

INTRODUCTION

September, 1989 marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of Martin Marprelate's *cygneam canteonem*, his Protestation. For 400 years, the identity of this remarkable individual has remained a mystery. This is all the more unusual in that Martin reveals much about himself in his writings, and what he has revealed narrows the field of candidates considerably. In fact, it narrows the field to a unique individual: there cannot have been two such men as Martin Marprelate in Elizabethan England, or in any age.

What characteristics of his personality, education and interests does Martin reveal in the Marprelate tracts?

In the first place, it is clear that Martin is a Londoner writing primarily to other Londoners. The tracts are filled with references to London place names. In addition, Martin knows a great deal about printing which, in his day, was confined almost exclusively to London.

Secondly, it is evident that the Marprelate tracts are the product of a legal mind. This point does not admit of much argument: the profusion of legal references in the tracts demonstrates that Martin was trained as a lawyer.

It is also abundantly clear that, in addition to his legal training, Martin had the advantage of a superb education. He is a master at the art of argumentation according to the rules of formal logic, one of the chief subjects taught in the universities in his day. He uses Latin expressions as a matter of course, and knows Greek and Hebrew and at least two modern languages, French and Italian. The breadth of his reading is extraordinary, and his allusions cover a wide spectrum. It is evident from references in the tracts that he has ties to both Cambridge and Oxford.

However, Martin does not allow his erudition to get in the way of his avowed purpose in writing the tracts, which is to inform by entertaining. Above all, Martin is a brilliant literary stylist, with a marvellous sense of humour and a penchant for puns. He moves effortlessly from formal argument to an informal colloquial style. Moreover, the vocabulary of the tracts, which is on a par with Shakespeare's, is employed with absolute precision. It would be difficult to find a single word in the tracts used superfluously or loosely.

Martin Marprelate's interests are, however, not confined to scholarly pursuits. He is a man of the world. He is knowledgeable about field sports and music, and his casual references to drinking and gambling betray little of the Puritan attitude toward such matters. He is aware of what goes on at court, and is possessed of much inside information which would only be available to someone with influential connections. He displays an air of supreme self-confidence in lambasting the bishops, and mentions details which indicate that he knows some of them personally. He speaks of Queen Elizabeth as one who is privileged to know her mind on certain matters.

Martin is independently wealthy, and calls himself "gentleman". Furthermore, he clearly identifies himself with the interests of the nobility against the wealth and political power of the upstart bishops. His theology is orthodox Church of England, tempered with a reforming bent characteristic of the powerful Protestant nobles who dominated the Elizabethan scene in the 1570's and early 1580's - Lord Burghley, the Earls of Leicester, Warwick, Bedford, Pembroke, Huntingdon et al. His attitude, when dealing with the less fortunate, has a distinctive tone of noblesse oblige. Moreover, in a significant slip in the Protestation, Martin identifies himself with the nobility in his use of the phrase "myself and other great men".

Finally, it is clear from several allusions in the tracts that Martin is somewhere between 35 and 45 years of age. He mentions events which occurred up to twenty years previously, suggesting that he was at least in his late teens in 1568. Yet, to Martin, men such as Thomas Cooper are "old", indicating that he himself is nowhere near their age.

The portrait which has been sketched thus far fits a single individual - Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604). Oxford was a courtier with access to information at the highest levels: his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, was Queen Elizabeth's chief minister of state for thirty years. He had M.A. degrees from both Cambridge (1564) and Oxford (1566), and legal training at Gray's Inn. He knew Latin, Greek, French and Italian and, probably, Hebrew. He was proficient in sports, and had pronounced musical ability. Like Martin, he had marked literary interests and a sense of humour; he was known in his day as "the best for comedy". In 1588, he was 38 years old, about the age that Martin reveals himself to be. Moreover, he could hardly have escaped knowing the bishops and other clerics mentioned in the tracts, most of whom were at Oxford or Cambridge, either as students, fellows or masters, during the years 1562-1566. In his day, Oxford was known for qualities which are noticeable in Martin - independence of mind and an ability to gather intelligence ("Not the like resolute man for great and serious affairs/ Not the like Lynx to spy out secrets and privities of States"). Finally, Oxford was connected by marriage with all the wealthy individuals in whose homes the Marprelate tracts were printed - Mistress Crane (Elizabeth Hussey), Sir Richard Knightley, John Hales and Roger Wigston - and is linked to John Penry through his relative, Edward Dunn Lee. To summarize: Oxford was Martin's age, knew the individuals mentioned in the tracts, had Martin's educational background, was possessed of the literary ability and sense of humour which are the hallmarks of Martin's style, and was connected with all the individuals who allowed the tracts to be printed in their homes.

The identification of Oxford as Martin Marprelate leads naturally to the question of motivation. What would have induced a privileged member of the nobility to undertake this dangerous enterprise?

It has often been stated that Martin wrote the tracts to advance the Puritan cause. However the tracts themselves make it clear that Martin was not a Puritan, and that his motives differed from theirs. Martin wrote the Marprelate tracts because of his disgust at the lawlessness of Archbishop Whitgift's repressive policies which, from 1583 on, had turned the Court of High Commission into a virtual Spanish Inquisition. Martin was not alone in his opposition to Whitgift. Many powerful nobles - including the Earl of Leicester and Lord Burghley - had expressed their disapproval through regular channels, but to little avail. It was at this juncture that Martin threw down the gauntlet. His cause was the cause of reformation in the Church of England, but he approached it, not from the narrow perspective of Puritan aspirations, but from the broader perspective of the danger which the bishops' lawless proceedings held for the safety and good government of the realm. Furthermore, it is quite evident from the tracts that Martin felt considerable alarm at the return of clerics to the Council table, as well as distaste at the corruption of the Elizabethan bishops and the ostentatious display of their rising power and wealth, which rivalled that of the old nobility.

The ultimate victory in the contest between Martin and the bishops went to Whitgift, who was backed by the Queen and who had the pursuivants and the rack at his disposal. However, in the contest in print, Martin clearly came off the victor. The bishops' attempts to defend themselves against his charges were feeble and evasive, and there can be little doubt that Martin spoke the truth, however unpalatable.

Did Martin manage this difficult and dangerous enterprise without being unmasked? We may never know. Martin's identity may ultimately have become known to Queen Elizabeth, and Oxford may have paid a price. However, it would likely have been deemed unpolitic to punish one of the highest-ranking peers in England in any public fashion for this sort of offence. The only real certainty is that Martin Marprelate escaped the brutal fate meted out to John Penry.

Notes on Modern Spelling Edition

1. Spelling and punctuation of the tracts have been modernized throughout; however, the original paragraphing has for the most part been left unchanged.
2. For ease of reference, an extensive glossary has been incorporated into the footnotes.
3. Titles of works cited have been abbreviated in the footnotes; for full citations, see the bibliography.
4. Index entries have been designed to gather together certain categories of information so as to facilitate further research into the Marprelate tracts and their authorship. The reader's attention is directed in particular to entries under the headings "Colloquial expressions", "Dating of events in Marprelate tracts", "Legal references", "London", "Marprelate, Martin", "Particulars of which Martin is aware", and "Printing, references to".