

Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse.
Almut Suerbaum, George Southcombe, and Benjamin Thompson, eds.
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Over the past three decades, the polemic of the medieval and early modern period has become an increasingly popular subject for literary scholars and historians. From recent studies of polemical exchanges between medieval Islamic, Christian, and Jewish writers, to work by Lori Anne Ferrell, Alexandra Walsham, and others on the confessional polemic of early modern Europe, considerable attention has been given to polemic and its effects. Yet most of these studies focus on a particular historical moment. In comparison, Almut Suerbaum, George Southcombe, and Benjamin Thompson identify their edited collection, *Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse*, as a work that assesses the continuities, and divergences, between medieval and early modern polemic. Responding to claims that early modern polemic was a new form of writing, as Jesse Lander argues in *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (2006), their introduction suggests that the articles in *Polemic* reveal not change, but continuity, demonstrating that early modern polemic “remained deeply indebted to medieval developments” (14).

The collection is divided into three parts: the essays in parts 1 and 2 mostly consider medieval texts and writers, while those in part 3 take the reader from the early sixteenth

century to the late seventeenth. Suerbaum, Southcombe, and Thompson characterize this arrangement as indicative of a shift in emphasis from “texts whose polemic is largely internal, or literary, and is thus contained within the text” (11) to texts with significant social applications. Within part 1, for example, Francesca Southerden coins the phrase “polemical imagination” to describe how Petrarch’s internalized focus on the self contains the polemical aspects of his *Liber sine Nomine*, concluding that “for Petrarch to engage in polemic is consequently to enter the labyrinth of the self” (42). Other essays in this section consider the medieval poem *Lohengrin*, the thirteenth-century motet *In veritate comperi*, and late medieval Castilian hagiography; in each case, polemical strategies are identified as providing an opportunity for internalized reflection, rather than provoking political or social action. In part 2, on the other hand, essays by Monika Otter, Almut Suerbaum, Annie Sutherland, and C. M. MacRobert analyze the use of polemical strategies within socially performative texts: from the role of schoolboy flying rituals in pedagogic discourse to allusions to the Psalms in early sixteenth-century debates about vernacular Bible translation.

This theme of religious controversy continues with the first essay of part 3: Benjamin Thompson’s excellent account of how medieval reform rhetoric influenced the polemical strategies of the Henrician reformers. Considering an impressive range of sources, Thompson persuasively argues that medieval anxieties about the authority of polemical discourse were addressed by the secular polemic of Henry VIII’s government. Part 3 of the volume also includes interesting essays by Natalia Nowakowska and George Southcombe: the former draws attention to a critically neglected tradition of Central European Reformation polemic, while the latter highlights the intriguing significance that appeals to moderation acquired in late seventeenth-century debate.

The collection *Polemical: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse* asks thought-provoking questions about the nature of polemic, and encourages a reassessment of the relationship between medieval and early modern polemic. There is, however, an uneven engagement with such issues; while some authors devote considerable attention to formulating their definition(s) of polemic, other essays barely mention the term or its historical significance. It is also worth noting that, while the majority of the articles would be accessible to a reader with a general knowledge of the medieval and early modern periods, some essays in the collection do require a fairly specialized knowledge of translation practices and textual transmission. Overall, this collection includes a number of good essays that either illuminate topics that have received little prior critical attention, or offer persuasive new insights into familiar texts or historical developments. It should be a useful resource for those interested in how particular authors or texts employ polemical strategies, while the several essays that explore the relationship between medieval and early modern polemic directly are especially valuable in terms of the collection’s overall purpose.

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