

Heinrich F. Plett. *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004, xvi + 581 pp., € 128.00 hb.

Ever since his pioneering book on the rhetoric of the affections in the Renaissance published in 1975,<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Plett has been an authority in the field of early modern rhetoric, and his *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* – a monument of erudition – is the fruit of more than thirty years' engagement with the subject. In the first part, “Scope and Genres of Renaissance Rhetoric”, Plett gives an introduction to the humanists' rediscovery of classical rhetoric, their practice of editing, translating, annotating and disseminating classical texts and their attempts at emulation. He addresses

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Plett, *Rhetorik der Affekte. Englische Wirkungsästhetik im Zeitalter der Renaissance* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1975).

the Five Great Arts of rhetoric as expounded by Cicero and Quintilian (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria* and *actio*) as well as several types of rhetoric like the art of preaching, epistolary rhetoric and formulary rhetoric, also briefly outlining their role in education and public life. In this part of the book, Plett also engages with the metarhetorical debate including the clash between advocates of the figurative and plain styles. In this discourse, a rhetoric considered deceitful and useless is set against the “positive myth of the civilizing force of eloquence” (73).

Plett also points to some *leitmotifs* which characterize his approach to rhetoric. First, discourses are generally seen to be enlivened through *energeia*, a dynamic style created among other things through kinetic metaphors, and through *enargeia* or *evidentia*, the lifelike materialization of mental images. Second, “in the Renaissance every kind of representation, whether verbal or non-verbal, whether realistic or non-realistic, is tropical in character, which means that it has a twofold semantic status, a literal and a transcending, tropical one” (99). Therefore, allegorical and figurative representations are intrinsic to early modern culture. Third, among the three basic types of speech, *genus iudiciale*, *genus deliberativum* and *genus demonstrativum*, the latter became most significant in the production of literature at a time when *epideixis*, the rhetoric of praise and blame, “assumed an important role in public life for the numerous occasions the feudal system offered the subjects to express their attitude towards the ruling class” (101). Fourth, the importance of the emotions for effective speech increases throughout the period: “When the representation of passions is regarded the ‘glory of the (dramatic) poet’, we have [...] entered the Baroque Age with its self-interpretation in the light of the theatrical metaphor as the quintessence of its existence: *totus mundus agit histrionem*” (107).

The second part, “Poetica Rhetorica”, is structured according to the Five Great Arts, the first of which, “Inventio Poetica”, deals with “the rhetorical conceptualization of poetic imagination” (111). Plett shows how poetic invention is focussed on the vivid mental images created in order to stir up emotions of the orator and his audience, also glancing at the debate about images with positive and negative connotations (eikastic/fantastic) and the role of commonplaces. “Dispositio Poetica” is concerned with generic intertextuality and “Elocutio Poetica” addresses the connection between *res* and *verba* and the related issue of poetic style, both in a courtly and humanist context. “Memoria Poetica” is first concerned with mnemonic architectures like the villa, the memory stage, the church and the monastery, showing how the spatial metaphors changed with the cultural context. This is followed by a discussion of pious emblems and meditations related to the idea of the *liber naturae* and the notion that the “liveliness of Nature is a hieroglyph for the existence of God as the Unmoved Mover” (242). “Actio Poetica” is finally concerned with “stagings of the body” (253) and the “rhetorical grammar of action” (258), expanding into a discussion of the theatricality of rhetoric and the rhetoricity of the theatre.

The third part, “Intermedial Rhetoric”, deals with the rhetorical conceptualization of the visual arts, pictorial poetry, music and musical poetry. As regards the visual arts, Plett addresses the issue of the perfect illusionistic imitation of nature and the dialogue between the arts including the *paragone*, “pictures as orations” (330), *ekphrasis*, pattern poetry, emblems and the *iconomachia*. These debates foster the upgrading of the visual arts from *artes mechanicae* to *artes liberales* and entail the foundation of academies of art and architecture in a humanist spirit: “While the philosophical theories of art focus on the aesthetic concepts of imitation and beau-

ty, rhetorical theories are employed by art theorists [...] as concepts of affective persuasion for the hermeneutic analysis of the effects of pictures on their beholders” (313). The chapter on music deals with musical eloquence (*Klangrede*), prosodic patterns considered as harmony and the *poeta musicus* as “originator of culture” (396). Like the visual arts, music was raised in rank through a direct link with the mythical hero Orpheus and through its expression of *ordo*, “according to which each musical expression is a representation of the non-sensual music of the spheres” (367). Music is considered as a kind of language that has power to move because it speaks directly to the emotions and the “*poeta musicus* is also a propagandist whose rhetoric is the more effective because it combines teaching (*docere*) with delight (*delectare*)” (400).

The fourth part, “Poeta Orator: Shakespeare as Orator Poet”, turns to drama, offering an in-depth analysis of Shakespeare’s use of oration in terms of a typology of demonstration, dissimulation and negation of rhetoric, related, respectively, to the rhetorical writings of Thomas Wilson, George Puttenham and Francis Bacon. These “three names not only stand for three kinds of rhetoric but [...] denote three cultural paradigms that follow each other in the Renaissance: the humanist, the courtly, and the rationalistic” (433). Plett’s first example is Hamlet’s theory of acting as he explains it in his speech to the Players, and Plett traces a development from an affective and mimetic notion of acting to actions “shaped by tropical dissimulation” (452) inherent in the dynamics of tragedy. The second example is a detailed analysis of Iago’s rhetorical performance in *Othello*. Again, in this play, the three approaches to rhetoric may be discerned, i.e. Iago’s dissimulatory rhetoric (*celare artem*), Othello’s displayed rhetoric (*demonstrare artem*), and Desdemona’s anti-rhetoric (*negare artem*) (472). Together, they explore the relationship between rhetoric and ethics. The third example, the interlude in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is concerned with “the theory and practice of structural or conceptual intertextuality, which means the concrete embodiment of principles and rules of rhetorical and poetical theories in literary texts” (478). The rhetoric of Senecan tragedy is here used to comic effect. Generalising from these examples, Plett argues that Renaissance drama is characterized by a rhetoric of presence. Processes of *translatio*, for example from past to present tense or from narrative roles to actual performances, are “tropical substitutions aimed at the replacement of a lower level of evidence by a higher one” whose “ultimate objective” is “theatrical immediacy” (498), or the theatrical recreation of life itself in a rhetoric of immediacy and presence.

“Iconography of Rhetoric and Eloquence”, deals with allegorical representations, once more emphasizing the manifold links of rhetoric with the visual culture of the Renaissance. In this fifth and final part, Plett discusses depictions of *Rhetorica* as a teacher and civilizer as well as mythological representations of Mercury, Amphion, and of Hercules Gallicus, his audiences tied to him with the golden chains of eloquence. Here as throughout the book, the visual material – emblems, icons, title pages and the like – forms an intrinsic part of Plett’s arguments, which proves that rhetoric means much more than words in good order. The book contains almost a hundred illustrations in very satisfactory quality, thus giving a good and representative impression of the visual styles of the period, especially useful for readers with little access to the originals. The same holds true for the extensive quotations from treatises and other relevant texts. In terms of style, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* is a somewhat Germanic work with an encyclopaedic character, which some

readers might find forbidding, but students of rhetoric are well rewarded by the wealth of material and ideas presented.

Dealing with this wealth, it seems churlish to point to omissions on the part of the author, but readers should nevertheless be aware – if only to appreciate Plett's achievement the more – of the specific character and limitations of his approach. In his introduction, he acknowledges the neglect of Eastern European and Non-European rhetoric, pointing out that critics have begun in recent years to pave the way to a comparative or multicultural rhetoric. Not proposing to follow this trend, Plett limits his study to the Western rhetoric of the Renaissance. While this makes sense in view of the daunting dimensions of the subject, it seems a shame that Plett passes by almost all the work done in this particular field since the late 1980s, a period of revived interest in rhetoric as Plett himself notes.<sup>2</sup> A chance for dialogue is thus lost between his more conventionally philological approach and the work done in the last two decades within the paradigm of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Lisa Jardine's *Worldly Goods*<sup>3</sup> merits a brief mention, but the reader looks in vain for an engagement with the work of Joel Altman, Kathy Eden, Anthony Grafton, Stephen Greenblatt, Lorna Hutson, Victoria Kahn, Barbara Lewalski, Patricia Parker, Anne Lake Prescott, Wayne Rebhorn or Quentin Skinner, to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the picture of “Renaissance Culture” promised in the title remains rather sketchy. Having said that, if readers looked for just one book to give them a comprehensive overview of Renaissance rhetoric in Western Europe, they would be well advised to choose Plett's impressive volume.

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<sup>2</sup> Plett's Shakespeare-chapter consists of essays published previously in German between 1982 and 1995, translated but unrevised.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Since Plett's study contains no bibliography and the names of critics are not included in the index, it is rather difficult to get an overview of the author's engagement with the secondary material or to use the book for reference purposes in this respect, which would be helpful in the case of such an encyclopaedic work.