

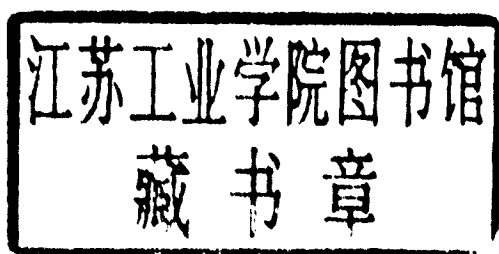


READING RENAISSANCE ETHICS

Edited by Marshall Grossman

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Marshall Grossman



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Part I

Introduction

1 Introduction

Reading Renaissance ethics

Marshall Grossman

After three decades in which historicist scholars have successfully reconnected Renaissance literature to its historical contexts, and formalist and rhetorical scholars have used improved historical resources to move closer to an understanding of how literary texts accomplish their cultural work, we think the time is right to question how Renaissance texts were read, how they were put to use in their own time, and how they may have been and continue to be used in subsequent times, up to and including our own. Following Kenneth Burke, we now ask: what sorts of “equipment for living” do Renaissance texts represent?¹

The ethics of writing and reading were a pervasive concern in the Renaissance. Following Horace’s dictum that poetry should delight and instruct, Renaissance writers understood their work as part of an ethical pedagogy, and reading in the Renaissance was understood to be an ethical performance. The right text might fashion a gentleman, build a citizen, or elevate the soul to the adoration of God.² But the wrong text might corrupt, enervate or confuse the reader.³ Stringent censorship and an industrious polemical underground seeking to circumvent it assumed, implicitly and explicitly, the potency of renaissance texts as ethical agents.⁴ Renaissance writers, appropriating classical forms for contemporary polemical purposes, were keenly aware of the ideological proclivities of given genres.

Our recent “culture wars” attest to the continued vitality of the old notion that what and how we read matters to who and what we are. Renaissance writers pursued the formative power of literature beyond explicit themes to include questions of genre, language and rhetoric with far greater nuance and precision than we have seen in our present debate. The “culture warriors” of the twenty-first century assume that our “values” are produced or conditioned by traditions that may or may not pass them down through generations, and across changing material and technological environments. Attention to the work of Renaissance writers not only raises the level of our own political discourse but also suggests a vocabulary and style of thought that allows us to move beyond the mere assumption that writing and reading matter and begin to articulate with greater clarity what is at stake when

canon-formation, aesthetic evaluation and curricular reform are questioned and revised.

This question of what is at stake is distinct from the related questions of how canons, evaluations and curricula come to be shaped by material forces. We set about to question the nature and mechanics of cultural agency. To take seriously the question of what to read, we must first consider what we do when we read and when we write about our reading. We ask what sorts of events took place when Renaissance texts were read in various contexts and what sorts of events take place when we read them – and teach them – now? Our method for approaching these questions is inductive. The essays collected here implicitly work toward a phenomenology of reading, but not necessarily of reading in general. First, for the reasons stated above, we have chosen to read texts from a rather broadly defined English Renaissance, ranging from the early English bibles of the Tudor reign through the restoration poems of John Milton. Our attention extends also into the overlapping classical, neo-Latin and continental linguistic worlds of humanism and its descendents. Second, each of us has begun with questions arising out of the specific writing we discuss. Some of these questions are contextual, but in accordance with our interest in reading as an act, each of us has undertaken to read from the inside out rather than from the outside in. That is, we have attempted to let the texts we study speak first and last.

Understanding the sources and protocols of Renaissance textual ethics is a historical undertaking. Understanding the rhetoric of Renaissance texts requires sophisticated formal analysis. This analysis cannot take place without close reading. *Reading Renaissance Ethics* aims to restore the centrality of close reading to the task of assessing the ethical performance of Renaissance texts as historical agents in their own time and in ours. Doing so, we work against the naïve assumption that political speech is speech about politics, ethical speech, speech about ethics. Renaissance writers understood and engaged the formative power of literature beyond explicit themes to include considerations of genre, language and rhetoric more nuanced and precise than we have seen in our present cultural politics. This is another reason for addressing Renaissance texts in particular. Attention to them will, we hope, not only raise the level of our own discourse, but also suggest a vocabulary and style of thought that allows us to articulate with greater clarity what was felt to be at stake in Renaissance writing and what might be at stake in our reading of it.

This volume undertakes, then, specifically and self-consciously, to bring together two critical practices that have lately been at odds with or neglected by each other to acquire an improved apprehension of “the content of the form” exemplified in Renaissance discursive practices.⁵ We aim to theorize and to set by example a protocol for future critical practice. To understand the scope and context of this proposed agenda, it is necessary to distinguish the historicist and formalist components of these essays from the “New Historicism” of the past 30 years and the “New Criticism” that preceded it.

As historicists, the New Historicists saw the need to dissociate their activity from a historicist tradition that, in their view, failed to recognize the nuanced content of literary form. Reading consistently from the ideological position of the powerful, the older historicists confused the material conditions in which a text is produced with the fictions represented within it – mistaking, for example, the “Elizabethan World Picture” for a picture of the Elizabethan world. New Historicists sought instead to reconnect the texts they studied not to an unmediated and reified version of the social world represented in them, but to a world as uniformly discursive and heteronymous as the texts themselves. They sought instead to formulate a uniform cultural field in which discursive practices could be seen in relation to material arrangements on the one hand, and literary historical contexts on the other. But it has become increasingly apparent in its second and third generations that New Historicism approaches two limits, one internal and necessary, the other external and contingent.

The internal limit, evident from the beginning, has been its inability to adequately theorize the notions of culture and text on which it depends.⁶ The external limit is rooted in the history of New Historicism as a reaction against the pedagogical dominance of the New Critics. New Critical close reading brought not just a failure to historicize, but a positive resistance to it: the ideological fiction that what was most valuable in literature was autonomous and universal. To reach the art of literature one had to disencumber it of all that tied it to the time and place of its production. The New Historicists’ primary mission of re-embedding the literary work in its culture reacted against the New Critics’ “art-for-art’s-sake” hermeticism, rather than against their interest in and facility with literary form.

But it has become apparent that diminished attention to close reading followed on from the attempt to treat discourse as a virtual total under the rubric “culture.” The turn from text to context is implicated in the New Historicists’ inability to derive and sustain protocols of reading that adequately recognize the literary historical and formal rhetorical contexts of Renaissance writing. In so far as New Historicism reacts less against the close reading of New Critics than against their isolation of the work of art from its material contexts, New Historicists worked to reconnect texts to a broader and more interactive social discourse. But the failure to recognize the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of even a synchronic discourse leaves New Historicist scholarship with an untheorized structuralist model that misses the resistance of the signifier – the unsystematic collaboration of historical intent and the intractable semantic effects asserted by linguistic, generic and literary historical forms that remain heteronymous to intention and contingent with respect to context.

It is the aim of this volume to explore and exemplify modes of reading that neither ignore nor privilege an extra-textual, material history putatively prior to the texts in question. The essays here presented insist rather that

material history itself is already inhabited and colonized by literary form. By understanding history itself as a literary-rhetorical form and extending its close reading in all directions, this volume aspires to produce a criticism that is formally attentive, aesthetically sensitive and historically engaged.

The essays in this collection are further bound together by their foregrounding and attending to ethos as the – belatedly constructed – ground of the literary subject. The founding moment of this endeavor is Aristotle's insight, at the beginning of the *Poetics*, that *mythos* precedes *ethos* – that we derive the story of a character from his or her actions:

Tragedy is an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. Now happiness and misery take the form of action; the end at which the dramatist aims is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. We have certain qualities in accordance with character but it is in our actions that we are happy or the reverse. ... Consequently the end of a tragedy is its action, i.e. its fable or plot; and the end is in all things paramount.⁷

What Aristotle says about tragedy is true of literature more generally. The activity of narration presents an action from which an ethos is deduced. The priority of action is easily confirmed by a simple thought experiment. Imagine a story constructed so as to create dissonance between character and action by attributing certain qualities to its characters but ascribing contradictory actions to them: "A ____ was a good son and an exemplary husband. He stole his mother's medications and frequently beat his wife." In such a case, readers invariably accept the action and dismiss the character description as unreliable or ironic. The narrator may be taken as a fool or a psychopath for *misrepresenting* the ethos, but only with a good deal of supporting narrative are the actions taken to be untrue. My example is outlandish, but an extant case in point would be *Othello*, in which Iago is consistently described as honest, dependable and trustworthy by the other characters, but easily identified as a villain by the things he does.

The nexus between character and action is choice. Ethos is not developed by what happens to a character but by what he or she chooses to do. Readers too make choices. One can choose to accept that Iago has been unfairly passed over for promotion, and share his suspicions that Othello and Cassio have had sex with his wife, and still be appalled at the revenge he chooses to exact. The reader's or spectator's own choices become more nuanced and perhaps more challenging when attention shifts from Iago to Othello. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle conceives virtue in terms of habitual action. Here again ethos is deduced from mythos. A virtuous man is one who can be expected to choose actions conducing to the good. In these terms Othello appears to be a virtuous man until, put upon by Iago, he murders his wife. Do we then construe his evil act as an anomaly, a momentary lapse of otherwise customary virtue?