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Review of A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380-1620

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter Mack. *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380-1620*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. vii + 345 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-959728-4.

Reviewed by Brian J. Maxson (East Tennessee State University)

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Commissioned by Amy R. Caldwell

Peter Mack's *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380-1620* provides a comprehensive examination of the content and circulation of rhetorical manuals published during the European Renaissance. The book is organized chronologically, with the majority of its pages focusing on northern Europe during the sixteenth century. The study is primarily concerned with familiarizing readers with the contents, differences, and intellectual influence of dozens of rhetorical manuals and their authors. The book's central theses about the characteristics and duration of the Renaissance largely uphold traditional wisdom, but rarely has the case been made with so much accumulated evidence. Mack's study is impressive in its scope and inclusivity and it will serve as the standard against which future studies of Renaissance rhetorical thought are measured. It will be an indispensable reference book for any scholar whose work touches on Renaissance rhetoric, which, since the Renaissance was inextricably tied to rhetoric (p. 2), should be all historians of the period. Historians of thought will find this book especially useful for their studies.

The book was conceived as "the first comprehensive history of Renaissance rhetoric" (p. 1), a task made possible through the recent completion of Lawrence Green and James Murphy's *Renaissance Rhetoric Short-Title Catalogue* (2006). Green and Murphy compiled a list of almost every work on rhetoric published between 1460 and 1700 as well as the number of editions for each book. Mack has used a large sampling of the 3,842 entries in Green and Murphy's compilation to show readers how rhetoric was understood by scholars and taught to students over this 250-year period. Mack argues that rhetorical books only gradually broke away from medieval approaches to form a unique "Renaissance rhetoric," which is distinguishable from earlier and later movements through seven major characteristics. These characteristics were both general—Renaissance rhetoric involved a closer reading of classical authors—as well as specific—Mack shows the strong emphasis on connecting

argument to style, varying the structure of speeches, expressing ideas in a variety of ways, and moving an audience emotionally, among others. The book then classifies a range of ways within this general framework that rhetoric differed at the beginning versus the end of the Renaissance.

The book is organized around fourteen chapters, most of which address a specific temporal period and geographical range. The study begins with an overview of the classical rhetorical tradition followed by a single chapter on fifteenth-century Italy. Chapters on Rudolph Agricola, Erasmus, and Philipp Melanchthon follow. Of particular note is the chapter on Melanchthon, whom Mack claims was instrumental in formally tying rhetoric and dialectic together in a rhetorical handbook. By the latter sixteenth century followers of Melanchthon continued to flourish, although they ceded the primary limelight in northern Europe to the thought of Peter Ramus, who argued for the complete integration of argumentation and style and a streamlined approach to rhetorical instruction. As these two schools of thought competed in the north, sixteenth-century rhetoricians in southern Europe went their own way by focusing less on the construction of original rhetorical handbooks and more on commentaries on the classical tradition, especially Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Ultimately the rise in influence of the Jesuits in Mediterranean Europe led to a revival in scholastic thought and thus a movement away from combining dialectic with rhetoric in southern Europe. The book's primary narrative ends with a discussion of three large textbooks written at the turn of the seventeenth century that enjoyed regional popularity and that differed in details even as they retained the core characteristics of Renaissance rhetoric. Mack suggests that these textbooks were the last of their kind: later challenges once again altered the basis for the instruction of rhetoric and, of at least equal importance, rhetorical instruction declined in importance overall, an argument convincingly proven through the steep decline in both classical and

sixteenth-century rhetorical manuals printed after about 1590. After the primary chronological narrative of the book concludes with chapter 9, Mack addresses other types of rhetorical handbooks that did not fit well into other chapters, such as chapters on letter-writing manuals, preaching manuals, and rhetorical handbooks written in the vernacular.

The book's greatest strength is its consistent erudition and clear organization. Each chapter follows the same basic format in order for readers to easily compare different authors and find summaries of their major works and ideas. A heading signals the start of a discussion on a particular author. One to two paragraphs of biographical information follow. After this short biography the book offers a detailed summary of that figure's primary rhetorical work(s), often accompanied by a chart illustrating the book's organization. Each section concludes with a summary of the author's major ideas, his innovations, and his influence. The book then moves onto a new section organized along the same lines. Mack's approach will allow scholars to quickly gain a solid foundation in the prevalent rhetorical trends taught at different places and times during the European Renaissance and then to use this previously difficult to find information to inform their own studies.

The book sets out to offer an interpretative synthesis of Renaissance rhetorical thought. This goal places

its content squarely onto texts and ideas in texts. Beyond short introductions the social and political context in which authors lived and taught is left to other historians. Instead, the author focuses on subtle and not subtle changes in the approach to Renaissance rhetoric from one rhetorical manual to another. Mack leads the reader through these discussions with care: pages dense with rhetorical vocabulary and theory are clearly articulated and accessible even for readers not well versed in these topics. The book even includes a useful reference guide to common and not so common rhetorical terms. The structure of the book makes it much easier to consult than it will be to read from cover to cover. While nuancing smaller points on individual authors, the book largely upholds the big picture about the centrality of rhetoric, its central characteristics, and the length of its hold on European culture. This is not necessarily a drawback since readers will rarely find the case made in such an organized fashion and backed by so much quantitative and qualitative evidence. The book ends with a list of potential future research projects, many of which hold promise; yet, this book is so thorough that it leaves less an impression of how much is left to be done than of how much is already known. All scholars of the European Renaissance should have access to this fine book, while intellectual historians and specialists of the history of rhetoric should have it on their shelf.

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