ordained by God, that is, a regular pastor; the bishop created by man, that is, a pastor set above his fellow ministers; and finally the bishop of the devil, the corrupt version of the bishop of man, who took upon himself civil roles and who lived in lordly luxury. But if “bishop” were simply the scriptural name for a parish pastor, how was the church to be administered? In answer, Beza outlined the Presbyterian system of progressively representative elected bodies and emphasized that representatives at all levels were chosen “by common voyces,” not appointed permanently, and in no way “superior in authoritie” to their fellows who had elected them (B5r–v). Enthusiasm for lay participation and lay education was not universal among Presbyterians, and many who advocated such programs in the 1570s and 1580s – including Fulke himself – later hedged their support. But the model Fulke, Field, and Beza collectively presented for discussion of controverted issues in a non-hierarchical context underlies Martin Marprelate’s experiments in the use of print to encourage public debate.

These Presbyterian requests for plain style and unadorned reasoning, Fulke’s means for non-magisterial deliberations, elicited a 1,400-page
rebuttal from John Bridges, dean of Salisbury, entitled *A Defence of the Government Established in the Church of Englelde for Ecclesiasticall Matters* (1587). The title page of the *Defence* advertised Fulke’s *Briefe and Plaine Declaration* and Beza’s *Judgement* as its two primary targets. On the subject of popular debate, Bridges insisted that the Presbyterian program was politically dangerous, as it encouraged widespread questioning of church authority: “in all degrees of men and women, noble, worshipfull, and of the vulgar sort, many begin to doubt of our established government” (4r). Developing objections Whitgift had made in his exchanges with Cartwright and anticipating the position advanced subsequently by Richard Hooker, Bridges argued that Presbyterian demands on this issue were simply self-serving attempts to popularize their ideas of reform. Why should the church debate those who so obdurately refused to acknowledge the validity of the status quo? The central issue was the question of interpretative authority, as Hooker suggested when he wondered if reformers would ever be content “to referre your cause to any other higher judgement then your owne.” In response to the reform attack on the very idea of hierarchy, Bridges raised the stakes by advocating divine right episcopacy, a position other theologians would continue to push in the wake of the Marprelate controversy.

Bridges’ *Defence* generated conventionally polemical responses by Presbyterian stalwarts Dudley Fenner and Walter Travers. Both accused Bridges of relying on logically faulty arguments and both condemned his polemical manner, pointing angrily to the dean’s casual colloquialisms, impertinent “jestes and scoffes,” and insulting habit of “trifling” with his opponents’ language by interspersing brief quotations from their texts into lengthy, often playful sentences. “No wordes,” Fenner complained, “no sentences, never so clearelie and manifestlie set downe of us, can escape at his handes most violent and forced interpretations, most ridiculous and slanderous gloses.” Not only was the church determined to turn its back on the model divinely provided for its organization, they argued, but it appeared also to be thumbing its nose at reformers as it did so. As Travers complained, to see Bridges “thus discourse upon everie seconde or thirde worde, and to playe and sport him selfe, as if he were at great leysure, and had as little to doe as one that should playe with a feather: may shewe how easilie men of his coate, beare the burden of the Church.”

Martin Marprelate would add his voice to this chorus of complaint some months after the appearance of Travers’ *Defence of the Ecclesiastical Discipline*. Like his predecessors, Martin demands open discussion of controverted issues, advocates a syllogistic manner of disputation, and rebukes the church for refusing to take seriously the debate over reform.
But Martin also suspected that the public the reform movement was so eager to engage had, after decades of pamphlet warfare, ceased paying attention to the arguments presented on either side. A new strategy was clearly required. The difficulty lay in crafting an appeal to popular taste while still honoring the call for scholarly discussion “without all by matters, quarrels, evasions and colours whatsoever.” The resulting tension between means and ends informs the entire Marprelate project: Martin advocates an embattled disputational ideal in a polemic that defiantly and innovatively flouts that ideal. These counterpoised discourses of tradition and innovation form a creative ambivalence that lies at the heart of Martinist style, a productive tension that arises out of Martin’s experiment in the social uses of print. The same ambivalence would be replicated in texts produced by the anti-Martinist campaign, where it would in turn provoke debates throughout the 1590s on issues of appropriate style, the relationship of writer to textual personae, and the social responsibilities of authorship at a time when texts were increasingly coming to be regarded as commodities.

**MARTINIST STYLE**

The first two Marprelate tracts mount sustained critiques of John Bridges’ brick-sized *Defence*, “a portable book, if your horse be not too weak,” as Martin remarks (*Epitome*, 56). Like Fenner and Travers, Martin condemns the *Defence* as unconscionably verbose, filled with solecisms, and characterized by such sins of intellectual dishonesty as plagiarism and misrepresentation of sources. While attacks on an opponent’s syntax and grammar might seem pedantic or frivolous, Martin argues that form reflects substance. While “honest and godly causes” could be defended by “good proofs and a clear style,” Bridges had “defended our church government which is full of corruptions, and therefore the style and the proofs must be of the same nature that the cause is” (*Epitome*, 57). That is, a defense of the indefensible could be founded only on specious logic and slippery language. Similar arguments had long abounded on all sides of Elizabethan ecclesiological debate. What was unusual for this period was Martin’s addition of the weapons of satire and parody to the polemical arsenal of Presbyterian reform. Fenner and Travers had accused Bridges of playing rather than arguing; Martin asserts that a senseless book deserved a foolish response, and so adopts the voices of the episcopal dunce, stage clown, and rustic simpleton to represent the opponents such jesting deserved. He had no choice, Martin claims with an air of naive scrupulousness, “otherwise dealing with Master Doctor’s book, I cannot keep decorum
personæ.” Should anything in Martin’s text consequently prove “too absurd,” the reader could put the book down and go confront the person responsible: “ride to Sarum [Salisbury], and thank his Deanship for it” (Epistle, 7). With characteristic irony, Martin on his opening page simultaneously distances himself from outrages of polemical manner by blaming them on his opponent, and establishes a sly, sophisticated narrative voice that gleefully exploits in every way imaginable his own refusal to play by the polemical rules.31

Doubleness and fluidity characterize the Martinist voice throughout the tracts. “Martin Marprelate” is both an opponent of the bishops and a fellow “primate and metropolitan” as foolish as his episcopal brethren: he reveals the faults of his opponents, even as he exemplifies those faults in himself. Repeatedly shifting perspective, he is both person and stance, Martin and a Martin. The name itself is multivalent. “Martin” might glance at Martin Luther, though English reformers were more likely to identify with the originary figure of John Calvin, founder of the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. More immediately, the name plays ironically with contemporary valences of “Martin” as monkey, bird, ass, gullible dupe, or rustic clown. As anti-Martinist writers would frequently note, “Martin” was a name associated in general with foolery or madness.32 Confident, witty, and direct, the voice models spoken discourse and soon becomes an almost physical presence at the reader’s side. We hear Martin’s laughter (“py hy hy hy. I cannot but laugh, py hy hy hy’’); we see him struggling to read one of John Bridges’ lengthy sentences (“Do you not see how I pant?’’); we watch with complicit amusement as he conjures up and confronts opponents, then responds to onlookers butting into the conversation from their seats in the margins.33 Speakers and addressees walk in and out of Martin’s pages, like actors making their entrances and exits. Opponents deliver their own set-piece speeches, instructing the anti-Martinist troops; Martin’s two sons, Martin Junior and Martin Senior, exchange texts that, in the process of being read, become reported conversations between the two. Indirect address slides mid-sentence into direct address; text and dialogue, conventions of print and conventions of orality, repeatedly blur. The Marprelate tracts are fundamentally performative.

Contemporaries denounced all of Martin’s popularizing gestures, primarily by associating the tracts with other disreputable cultural sites that targeted popular taste with colloquial language and irreverent scurrility. Anti-Martinist commentary often commented on the inappropriate theatricality of the Marprelate tracts, for example. Francis Bacon would speak for many when he condemned the cultural turn Martin had apparently
initiated: “matters of religion,” he complained, were now being “handled
in the style of the stage.” Others were more specific in the theatrical
analogues they invoked. One official announced that Martin’s approach to
controversy was “fit for a vice in a play,” and several contributors to the
anti-Martinist campaign compared the Martinist persona with the comic
actor Richard Tarleton. The performances of both figures were associated
with direct audience address, racy insinuations, taunting personal attacks,
and extensive wordplay, including the use of such Martinist ploys as
deliberate misinterpretation, verbal distortion, and nonsense or hybrid
words. The Vice was a particularly appropriate analogue, being known
for a defiant quarrelsomeness that Martin echoes in his verbal fencing and
swaggering self-confidence in his ability to out-insult and out-reason any-
one who dared try. Clowns like Tarleton were famous for their abilities to
improvise, and the comparison reflects uneasiness with Martin’s fluidly
extemporizing discursive mode. Clowns were furthermore associated with
the jig, a form of stand-up routine comprising jokes and bawdy stories
accompanied by side drum or pipe. With their narrative economy in scene-
setting and characterization and frequent use of rustic dialect and personae,
the jig and its print counterpart the jestbook offer clear formal and tonal
analogues for Martin’s offhand one-liners and pointed ad hominem
anecdotes.

To contemporary readers, Martin’s irreverent, even libelous personal
attacks on church officials were his most immediately striking innovation.
While reform polemicists had inveighed against episcopacy for years, they
had on the whole denounced the office rather than the individuals who
occupied it. Restraint had been the convention on this issue, at least since
the accession of Elizabeth. As Francis Bacon asserted with characteristic
certainty in his response to the Marprelate controversy, “indirect or direct
glances or levels at men’s persons” were “ever in these cases disallowed.”
But Martin, as Thomas Cooper complained, was “not contented to lay
downe great crimes generally, as some other have done, but with very
undecent tearmes, charge[d] some particular Bishops with particular
faultes” (Admonition, 36–37). These “faultes” ranged from stupidity to
bigamy, closet Catholicism to contented cuckoldry, swearing, gambling,
and Sabbath-day bowling to theft, corruption, and public brawling, all in
addition to the more usual reform complaints that bishops were traitors to
her Majesty, tools of Antichrist, and active hinderers of salvation, com-
plaints the tracts instantiate with respect to particular bishops on specific
occasions. In many cases, Martin cites his sources and supplies corroborat-
ing details, giving readers the information they needed to check the facts
for themselves. “My book shall come with a witness before the high commission,” he remarks, after providing the names and addresses of several men victimized by John Aylmer, bishop of London (Epistle, 13). The point of Martin’s ad hominem stories was to make the Marprelate tracts a trial of the Elizabethan episcopate in the court of public opinion, and Martin justifies his course by contrasting his “open” examinations supported by witnesses with the procedures the bishops themselves employed against reformers. What was “the seat of justice they commonly use in these cases, but only some close chamber at Lambeth, or some obscure gallery in London palace? Where, according to the true nature of an evil conscience, that flyeth and feareth the light, they may juggle and foist in what they list without controlment” (Protestation, 203). Denied trial by debate, Martin shifted the venue to print, with the entire reading or listening public his jury.

Jig and jestbook provided one set of analogues for Martin’s ad hominem tales; manuscript satire, ballad, and other vehicles of popular and coterie culture provided another. Thomas Bulkeley’s manuscript “Libel of Oxford” (c. 1564), for example, circulated the rumor current in Oxford circles that Amy Cooper, Thomas Cooper’s wife, and Dr John Day, fellow and librarian of Magdalen College, were lovers. Martin either heard the rumor or saw a copy of the well-known poem, a rollicking account of the sexual peccadillos of local personages that survives in several versions. Martin repeats all the details Bulkeley had provided of the indiscretion, and echoes Bulkeley’s use of stage dialect, rustic persona, and even specific wordplay: Bulkeley had opened his stanza on Cooper with the lines “he that all our tubbes coould trimme / can never keepe his vessell staunch,” and Martin calls Cooper “Tom Tubtrimmer of Winchester” throughout Hay any Work for Cooper, the title of which plays on Cooper’s name. What was new, at least to Elizabethan ecclesiological debate, was Martin’s readiness to publicize such stories for polemical purposes. His apparent suggestion of homoerotic intimacy between John Whitgift and Andrew Perne, the dean of Ely and master of Peterhouse, for example, might have made its way into manuscript libel or orally circulated ballad; only Martin Marprelate would dare put it in print.

While drawing polemical strategies and even content from the theatre, prose fiction, coterie verse, and popular ballad, the Marprelate tracts also experiment with the conventions governing print publication. Martin’s critique of episcopacy extends into all available textual space: his mockingly discursive titles, facetious imprints, self-reflexive and conversational marginal notes, inventive running heads, coy, hint-dropping subscriptions,
The tracts also play with expectations of genre. Five of the seven experiment with the fictive possibilities of the personal letter. The *Epistle* gestures ironically at the conventional rhetoric of petitions, contrasting the colloquial confidence of Martin’s charges with the self-abasing feebleness of the language of supplication. Several of the tracts similarly undermine the quotation-response form of the animadversion, the traditional mode in which much ecclesiological debate was conducted, by juxtaposing Martin’s conversational responses with his opponents’ formal language. The *Just Censure* rewrites to Presbyterian ends John Whitgift’s own articles of examination, concluding with the mock-legalistic vow “I . . . do here protest, affirm, propound, and defend, that if John Canterbury will needs have a fool in his house, wearing a wooden dagger and a cockscomb, that none is so fit for that place as his brother John a Bridges, dean of Sarum” (181). The broadsheet *Schoolpoints* likewise packages scandalous charges against named bishops in the formal wording of theological disputation. The ironic contrast between the genre and the at times ludicrous resolutions he asks the church to defend – that a bishop may have two wives at once, for example – makes refutation unnecessary.

Of course, Martin Marprelate was not the first English polemicist to employ such popularizing means as colloquial prose, irreverent abuse, dialogue, ironic personae, or linguistic, textual, and typographical play. Pamphlet wars and propaganda campaigns throughout the earlier stages of the Reformation had produced numerous analogues for all these devices, and the Marprelate tracts draw repeated attention to their own polemical genealogy. Most obviously, Martin positions himself as the latest champion of two decades of aggressive Presbyterian protest, citing such predecessors as Thomas Cartwright, Anthony Gilby, John Field, Walter Travers, Dudley Fenner, John Udall, and John Penry. But Martin also anchors Presbyterian writings in a tradition of reformist challenge by writers of the previous generation such as William Tyndale, John Frith, Robert Barnes, John Hooper, James Pilkington, and John Foxe. Other publications associated with the Marprelate project extend this family tree. A 1592 Presbyterian petition attributed to Job Throkmorton defends Martin Marprelate by allying him with an oppositional culture that reached back through Tyndale, Barnes, Hooper, and Hugh Latimer to John Wyclif, *Piers Ploughman*, and the pseudo-Chaucerian *Ploughman’s Tale*. A mysterious book printed around the time the first Marprelate tracts appeared likewise associates Martin Marprelate with a native tradition of plain-speaking denunciation of ecclesiastical abuses. *O Read me, for I am of*
great antiquity. I Plaine Piers which can not flatter (London? 1588?) is an incomplete reprint of I Playne Piers which can not flatter (1550?), a “ploughman” text first published in the campaign to legitimize Edwardian reforms by popularizing the idea that they fulfilled a legacy of proto-Protestantism that reached back to the Lollards. The prospective reprint might have been meant to play a role in the Marprelate project: Piers Ploughman, the title page announces, was “Gransier of Martin mare-prelitte,” and the title page and new preface both borrow (or anticipate?) words and phrases employed in Martin’s Epistle. The preface furthermore threatens that similar material would be forthcoming. “These,” Piers writes, are “my first labours, which I pray you accept, but in time when I shall bee more able, you shall then here oftner from mee.” Because anticlerical and anti-Catholic arguments were easily repackaged for anti-episcopal purposes, an alliance with the heroes of the English Reformation and with proto-Protestant complaint helped legitimate the cause of Presbyterian reform and rebut the charge of introducing innovations.

Writings of the earlier Reformation also offered Martin Marprelate models of style, language, and polemical approach. The colloquial directness and linguistically inventive abuse employed by William Tyndale, for example, clearly influenced Martinist style, as attested by the extensive citations from Tyndale’s work in Theses Martinianae. In addition to the writers actually cited in the tracts, other possible influences include John Bale, William Turner, Luke Shepherd, Simon Fish, John Skelton, Robert Crowley, and Thomas Becon: all exploit, to varying degrees, the resources of colloquial prose, wordplay such as puns and alliteration, personal attack, anecdotes, satire, fictive framing strategies, shifts of narrative voice, and typographical and textual play. Similar strategies also appear in the pamphlet warfare in France and the Netherlands in the two decades before the Marprelate tracts appeared, much of which was far more free in approach than English polemic of the 1580s and 1590s. Proselytizing English Catholic performances of the early 1580s, textual and otherwise, also popularize their cause in ways analogous to Martin’s efforts. But while these sources and analogues all share elements of Martinist style, few offer anything like Martin’s narrative sophistication, virtuoso prose, and ironic, self-reflexive play with textuality, qualities reminiscent of two writers often invoked in discussions of Martinist style, Desiderius Erasmus (particularly the Erasmus of Encomium Moriae and Colloquia) and François Rabelais.

Martin’s innovative means of enlisting public support made fellow reformers deeply uneasy. “The puritans are angry with me, I mean the
puritan preachers,” he admits in the second tract. “And why? Because I am too open. Because I jest” (Epitome, 53). Many puritan leaders did indeed dissociate themselves from the Marprelate project. Thomas Cartwright, writing Burghley in 1590, insisted, “that from the first beginning of Martin unto this day, I have continually, upon any occasion, testified both my dislike and sorrow for such kind of disordered proceeding.” When Robert Waldegrave left the project after printing the fourth tract, he claimed to be doing so because the preachers he consulted disapproved of Martin’s course. At his trial in 1590, John Udall testified that “But for Martin and the rest of those Bookes . . . they were never approved by the godly learned.” Even John Penry, manager of the Marprelate press, wrote shortly before his execution in 1593 that he “disliked manie thinges in Mart. both for his maner and matter of wryting.” As Martin ruefully notes, “Those whom foolishly men call puritans, like of the matter I have handled, but the form they cannot brook” (Theses Martinianae, 147).

Opposition from his own side eventually prompted Martin to defend his use of satire in the fourth tract, Hay any Work. “I am not disposed to jest in this serious matter,” he claims. But he was confronted with a situation in which “the cause of Christ’s government” and “the bishops’ antichristian dealing” were both kept hidden from the public by a church he believed was determined to suppress discussion of reform. Furthermore, Martin also recognized that, however worthy the cause, conventional religious polemic had limited marketplace appeal:

The most part of men could not be gotten to read anything written in the defence of the 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. Aye, 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 would 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? (115)

Martin rests his case primarily on a contrast between his responsible playfulness (no profanation, mirth as a means to a good end) and the irresponsible and damaging foolery exhibited by opponents like Bridges, whose jesting made light of all the “antichristian dealing” the tracts were exposing to public gaze. But Martin also asserts the lawfulness of his approach by invoking the “circumstances of time, place, and persons,” the traditional terms that governed decorum. The argument here allies the tracts with a
classically inspired tradition of learned satire, as exemplified by such continental writers such as Theodore Beza, Philips van Marnix van Sant Aldegonde, and Caelius Curio. But most contemporary readers would recognize that the Marprelate tracts were operating in a discursive mode far removed from such culturally acceptable traditions. Martin Marprelate assumed what book historians have only recently begun to acknowledge, that books, particularly pamphlets, were not static objects of attention for one reader but were passed around, read aloud to others, and discussed at home, in the tavern, or in the market. The style of the tracts encouraged public dissemination of their content by rewriting traditional ecclesiological polemic for the popular culture of ballad, jig, and libel, the weapons of the politically weak. Stories, for example, are above all transportable, easily assimilated into oral culture: with every retelling, Martin would secure broader attention to his scrutiny of episcopal claims to spiritual and secular authority. The tracts are a kind of spectacle – a “display,” to use Martin’s own repeated term – staged to demonstrate to the community at large the invalidity of an office and the unworthiness of the men who occupied it. Every reader of the tracts, Martin implies, could be a Martin: the role required only a willingness to abandon traditions of deference and see that in neither its actions nor language could the church withstand close examination. As Martin warns his opponents, finding and punishing the author of the tracts would not keep them secure, because with the attitude he modeled in circulation, “the day that you hang Martin, assure yourselves, there will twenty Martins spring in my place” (Hay any Work, 119). The main goal, in Martin’s view, was to get talked about, because in the marketplace of ideas God’s (Presbyterian) truth would eventually emerge the winner.

Was the Marprelate project successful in reaching a public audience? Contemporaries thought so: almost all references to the controversy remark on Martin’s popularity among “the common people.” An anonymous memorandum on the project explained that Martin’s “seditious libelles” made easy way into “the hartes of the vulgar,” because such people were always “apt to entertaine matter of Noveltie especiallie if it have a shew of restraining the authoritie of their Superiours.” The church historian Thomas Fuller, writing in the seventeenth century, talked with ministers who were active when the tracts appeared and summarized in similar terms their collective memory of these “bastardly Libels”: “it is strange how secretly they were printed, how speedily dispers’d, how generally bought, how greedily read, yea and how firmly beleived, especially of the common sort, to whom no better musick then to hear their betters