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**Prendergast, Maria Teresa Michaela. Railing, Reviling, and  
Invective in English Literary Culture, 1588–1617: The  
Anti-Poetics of Theater and Print**

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**Prendergast, Maria Teresa Michaela.**

***Railing, Reviling, and Invective in English Literary Culture, 1588–1617: The Anti-Poetics of Theater and Print.***

Material Readings in Early Modern Culture. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. Pp. xii, 246 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-1-4094-3809-0 (hardcover) \$99.95.

Focused on railing—which dominated the English literary landscape from 1588, with the first printing of *The Epistle* (the original Martin Marprelate pamphlet), until 1617, with Constantia Munda's and Jane Sharp's somewhat belated

contributions to the Joseph Swetnam controversy—Maria Teresa Michaela Prendergast's study of the perverse aspects of rhetorical ranting associates the novelty of railing's media (plays and pamphlets) and messages (usually topical) with what she calls an aesthetics of experimentation, a third space of discourse located at the margins of literary production that could not be absorbed by the dominant culture.

Prendergast's main interest here is in identifying an aesthetics—or, more precisely, an anti-aesthetics—of railing particular to the texts she considers: the common formal and rhetorical elements that she argues shaped a coherent aesthetic literary movement and community, not only temporarily creating a mode of expression that occupied the cultural margins but also instrumental in aiding the shift from lyrical romantic expression in the sixteenth century to the satiric forms that so dominated the seventeenth century and beyond. Key to this inquiry is Prendergast's view of railing as a briefly popular articulation signaling the historical and cultural crises that conditioned its production and popularity: the emergence of both print and theatre as new and experimental media; the splintering of the Protestant church in the wake of the Spanish Armada; the uncertainties of the royal succession and the ensuing experiences of having a new king who had never before set foot on English soil; and the usual *fin-de-siècle* anxieties that attend the conclusion of one century and the start of another. Prendergast organizes her discussion chronologically, treating the Marprelate pamphlets in the first chapter; the Nashe-Harvey war of words in the second; the *Poetomachia* or the Poets' War plays, with a special focus on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, in the third; Shakespeare's late experiments with railing in *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens* in the fourth, and the Swetnam Controversy's railing women—Jane Anger, Constantia Munda, and Jane Sharp—in the fifth and final section. What emerges is a persuasive identification of a particular mode of articulation and altercation that not only counters the aesthetics and decorum of the dominant literary discourse of early modernity, thereby opening a space for considerable novelty and experimentation, but also exposes the dialogical aspects of early modern print and theatre culture—a salient but often elusive feature of the period's literature and drama.

In her introduction, Prendergast addresses her primary interests in exploring why railing texts commanded so much attention at the height of their popularity, why the phenomenon was particularly associated with plays and pamphlets, and what the stylistic elements, definition and status, and aesthetic

and cultural resonances of railing were. Her treatment of the Marprelate controversy shifts our attention toward stylistic concerns in order to expose how a poetics dedicated to metaphors of perversion threatens to overwhelm the theological content of the texts but also creates an aggressive and transgressive intimacy among the Marprelate writers, the printing press, and an early modern pamphlet readership. Next, considering the six-year railing rivalry that developed between Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey, Prendergast points again to how the proliferative production of perverse metaphors and puns overwhelms any learned discourse that these texts contain, generating a promiscuous, vulgar parthenogenesis that implicates both authors in a queer poetics of sodomitical coupling with the mechanical fecundities of the printing press. Prendergast's section on the *Poetomachia* not only seeks to associate the Poets' War plays with the Marprelate scandal and the Nashe-Harvey war of words as a coherent continuum of a developing aesthetics of railing but also homes in on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in order to construe that play as a blistering judgment of railing as a failed poetics of envy that ultimately turns savagely against itself. Prendergast interprets the displacement of railing from the envious, educated man to the angry aristocrat in *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*, together with the plays' replacement of aggressive male bonding at the margins with the struggle to maintain an ideal of the aristocratic warrior hero, as both signaling a decline in the popularity of railing and the rise of satire and participating in a larger scene of socio-economic crisis. Finally, Prendergast considers how three railing writers who contributed to the Swetnam controversy by representing themselves as women celebrate the way that creating a self in print temporarily liberates them from the constraints of gender by licensing their performing a subversive third sex.

Throughout, Prendergast associates railing texts and authors with a queer aesthetic, invoking both early modern and recent critical definitions of "queer" that would stress its connoting generic depravity in order to capitalize on its increased utility and applicability to anyone and anything located at the margins of the dominant culture. Although Prendergast insists on a homoerotic intimacy lurking beneath railing's hostile surface in order to support this move, the anonymity and inscrutable gendering of most railing authors often make these claims seem comparatively tenuous. Otherwise, Prendergast's study of a short-lived but formally, rhetorically, and stylistically coherent literary and dramatic movement is solidly buttressed by her interrogation of aesthetics and

Careful close readings, which instantiate and substantiate her claims that railing texts reflect a climate of political and religious crisis, capitalize on the novelty of the printing press and the stage, challenge the accepted poetic decorum of the day, and constitute a vituperative, dialogic mode that served a crucial cultural function. Ultimately, this book constitutes a coherent, convincing, and important exploration of an oft-overlooked experimental phase in the development of early modern English literature and drama.

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