

Sari Kivistö:

Creating Anti-Eloquence. Epistolae obscurorum virorum and the Humanist Polemics on Style

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The anonymous *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* (1515-17) are less famous today than contemporary humanist satires in Latin such as Erasmus's *Moriae encomium* (*Praise of Folly*) and More's *Utopia*, in spite of learned editions by Eduard Böcking (1869) and Aloys Bömer (1978) and one with a lively English translation by Francis Griffin Stokes (1909). Yet anyone who takes the time to read these comic letters cannot help but feel that they deserve a larger audience. They have been attributed principally to Crotus Rubeanus and Ulrich von Hutten; other humanists may also have had a hand in them. The fictional authors, "obscure men" with Latinized Germanic names such as the outlandish "Buntschuhmacherius", write about the Reuchlin controversy to Ortvinus Gratius, a real Cologne scholar who had translated works by a converted Jew, Johannes Pfefferkorn. Pfefferkorn's attack on Jews and demand that their books be burned sparked a controversy that involved, among others, the Emperor Maximilian, the Dominican Inquisitor General Jakob von Hochstraten, several theological faculties, and the renowned scholar of Hebrew Johannes Reuchlin. When Reuchlin defended Hebrew books, the German humanists united in his support. Reuchlin published their letters as *Epistolae clarorum virorum*. The *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* parodied the late medieval scholasticism of Reuchlin's opponents. Church historians have described the *Letters* as a prelude to the Reformation. In the past two decades, Bengt Löfstedt has studied their Latin while Reinhard Paul Becker and James V. Mehl have examined them as literature. Although Sari Kivistö offers few strikingly new insights, her recent monograph usefully synthesizes for readers of English much scholarship about the *Letters of Obscure Men* while arguing that they create a coherent "anti-eloquence" within the rhetorical tradition of their period.

In four of the central chapters of her study (Chapters 3-7), Kivistö describes the vices of Latin style in the *Letters* – barbarism, obscurity, obscenity, and loquacity – and shows that they are opposites of the virtues of purity, clarity, propriety, and elegance described in classical and humanist rhetorical treatises. Chapter 7 focuses on the rhetoric of one genre, the epistle. The humanists, imitating such classical correspondents as Cicero, revised epistolography as it was taught in the late medieval *ars dictaminis*. For example, they attempted to substitute classical expressions of salutation and valediction for the fulsome phrases of the medieval formularies. In this context, the sycophantic flattery that the obscure men employ in addressing their correspondents is "anti-eloquence". In humanist treatises on letter writing, such as that of Erasmus, the writer is advised to persuade cor-

respondents by praising their characteristics most appropriate to the occasion, for example, beneficence if requesting financial assistance or clemency if asking pardon. Kivistö suggests that by emphasizing mere social hierarchy in their flattering formulas, the obscure men inadvertently suggest that their correspondents are pompous social climbers.

In Chapter 2 and throughout the monograph, Kivistö demonstrates that in the European tradition stretching from the ancients through the early modern period, language was judged to reflect the speaker's moral character and relationship to civilized (as opposed to barbaric) society. In their letters the obscure men reveal their low social status, poor education, and carnality. In Chapter 8, Kivistö surveys contemporary medicine as context for a discussion of the physical ailments of which the obscure men continuously complain and the sins they embody in their living and thus inevitably in their language. In Chapter 9 she treats their attraction to etymology and allegory, medieval arts grounded in a conviction that the forms of words, even though corrupted by time, and their meanings, even when veiled from the multitude, can be recovered as signs of a timeless reality. Because of their carnality and ignorance, the obscure men practice these arts with a mental literalism that results in comic misinterpretations. To readers since the nineteenth century, accustomed to historical linguistics, serious sixteenth-century humanist attempts to discover the origins of words seem as ludicrous as those of the obscure men. However, Kivistö deftly distinguishes parody from accepted contemporary practice. The techniques used by the obscure men – “transforming and manipulating words, i.e. by shortening, lengthening, adding or removing letters” (p. 227) – were recommended by Quintilian, but they fail to meet humanist standards because the obscure men lack knowledge of Greek and of ancient history and mythology.

At times, nevertheless, this study fails to recognize that styles comic to readers today may have been admired and imitated by the best writers of the sixteenth century. The chapter on loquacity, for instance, only vaguely acknowledges the Renaissance love of figurative repetition and syntactical parallelism. The following passage, as Kivistö observes, develops the rhetorical figure of *gradatio*:

But tell me one thing: you must confess that *Pfefferkorn* knoweth not the Latin alphabet, much less can he read. And if he cannot read, much less can he understand. And if he cannot understand, much less can he write and compose. And if he can neither read, nor understand, nor write – much less can he discuss questions that none but a deeply learned man can deal with. (II, 14, trans. Stokes)

Kivistö recognizes that the scholastic magister is quoting directly one “of Reuchlin’s supporters” (pp. 143-44), yet she includes the quotation among her examples of the loquacity of the obscure men themselves. A footnote (p. 144, n. 51) suggests, following Heinrich Lausberg’s *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, that “the comic use of *gradatio* is the contrast between the seemingly logical train of thought and the chaotic idea behind the sentences”. These sentences, however, seem to me no more illogical, than the *gradatio* in the opening sonnet of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*:

Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.

Sidney's sequence treats Astrophel's infatuation comically and questions his claim to poetic originality inspired by Stella, but its ironic treatment of the young lover does not undermine the beauty of his verse. I am more inclined to see the style of the "stiff Reuchlinist" (as Stokes's translation calls him) as an example of the humanist ability to write a well-knit, balanced period. As Kivistö demonstrates, the prose of the obscure men is characterized rather by the naive accumulation of simple sentences joined by coordinating conjunctions. Their syntactical parataxis (or polysyndeton, to name the rhetorical figure) often lacks logical development.

Kivistö's own prose threatens to fall into loquacity as she elaborates the effect of a paratactic style on the reader of the letters:

Furthermore, the frequent usage of polysyndeton is a simple and naïve syntactic choice, which entails the danger of making the utterance monotonous and linear. It lacks all elaboration of thought, being rather expressed in a straight line and in a formless manner. In its additive nature, a paratactic construction never seems to attain its goal, but makes the narration seem longer and slows down the speed. A density of connectives suggests infinity and immobility which leaves [*sic*] no room for the reader, except perhaps the passive role of listener. The endlessness realized in paratactic sentences rests on the power of copulative conjunctions to adhere to the preceding sentence (where the idea had begun and to which the reader is forced to return as s/he continues reading) and reach out to the subsequent sentence, where the idea is fulfilled. (pp. 156-57)

The monograph would be much better if many belabored explanations such as this one were deleted by a good editor. Describing the stylistic vices of others is an inherently risky project for any scholar, especially when the subject is humor. What joke remains funny once it is explained? The better strategy would be to establish the context of the humor and then allow the reader the joy of its discovery. Fortunately, Kivistö's examples from the *Letters of Obscure Men* relieve the occasional tedium of the argument by eliciting chuckles, whether she takes them from the Latin or from Stokes's amusing (though, Kivistö suggests, somewhat prudish) English translation.

Even if Kivistö had not acknowledged that her "work was done as a member of the Finnish Graduate School of Literary Studies" under the tutelage of instructors (p. 1), the self-conscious earnestness of this monograph would reveal its genre. Kivistö is so intent on demonstrating her considerable command of her subject that she often forgets the rhetorical goal of teaching and delighting the reader. She repeats the same point in all chapters where it seems relevant and finds space in unlikely places for material that does not quite fit her structure. Discussing in the chapter on illness the obscure men's "accumulation of proverbs", for instance, she observes, "What, the reader may be asking, has this to do with digestive failures?", then explains that Macrobius attributes indigestion to eating miscellaneous foods (p. 214). Throughout the study she follows an almost scholastic formula that she sometimes recalls in transitional phrases: "Again the account may be prefaced by a brief consideration of the ancient [. . .] views on the phenomenon, thereafter concentrating more specifically on the humanist polemics and the Letters of Obscure Men" (p. 133). Thus introducing Chapter 6 on loquacity, she proceeds to review relevant observations on *copia* and its vicious opposite in Demetrius, Hermogenes, Quintilian, and Seneca among the ancients, and Agricola, Erasmus, Lipsius, Melanchthon, Murrnellius, and Vives among the humanists.

Kivistö has mastered an impressive body of ancient and humanist literature, and her learned summaries of these sources are accurate as far as they go, but she tends to ignore historical developments and the process of recovering and imitating classical literature in the Renaissance. For example, Demetrius and Hermogenes were less influential than Quintilian and Seneca at the time the *Letters of Obscure Men* were written. The Latin writers were staples of humanist education by the second decade of the sixteenth century, but the Greek writers were introduced into rhetorical education some years later by such Protestant humanists as Johann Sturm. In other chapters, Kivistö often cites Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, another work used by only an elite group of scholars until later in the sixteenth century. Kivistö seems content to treat all ancient *loci* as equally relevant to her subject, though in a note on the availability of Hermogenes she may be anticipating criticism of this habit (p. 106, n. 111). Likewise she draws with equal enthusiasm on humanist writers preceding or contemporary with the obscure men (Agricola, Murmellius, Erasmus), younger scholars who were alive but not yet established (Vives, Melanchthon), and one born three decades later (Lipsius, b. 1547). The references to Lipsius are especially troubling because his work in the last decades of the sixteenth century challenges and revises the humanism of his predecessors. The seeming agreement among all these writers can be credibly maintained only by ignoring intellectual and social changes that took place in both the Classical Period and the Renaissance.

Kivistö also tends to follow the polemical works she studies in polarizing as monolithic opposites the scholasticism of the obscure men and the humanism of their critics. Yet scholars at the turn of the sixteenth century sometimes recognized a dual allegiance, for example to scholastic style and method in their professional work and imitation of Cicero in their personal letters to like-minded humanists. Even those determined to imitate the ancients in correspondence were often forced into barbarism and flattery by contemporary etiquette. What was conventional in each camp could also change quickly. As Kivistö notes, the *Letters of Obscure Men* parody the flowery formulas of salutation and valediction taught at the College of the Lily in Louvain by Carolus Virulus. Yet Virulus was not a medieval scholastic; he was among the earliest and most influential of the northern humanists. The dissemination of Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae* throughout northern Europe in letter-writing handbooks of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century finally drove Virulus's epistolary formulas out of fashion. In 1556, Marc-Antoine Muret observed in his edition of Cicero's Catilinarian orations that advances in humanist philology had made comic even the supposed Ciceronianism of humanists writing sixty years earlier.

If Kivistö's monograph fails to capture the dynamism of Renaissance thought, for the most part it accurately summarizes much that we know of the rhetorical, ethical, medical, linguistic, and philosophical contexts of the *Letters of Obscure Men*. Her study therefore may serve as a reliable introduction for readers unfamiliar with these aspects of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance as they inform the satire. Her discussion of specific words and phrases will also be of use to many specialists more comfortable with vernacular languages than with Latin or at least unacquainted with sexual innuendo in that language. The pains Kivistö has taken – assisted by a corrector (Robert MacGilleon) – to produce a readable (and usually correct) English style suggest that she is seeking a broad readership for this monograph in North America as well as in Europe. Unfortunately, few North Americans are likely to discover a book published in Finland. Perhaps as the author matures into the breezy self-confidence of a scholar completely at home in the early northern

Renaissance, she will think of revising this study into a pamphlet published by a major North American or European press as an introduction to the hilarious joy of reading the *Letters of Obscure Men*.

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