

Jennifer Richards:

*Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

220 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 0-521-82470-2

Price: £45

In *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature*, Jennifer Richards introduces and discusses the concept of ‘civil conversation’ used in sixteenth-century courtesy literature. Richards’ main purpose is to study the dialogue form of early modern conduct books and to reconstruct the network of the readers of the courtesy books that were translated from Italian into English. Richards’ aim is “to analyse how a group of humanists experimented with the dialogue form to express their personal aspirations whilst simultaneously recognising alternative and competing interests” (p. 3). She concentrates partly on a micro-level study of the use of the concept of *honestas* (‘honesty’), but also makes macro-level conclusions about the influence of major social changes on the individual and on the role of sociability in sixteenth-century English society.

In the introduction (pp. 1-19), Richards argues that modern social historians have “inhibited debate” about the role of manners and sociability in the pre-Enlightenment period by insisting that it is solely an eighteenth-century phenomenon. This restricted scholarly perspective has also led to the conclusion that the social and political ‘realms’ reflected in courtesy literature are two independent phenomena. Richards then lays out her aim, to explore the Ciceronian concept of *societas* as a union of “communicating and conversing individuals” (p. 6). She argues that the traditional ideal of suppressing self-interest for the greater good of the community was in fact “quietly self-interested” (p. 7). She recommends that we consider ‘civil conversation’ as a form of compromised discourse instead of an ideology, and emphasises the importance of concentrating on the dialogue of the courtesy books itself.

Chapter 1 (pp. 20-42) discusses the different types of ‘honesty’ in civil and domestic conversation, which are taken not only as opposing terms but also as related discourses. Richards presents the genre of conduct books by giving examples from Hugh Rhodes’ *Boke of Nurture* and Stefano Guazzo’s *Civile Conversation*, which represent two opposite ends: whereas Rhodes advises the reader to be silent in the public presence of his master, Guazzo introduces the reader to ‘civil conversation’ between friends in a private space, a ‘little closet’. Richards then discusses Plato’s and Cicero’s dialogues and the interrelated concepts of *honestas* (moral goodness) and *utilitas* (profit). Richards argues that since the “meaning of ‘honesty’ as decorous self-restraint and accommodation only emerges in conversation” (p. 28) and since it is negotiable in so far as it depends on the social context, it is important to study the courtesy dialogues as literary rather than didactic texts.

In Chapter 2 (pp. 43-64), Richards gives a detailed analysis of Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, which was written in the 1520s and translated into English by Thomas Hoby as late as 1561. Its readers were mainly Cambridge graduates, including John Cheke and Thomas Smith, who were interested in the book because it could be used for practising idiomatic conversation. Richards studies the way in which the *Courtier* both imitates Cicero’s *De oratore* and serves as an introduction to the notion of *societas*. She attempts to define

‘nobility’ as a social habit that can be acquired through practice, and furthermore proposes that even instinct may be shaped by practice. According to Castiglione, the only prerequisites for adopting the contemporary linguistic idiom are talent and will. There is, however, also a need for self-control, or, in Cicero’s terms, ‘temperance’, serving as a form of decorum with regard both to one’s social context and to one’s audience.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 65-86) Richards continues her discussion of the conflict between ‘self-interest’ and ‘social duty’, an opposition that reflects the difference between the courtier and the humanist. Richards notes that humanism was both inclusive and exclusive: some writers considered country people “backward”, whereas others did not want to restrict courtliness to courtiers only. Richards then moves on to questions concerning social hierarchy, estates and sorts, of sixteenth-century England. She argues that the idea of decorum was introduced to the people as “a stratification of styles” corresponding to their social stratum (p. 68). She then turns once more to the meaning of the term *honestas*, often translated as ‘simplicity’ and ‘plainness’. In the sixteenth century, however, ‘honesty’ was not only associated with ‘fair dealing’, ‘probity’, and ‘uprightness of character’, but also with the generally accepted mode of ‘dignity of deportment’. Richards gives examples of the writings of Thomas Elyot, Thomas Wilson, and Roger Ascham, who associate the quality of ‘honesty’ with members of the lower ranks. Thomas Smith, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of ‘truth’ brought on by the classical style of debating between friends.

Chapter 4 (pp. 87-112) goes deeper into the “social community vs. the individual” debate. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, commerce was recognised as sociable and conversation as the essential social relation built on ‘honesty’. Here, Richards’ examples are taken from one of the native English conduct books, *Cyville and Uncyville Life*, a dialogue between the urban Vallentine and the country gentleman Vincent. Vallentine insists on social distance, whereas Vincent is hospitable and sociable to everyone. Although, as Richards notes, Vincent appears ‘honest’, ‘honesty’ is in this case no more than a cover for his exploitation of land and tenants. In fact, *Cyville and Uncyville Life* presents a very sceptical view of the meaning of ‘honesty’ as “truth-telling, plain-dealing or open-handed liberality” (p. 97). The Ciceronian lesson in the book is that generosity should reflect the worth of the recipient; this makes it heart-felt. And as also Lodowick Bryskett points out in his *A Discourse of Civill Life* (1606), which is a translation and adaptation of Cinthio’s *Tre dialoghi della vita civile* (1565), physical and intellectual husbandry is a way to true ‘honesty’.

Chapter 5 (pp. 113-138) concentrates on the way in which Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser contributed to the development of an improved model of education. Their purpose was to “liberate the pupil from the tyranny of the schoolmaster” (p. 114), and they saw the development of English poetry as dependent on such a reform, both with respect to the master-pupil relationship and to male friendship. Harvey and Spenser thus re-interpret the classical notion of *amicitia* by developing social communication into a less rigid and hierarchical form of interaction. The familiar letter functions as “a natural extension of ‘civil conversation’”, and by writing a letter, a person is able to start a trusting relationship with the recipient (p. 123).

Richards ends the book (Chapter 6, pp. 139-167) by inquiring into male friendship as depicted in Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*. She first discusses the classical ideal of *amicitia*, which places true friendship above material wealth, and also introduces some of the writers who attended the Inns of Court. The writers include Barnabe Googe, Richard Turbeville, and Richard Edwards, whose drama *Damon and Pythias* primarily deals with honesty as the basis for all friendship. Richards then returns to the meaning of *honestas* in Spenser’s *Calender* – “a self-restraint expressed as self-deprecation” (p. 149) – claiming that this virtue is related to the sociability and nobility of the speaker.

In the short conclusion (pp. 168-170), Richards argues that one reason for “the failure of civil conversation as a critical discourse” (p. 169) was the early humanists’ overlapping but separate conceptions of ‘honesty’. It must be remembered, however, that the writers of conduct books understood the complex meaning of ‘honesty’ in the context of social interaction, just as they were aware of the interrelatedness of “social or political and literary structure” (ibid.).

*Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* is a detailed and for the most part comprehensive volume that makes interesting reading. The text is based on thorough and faithful reading of the quoted literature. One can clearly see that the writer knows her subject well and can make some ingenious comparisons of philosophy and language. Despite the fact that Richards’ analyses of both the Italianate conduct books (in Chapters 1 and 2) and Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (in Chapter 6) are both careful and informative, Chapters 3 and 4 emerge as the meatiest and central parts of the book. The strength of Richards’ work lies in her ample use of examples from the primary sources.

Having said that, I am not quite convinced that the examples Richards gives are always in a reader-friendly form. Thus the writer seems to jump from one detail or topic to another on more than one occasion, and this somewhat affects the overall readability of the book. For example, Chapter 6 is a combination of back-and-forth accounts of the works of Spenser, Googe, Turbeville, Harvey, and Gascoigne. Richards gives details of Googe’s *Eglogs* first, and only a few pages later tells us who Barnabe Googe in fact was. Also, some of the passages in the book are repetitious. Still, the reader may appreciate the repetitions, since not all citations of the relevant literature are explained in as much detail and with as much consistency as is the case with *The Shepheardes Calender*, discussed in the last chapter of the book.

Richards’ study would no doubt have benefited from a more uniform line in the choice of sources as well as from a more consistent structure, since it is sometimes difficult for the reader to discover the connecting thought in the volume. I would also have been interested in learning more about what constitutes Richards’ ‘own voice’ amidst the many quotations taken from modern rhetorical studies. Moreover, the terms *courtliness* or *literature*, both of which are mentioned in the general title of the work, are much too broad to cater for Richards’ detailed analysis. It would have been better to include *honestas* and *amicitia* in the title, since these are in fact the key concepts in Richards’ study.

Even though *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* will primarily be of interest to historians of rhetoric, it may also serve as an introduction to anyone wanting to learn more about the conception and interpretation of ‘civil conversation’ and ‘honesty’ in the sixteenth century. It is valuable alone for its discussions of some of Cicero’s major works, not to mention those of the ‘Cambridge network’, Harvey, Spenser, Cheke, Ascham, and Smith. Richards’ book might well lead to further studies of the idea of ‘honesty’ in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, especially since it acknowledges the influence of social change on the use of the term. Richards herself is not fully convinced that the study of isolated speech acts and the providing of rules for shifts in conversation are a good way of analysing interaction. Nevertheless her study might help a linguist to find similarities between the conduct principles in sixteenth-century courtesy books and, for example, Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims – or even Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Paul Grice, “Logic and conversation”, in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3: *Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 41–58. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

---

Dr. Minna Nevala  
Department of English  
University of Helsinki  
P.O. Box 24  
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki  
FINLAND  
minna.nevala@helsinki.fi

Minna Nevala is a research fellow at the Department of English, University of Helsinki, and the coordinator of the Research Unit for Variation and Change in English (VARIENG). Her research interests include historical socio-pragmatics, text analysis, and editing of letters. Among her recent publications are *Address in Early English Correspondence: Its Forms and Socio-Pragmatic Functions* (Ph.D. dissertation; Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 2004) and the thematic issue, *Letters and Letter Writing* (*European Journal of English Studies* 9:1), edited in collaboration with Minna Palander-Collin.