Reviews


This volume contains English, German, and French papers read by a variety of distinguished scholars at an international colloquium on the history of Renaissance rhetoric organized by H. Plett at the University of Essen in June, 1990. While extremely valuable on their own account, these papers also invite comparison to a similar venture organized by P. Mack at the University of Warwick in July, 1991: Peter Mack, ed., Renaissance Rhetoric (London-New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994). Although they differ somewhat in character, each collection nicely counterbalances in diverse ways some of the inevitable omissions or imperfections of the other one. I shall therefore look at the two collections together in this review.

Plett’s volume is the larger and more heterogeneous one. In his preface, the editor presents the collection as a complete survey of Renaissance rhetoric outside Italy. It contains, apart from an introductory essay by the editor, eighteen papers (two of which were actually not read at the conference but were added by way of necessary elements to complete the picture), grouped under three distinct headings: rhetoric and humanism; rhetoric and other intellectual pursuits (including topics such as letter-writing, preaching, philosophy, and medicine); and rhetoric and poetry, visual art, music, and drama.

Seven articles in the Plett volume contain very useful and in most cases solid general surveys of rhetoric as a whole in a particular country (France, the Low Countries, Spain, Slavic countries), of a particular author (Erasmus), or of a particular rhetorical genre (letter-writing, sacred rhetoric). Moreover, there is an article on the influence of the political speeches of Cicero among fifteenth-century humanists in Italy (in spite of the presentation of the volume as a volume dealing with the Northern Renaissance); an article on rhetoric and medicine in Descartes; an article on the consequence of the invention of the printing press for the development of rhetoric; an article on the relationship, especially on the level of the figures of speech, between rhetoric and poetics; an excellent and well-documented analysis of the evolution of the term *enargeia* in antiquity and in the Renaissance; papers on the ways in which var-
ious elements from the theory of eloquence (such as the nature of *imitatio* and the methods to convey emotions) were transposed to criticism of the visual arts and music theory; an article on French classicism and rhetoric; and, finally, an essay examining the expressive, and therefore rhetorical, nature of drama. The usefulness of the articles in this volume is substantially enhanced by copious bibliographies, printed immediately after each article.

The articles in Mack's volume count exactly half the number of those in Plett's volume and have not been thematically ordered. I found this volume a bit more stimulating to read as a whole because the articles it contains by and large include fewer general observations and seem to deal with each topic in a more explicit way; most of the articles engage the reader more directly in the actual Renaissance sources by explicit discussions of textual fragments (or, in one case, pictures, the illustrations of which have been appended in the volume). The articles in this volume also deal mainly with Northern Europe, although in contrast to Plett's volume this perspective has apparently not been chosen on purpose, since one article dealing specifically with an Italian subject is welcomed by the editor as a vital extension of the general scope of the volume. The collection contains articles dealing with the (somewhat slow) influence of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; Erasmus and the diffusion of rhetoric and dialectic; the importance of Melanchthon's rhetoric; rhetoric in Protestant schools; rhetoric textbooks in general; and the ways in which rhetoric helps to understand, consecutively, drama, prose literature, and visual art. Finally, there is a piece on the affinities between instruction in rhetoric and political discourse in the Elizabethan world.

It is to be noted as an advantage of Mack's volume (and therefore as a compliment to the editor) that each article was revised for publication. Thus the reader can assume that, to the benefit of the reader, each author has incorporated the results of the conference discussions into her or his essay, wherever this proved to be relevant. In at least one case, namely when B. Vickers challenges L. Jardine's observation that Agricola's *De inventione dialectica* and Erasmus' *De copia* are in a certain way unreadable texts, the reader is given an impression of the discussions which have actually taken place at the meeting. Finally, Mack's collection is also in a metaphorical sense a true report of a discussion and of a work in progress, in that all contributions but one (namely D. Knox's sur-
vey of rhetoric in Protestant schools) break new ground or challenge old ideas.

Space as well as the reviewer's limited competence make it impossible to mention, let alone analyse, the various merits of each article included in these two tomes. For this reason, I confine myself to observing, from my own area of interest, a few brief points.


An interesting and relatively new topic of research concerns the ways in which rhetoric and dialectic were combined by the humanists to formulate a coherent theory of ratiocination focused on topical invention. This new theory was codified in manuals and widely applied in humanistic school curricula during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Some of the important actors in this revitalization of rhetorical education north of the Alps who are discussed in Mack's volume are Agricola, Erasmus, and Melanchthon. Kees Meerhoff's essay on Melanchthon's rhetoric ("The Significance of Philip Melanchthon's Rhetoric in the Renaissance," pp. 46-62) is a very informative piece both on Melanchthon's rhetoric and dialectic (about which Meerhoff has published several other, more detailed articles) and on humanistic didactics in the area of argumentation theory. One of the reasons why this article may be especially recommended to the reader is that it explains most clearly and in simple language that the main function of
humanistic rhetoric and dialectic in the schools was a practical one, namely to teach students to read texts methodically and, subsequently, to write (or speak) effectively themselves.

A famous case illustrating the way in which the humanists made rhetoric serviceable to their intellectual pursuits is Erasmus' *Declamation on the Praise of Marriage*. This short piece, published separately in a 1518 small collection of *declamationes* and in 1522 as a part of Erasmus' manual of letter-writing, is a harmless rhetorical exercise, yet at the same time it is a small theological essay which was the cause of a protracted and sharp controversy with academic theologians who felt that Erasmus should be forbidden to speak, as they saw it, in favour of marriage to the detriment of celibacy. Thomas O. Sloane has taken this declamation on Christian marriage as the starting point for a brief characterization of humanistic rhetorical education and two-sided argument ("Rhetorical Education and Two-Sided Argument," ed. Plett, pp. 163-78). Sloane rightly stresses that for the humanists the skill of looking at a case from two sides, pro and con, not only constitutes a technique but also presupposes a mental attitude which is anti-dogmatical. Erasmus certainly had this attitude, because, I think, he favoured a mood in society which would allow educated people to make their own well-considered moral choices. On the other hand, I question Sloane's judgment that Erasmus enjoyed the confrontation prompted by his declamation merely because it attacked dogmatism. And it is certainly a mistake to claim, as Sloane does, that the rhetorical mode of thinking which Erasmus represents amounts to a skeptical attitude toward truth. Truth, in the eyes of Erasmus and the humanists like him (such as Agricola and Melanchthon), is God's revelation and the responsibility of those to whom it is destined; and these are things about which Erasmus had no doubts whatsoever. The debate which Erasmus favours is rather about the practical fulfillment of man's duties, both as an individual and as a member of society, toward God.

A similar remark can be made concerning Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggeman's essay on the *philosophia perennis* and topical invention ("Über die Leistungsfähigkeit topischer Kategorien—unter ständiger Rücksichtnahme auf Renaissance-Philosophie," ed. Plett, pp. 179-95). This article focuses on topics as a method to structure human experiences in theoretical disciplines, in order to make it possible to use them as arguments in discourse. As such, the theory
of topics was an important instrument for the *philosophia perennis*, whose adherents assume that God is identifiable by the human senses in the created world. In the context of this theme, the author brings up Agricola’s definition of the argument as a means to convince. The author maintains that Agricola’s definition has philosophical and theological implications because through it, truth is given up and exchanged for probability, and as a result the revelation has, on the level of argumentation, the same psychological status as any other argument. I am incompetent to assess the philosophical value of this exposé as a whole, but I feel that Agricola does not belong in it. As far as we know, Agricola never got involved with *philosophia perennis*, and if we go by Agricola’s writings, he saw topical invention, like Erasmus and Melanchthon after him, as a moral and educational tool, not a vehicle for the construction of religious belief through the senses and even less as a tool to question the basic beliefs of Christianity.

Considering the large extent to which humanistic school education was focused on practical skill in reasoning, it seems obvious that the results of this education should be visible in the literature and other writings of the day. However, a lot of work in this field still needs to be done. In this context, the articles by George Hunter (“Rhetoric and Renaissance Drama,” ed. Mack, pp. 103-18) and Peter Mack (“Rhetoric in Use: Three Romances by Greene and Lodge,” ed. Mack, pp. 119-39) strike me as particularly interesting. Mack investigates, by means of a case study of three average literary texts from the sixteenth century, whether our knowledge of sixteenth-century rhetoric and dialectic contributes to our understanding of these works. Hunter’s essay deals with the application of strategies of argumentation in Renaissance plays. Both essays are remarkable in that they illustrate how illuminating it is to analyse Renaissance literary texts (and, by extension, all literary and non-literary texts) from the premise that *inventio* and *elocutio* (in other words, content and form, *ratio* and feeling) are inextricably connected in the intellectual and emotional process which produces human discourse.

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