

Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman (editors and translators):

Rudolph Agricola, Letters

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During the past few decades, Neo-Latin letters from the early modern period have received much scholarly attention. Critical editions have been published or are being prepared for publication of Philip Melanchthon's, Juan Luis Vives', and Justus Lipsius' letters.¹ In contrast to these editions, however, Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman's edition of Rudolph Agricola's (1444-85) correspondence fits into a single volume. This is the first edition that includes all of Agricola's extant letters: fifty-one that he wrote and four addressed to him. As the editors remind us, Agricola was a meticulous writer who did not make haste, but carefully polished all his letters (p. 7). Despite his attention to style and eloquence – which might suggest that he wrote with an eye to a larger readership – Agricola never published a collection of his own letters.

The work of editing Agricola's letters was begun in the 1970's at the initiative of the late professor Edzo Waterbolk, and the work was continued and completed by Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman. The resulting volume is a noteworthy contribution to the field of humanist epistolography and Neo-Latin literature. With its meticulously prepared edition, smooth translation, and copious and well-researched introduction and notes, the volume is of great value to specialists and more general readers alike.

The edition includes an introduction (pp. 3-59); the Latin texts with parallel English translations (pp. 61-265); explanatory notes (pp. 267-383); abbreviations for works cited (pp. 385-90); and a bibliography (pp. 391-408). The volume concludes with indices of names, Latin and Greek words, passages cited, *clausulae*, minor variants, and, finally, a list of Agricola's letters (pp. 409-35).

In their preface to the volume, the editors call attention to Agricola's elegant Latin style and point out that the letters give us valuable information about the dissemination of humanist learning north of the Alps in the 1470's and 1480's (p. vii).

¹ *Melanchthon's Briefwechsel. Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe* (Stuttgart: Frommann-holzboog, 1977-); *Iusti Lipsii epistolae* (Brussels 1978-). On the forthcoming critical editions of Vives' letters as well as on other modern editions of Neo-Latin epistolography, see Toon Van Houdt and Jan Papy, "Introduction", in Toon Van Houdt, Jan Papy, Gilbert Tournoy, and Constant Matheussen (eds.), *Self-Presentation and Social Identification. The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), pp. 1-13:1.

The introduction first provides an outline of Agricola's life and a brief presentation of his nineteen correspondents (pp. 3-12). Several of them belonged to a group of educated men who, along with Agricola, enthusiastically promoted Italian humanism in the Low Countries. An important centre of this intellectual activity was the abbey of Aduard in the province of Groningen. Since around 1469 the abbey had hosted gatherings of men who had studied in Italy and its list of visitors includes several connoisseurs of Greek and correspondents of Agricola, such as the scholar Alexander Hegius (1439?-98), who later became a schoolmaster in Deventer and was known as one of Erasmus' teachers (Introduction, pp. 4-6). Other friends and correspondents of Agricola's were, e.g., Rudolf von Langen (c. 1438-1519); the physician Adolfo Occo (1447-1503); the brothers Dietrich (1453-1520) and Johann (1454-1506) von Plieningen, whom Agricola had come to know in Pavia in Italy, and the renowned scholar Johann Reuchlin (1454/5-1522). Apparently, Agricola was popular with the opposite sex and fond of exchanging letters with women (p. 8), but no evidence of that correspondence remains.

Furthermore, the introduction offers a discussion of the language and style of the letters (pp. 13-24). Agricola followed classical linguistic standards and preferred ancient vocabulary and syntax to medieval expressions. Thus, Cicero's prose had the strongest influence on Agricola's Latin (p. 19), but in his letters he also quoted or alluded to Roman poetry, for example: the elegies of Catullus and Tibullus, when he touched upon the themes of love and yearning; Juvenal's satires when ironic; and Vergil's *Aeneid* when he looked for striking expressions at the end of sentences. The main classical sources are presented in the introduction (pp. 19-22, 26-29), and the relevant passages are quoted in the original language in the explanatory notes.

Van der Laan and Akkerman announce that in discussing Agricola's language "any influence of medieval Latin will also be measured" (p. 15), and point out that occasional 'medievalisms' do appear, for example, in humorous passages where they are used with the intention of ridiculing medieval 'barbarisms' (pp. 16-17). A good example of such a humorous passage is found in letter 53, in which Agricola complains that in Heidelberg his Latin had degenerated into medievalisms such as "the irradiating glories of a new luminosity" (*nove luminositatis irradiantibus adoriis*) (ep. 53, section 6; the editors discuss this passage on p. 17 and on p. 382, note 6). One wonders, however, whether the medieval Latin tradition did not play more of a role in Agricola's letter-writing than this. Thus, the editors rightly observe that Agricola's numerous quotations from ancient literature may "derive from an intermediate text" (p. 29). Nevertheless, they trace quotations to ancient and sometimes to contemporary texts, but rarely to medieval literature. Undoubtedly, Agricola's knowledge of ancient literature was based on his own reading of the classics, but the editors' notes ignore the role of medieval texts in the transmission of the ancient legacy.

The introduction concludes with a bibliographical description of the printed sources (e.g., *Agricolae Lucubrationes*, Cologne 1539) and manuscripts (e.g., Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, cod. poet. et phil. 4, 36, ca. 1490) used for the edition (pp. 33-58). Agricola's autograph letters have not been preserved.

In their introduction the editors focus on the textual and linguistic aspects of Agricola's letters, paying less attention to the specific contents of the letters. They briefly mention that the letters deal with issues that were common in ancient and humanist letter writing, such as friendship and praise of Italian culture and learning (p. 13). However, in the introduction the editors do not offer any discussion of the issues that Agricola actually wrote about, such as his translations from Greek into Latin. Thus, the collection includes letters that Agricola addressed to friends and had printed as introductions to his translations of such works as Isocrates' *Paraenesis ad Demonicum* (ep. 15) and Lucian's *De calumnia* (ep. 16). In fact, these letters often offer interesting insights into the general practice of translating, and Agricola also briefly discusses his own work as a translator. It would therefore have been useful had Agricola's activity as a

translator – as well as the genre conventions of the dedicatory letter – been presented in the introduction. It must be noted, however, that in the explanatory notes to letter 5 (pp. 279-80, note 2), the editors deal with humanist translation practice and the question of translating literally or freely.

Although the collection of Agricola's letters includes 'familiar letters' – such as those to his older half-brother, Johannes, and other intimate friends – van der Laan and Akkerman only occasionally discuss the possible private context of the correspondence or suggest what the letters reveal about Agricola's life. Moreover, the editors only briefly touch upon the stylistic differences between the genres of personal and public letters. In their discussion of Agricola's epistolary style (pp. 12, 22-24), they rightly observe that the style of the letters varies according to the addressee. Thus, Agricola's letters to his brother are brief and less elaborate in comparison to those to other correspondents.

An important question as regards the principles of editing Neo-Latin texts is the modernisation of the orthography. Some researchers believe that the spelling of sixteenth-century prose texts should be standardised according to the spelling of classical dictionaries (*OLD*, *Georges*). This is thought to make the edited text readable and thus of use to both specialists and non-specialists.² Others argue in favour of preserving the original orthography since it reflects the material history of the text and therefore should be considered to be almost as important as the content.³ Van der Laan and Akkerman have decided to make the text accessible to a larger readership by modernising capitalisation, adding punctuation and paragraphs, and leaving out diacritical marks. The spelling is not standardised (e.g., *equus* is used for *aequus*, *paci* for *pati*).⁴ According to the editors, this allows for the texts to appear "as documents of their time" (p. 30, note 127).

Each letter is preceded by a brief introduction to its sources and transmission. The Latin text is accompanied by a parallel English translation. The editors claim that the "translations were added solely to facilitate a correct use and interpretation of the letters. No effort has been made to render Agricola's stylistic virtuosity into English" (p. 30). The translation is fluent and clear, but not only do van der Laan and Akkerman refrain from competing with Agricola, they also avoid translating general stylistic effects in the Latin text. Rhetorical figures of repetition, for instance, are often ignored in the translation (e.g., *ep. 2*, section 6: *nihil... nihil... nihil...*; or *ep. 6*, section 2: *non tam... non tam... non tam...*). Likewise, long sentences in Agricola's text are divided up into a series of shorter sentences. This may indeed facilitate the reader's understanding, but sometimes at the cost of an accurate transmission of the text. Long sentences as well as rhetorical figures of repetition are expressions that reflect the mood or the passion of the writer, and when ignored in the translation, the emotional fervour of the text also subsides. And although the stylistic features of Agricola's letters are discussed in the introduction (pp. 22-24), this reader would have wished to learn more about Agricola's "stylistic virtuosity".

Agricola's letters are indeed impressive in their beautiful and sometimes sentimental elaborations on such traditional epistolary themes as friendship or longing for a distant friend. The editors' notes successfully place Agricola's letters in the context of humanist learning by providing much important information on humanist letter writing, its ancient models, rhetorical conventions, standard themes, and commonplaces. In *ep. 44*, addressed to Johann Reuchlin, Agricola thus reveals his ideas about marriage:

² See Luc Deitz, "Editing Sixteenth-Century Latin Prose Texts: a Case Study and a Few General Observations", in Glenn W. Most (ed.), *Editing Texts – Texte edieren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 141-64.

³ See Helga Köhler, "Auf dem Weg zum modernen Lesetext?", in Glenn W. Most (ed.), *op.cit.* in note 2 above, pp. 165-89.

⁴ These and other variant spellings are listed in the glossary at the end of the volume, pp. 424-25.

I hear that you have married. I include you in all my prayers, and hope that it may bring you happiness and good fortune. [...] In my younger days, I intended to do so too, but once I began looking into my soul more carefully, I was deterred from that plan; not by the disadvantages of marriage, which many authors of bad taste have written copiously about, but rather, I was put off by my way of life and by my character, which cannot cope with even the slightest worries, and by a kind of innate fondness for rest, or rather, love of quiet life and (to be completely honest) a deeply rooted sluggishness in my entire life. Why should I cover up my shortcomings with pretty names? (*Ep.* 44, sections 3-5, p. 241)

The editors rightly comment that this apparently personal discussion about marriage was a traditional and popular topic among the humanists as well as in ancient literature (p. 372, note 4). However, this approach, which focusses on traditional issues in Agricola's letters, appears somewhat exaggerated when, for example, the editors – prompted by Agricola's brief marvelling (in *ep.* 39, addressed to his older half-brother) at his younger brother's behaviour – give a whole account of ancient parallel expressions and ideas on how to improve a wicked character (cf. p. 364, note 8). The editors' notes to letter 49, which Agricola wrote when seriously ill and only two-and-a-half months before his death, are equally surprising. Without acknowledging Agricola's difficult situation, the editors merely examine the classical parallels of expressions such as *melior morte defungi* (to die a better death) and *lintheos* (sheets for a bed). Here, as well as in several other places, the editors' philological approach magnifies linguistic details at the expense of the concrete context and contents of the letters. Now and then this reader also clearly detects Agricola's personality and sense of humour, which can be explained neither by philological commentary, nor by references to humanist conventions and commonplaces. An example is letter 7, in which Agricola portrayed himself as a bear that sucks its claws when feeling lonely. The origins of this alleged habit of bears are delightfully described in the editors' notes *ad locum* (pp. 285-86) – without, however, any mention of the possible erotic connotations of the expression chosen by Agricola.

To conclude, this meticulously edited volume is an excellent tool for further studies of Rudolph Agricola's authorship. The notes (pp. 267-383) are thorough and erudite, presenting a wealth of information on the language of the letters with special regard to their ancient sources and parallels. Together the notes and the bibliography also provide valuable information concerning modern research on humanist epistolography. Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman's edition of Agricola's letters can be recommended to all interested in northern humanism, and specifically to scholars of Neo-Latin literature and the history of rhetoric.

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