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Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance

Victoria Kahn / Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985. Pp. 243.

Kahn's interpretation of quattrocento humanism, Erasmus, Montaigne, and Hobbes extends well beyond traditional work in comparative intellectual history and finally should be approached as a theoretical rather than historical study. Indeed, should one expect a historical examination of Renaissance rhetoric that reviews Ramistic reforms in the manner of Walter Ong or James Murphy or an analysis of skepticism in the mode of Richard Popkin or the late Charles Schmitt, one will meet considerable frustration. Here deconstructive methods (with asides to Richard Rorty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton) orient an analysis of the humanist practice of reading from its early reaction to scholasticism to its eventual confrontation with mathematical science. But while the book interprets individual texts and aligns them to offer an interpretation of an entire period, it above all approaches humanist hermeneutics as a means for testing the possible modern realignment of literary theory and practical criticism. Although the book pulls the reader between the articulation of theoretical problems and historical scholarship, such polarity finally marks the seriousness of Kahn's project.

Kahn purposely tests the frontier between philosophy and rhetoric in the Renaissance by locating her discussion *between* the deconstructionist's play with epistemology and rhetoric and the pragmatist's argument for local validity. Although she acknowledges the limits of forcing humanist texts into such a modern cast, she finds that it helps articulate the ways humanist rhetoric combines skepticism and commitment: "The deconstructive description of the pragmatic skepticism of the humanists is one that the humanists themselves would accept; humanism is defined by its resistance to the epistemological implications of its own rhetoric, by its concern with the 'consequence of pragmatism' rather than with the epistemological implications of such pragmatism" (p. 26). Kahn's subsequent move simultaneously relocates and tests the force of her theoretical orientation in history: "In the following pages I will be more concerned with defining the humanist's attempt to construct such a pragmatic rhetoric than with deconstructing such an attempt. For if deconstruction is a critique of metaphysics, or philosophical language in general, it is necessarily a very different task from the *reconstruction* of the conventions of writing and interpretation in a given historical period" (p. 26; my emphasis).

Kahn's "reconstructive" argument becomes reiterated in the concluding chapter. Although her position remains insufficiently developed, she suggests that deconstructive methods, while useful, ultimately do not give sufficient attention to praxis.

"But if, for example, the modern problematic of deconstruction allows us to read humanist texts for what they have to say about rhetorical versus logical notions of representation, the humanists' concern with praxis in turn allows us to see how much the deconstructive view of rhetoric is determined by theoretical and epistemological concerns" (pp. 190-91). The conclusion is significant because it confirms that Kahn's intention in the book is not simply a historical reconstruction of a humanist problematic but is also a kind of *prise de conscience* in regard to modern theory. As David Quint recently noticed—in reference to Kahn—in his introduction to *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore, Md., 1986), humanism invites such analysis because of its situation "between two systematic modes of theory, between scholastic logic and the mathematically based new science of the seventeenth century" (p. 14). Each of Kahn's central chapters explores shifts within this spectrum.

After mapping her project theoretically, Kahn orients (chap. 2, "Humanist Rhetoric") the reader to the historical range of the book and introduces the configuration of prudence and skepticism. She places the terms historically in connection with the humanist practice of setting arguments *in utramque partem* or on either side of a question. According to Kahn, such deliberation engaged not simply the writer but also the reader in an active intellectual practice that may be associated with prudence. Academic skepticism and ultimately Pyrrhonian skepticism affect the prudential practice of reading and writing differently. In the first stage, skepticism becomes practically synonymous with humanism itself. In the later Pyrrhonian stage, however, skepticism fosters a crisis which undermines the practical critique of absolute truth mounted so successfully against scholasticism in the early Renaissance. Montaigne and Hobbes represent different expressions of the crisis.

In the next chapter (chap. 3, "The Quattrocento"), Kahn extends the discussion of prudence to Colluccio Salutati, Giovanni Pontano, and Lorenzo Valla. In the works of each, she finds a shifting deployment of argumentation *in utramque partem*. For example, in Salutati's treatise *De nobilitate legum et medicine* (1399), the pragmatic practice of law with its attending conception of consensus becomes celebrated as a more favorable model for discourse than the prescriptive application of Galenic medicine. In Pontano's *De prudentia* (1496?), the practical, deliberative force of exposition *in utramque partem* becomes not simply an occasional tool, as with Salutati, but a mode of reading itself. Valla's *De libero arbitrio* allows Kahn to show that, even though doubt accompanies reading, it engenders action or prudence rather than causing paralysis. For Kahn each figure moves toward an increasingly active conception of reading that embraces prudence and skepticism.

The discussion of Erasmus—with ancillary reference to Luther—(chap. 4, "Erasmus: Prudence and Faith") works as a transition between the pragmatic skepticism of the early humanists and the more subversive doubt that emerges after the publication of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1562) and Gentian Hervet's *Against the Mathematicians* (1569). By linking prudence more exactly with interpretation rather than reading, Kahn can locate the changing status of prudence at the center of the Erasmus/Luther debate on free will. While Erasmus believed in judicious interpretation—in effect a kind of controlled skepticism—Luther challenged the possibility of deliberative reading altogether. For Luther, skepticism paradoxically works as a vehicle for affirming faith and the reception of God's

word. For Erasmus, skepticism is more complex. The *Encomium moriae* in particular forces the *in utramque partem* argumentation so that it begins to thwart the consensus anticipated by quattrocento humanists. By upsetting the message of reconciliation or accommodation, by arguing against himself, Erasmus comes to anticipate the skeptical rhetoric of Montaigne.

The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the rhetorical assimilation of Pyrrhonian skepticism in Montaigne's *Essaies* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*. While Erasmus tests the limits of consensus in the *Encomium*, Montaigne replaces the idea of a public rhetoric altogether with the invention of a new mode of rhetoric directed at himself. By arguing "to suspend the possibility of judgment or persuasion to action altogether" (p. 116), Montaigne finally formulates a "skeptical practice of writing that redefines the possibility of prudence" (p. 116). With Hobbes the practical position of rhetorical persuasion and consensus comes to an end. Rather than trusting the maintenance of the commonwealth to rhetoric, Hobbes would replace it with the greater authority of a scientific-mathematical model. The displacement of rhetoric occurs paradoxically, however, for his argument for the institution of scientific rationality becomes administered rhetorically. Although Hobbes's argument appears contradictory, the tension manifest in the text is intended, for Hobbes wishes his reader to argue with the text and finally judge for himself that law should be instituted through the scientific neutrality of a sovereign.

Since I have space for only the most abbreviated questions, I want to comment specifically on Kahn's presentation of prudence and skepticism and, finally, on her "reconstructive" work. Prudence assumes so many forms in the chapters (reading, writing, interpretation, praxis) that it loses its ability to focus the discussion. Neither is the active, intellectual force Kahn associates with prudence an exclusive feature of humanist writings. Medieval discussion includes these notions as well. Kahn might have further explored the various functions of prudence by comparing *prudencia* to *allegoria*, another rhetorical mode which had hermeneutical and compositional status. Kahn's elaboration of *sensus communis*, also in regard to prudence, might have been further supported had she looked at the ample investigation of *sensus communis* in medieval and Renaissance faculty psychology. Here the analysis of optical deception in a setting of medical skepticism would supply rich material for the extension of her study. Although the discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism works especially well in the chapter on Montaigne, it was hard to see how her understanding of academic skepticism differed from reading in general. In a discussion that often makes subtle distinctions, it was disconcerting to find such crucial terms drift between different conceptual settings.

Finally, a comment about Kahn's "reconstructive" work. The book is most useful in drawing together deconstruction and the pragmatic rhetorical interests exhibited by the humanists. By noticing that such pragmatic rhetoric is not subverted but given impetus by skepticism, Kahn urges a more affirmative stance for deconstruction. The view is important for it hints that deconstruction may be incomplete unless it acknowledges that a text does communicate no matter what its limitations. In effect, deconstruction does not lead to suspension or paralysis but to a pragmatic awareness of reading and its limits. By drawing together deconstruction and Renaissance skepticism, Kahn extends Paul de Man's exploration of reading as "an endless process in which truth and falsehood are inextricably intertwined"

(*Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed. [Minneapolis, Minn., 1983], p. ix). The book's most important feature—and one which it shares with her recent article, "Humanism and the Resistance to Theory" (pp. 373–96 in the Parker/Quint collection mentioned above)—is its effort to work toward a critical accommodation of Renaissance thought and our own theoretical concerns about reading. It is to Kahn's credit that she allows the Renaissance texts to challenge and sharpen her theoretical interest, just as the theoretical questions she poses articulate facets of the historical texts.

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