

Pedro Martín Baños:

El arte epistolar en el Renacimiento europeo 1400-1600

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Pedro Martín Baños's study of the art of letter writing in the European Renaissance, 1400-1600, is a corrected and improved version of his doctoral dissertation, directed by Dra. Elena Artaza Álvarez and defended 23 June 2004 on the Bilbao campus of the Universidad de Deusto. Intending originally to treat only Spanish epistolary theory in the Renaissance, Martín Baños enlarged his vision to encompass the development of Renaissance epistolary theory in Latin and the vernacular languages from its classical and medieval predecessors up to 1600. The result, a monograph of more than seven hundred pages, carefully synthesizes for readers of Spanish the existing scholarship on manuals and textbooks of letter writing, much of it published in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, since the 1970s. Occasionally Martín Baños acknowledges gaps in the current state of research that he is unable to fill. However, he demonstrates his mastery of the primary as well as secondary sources catalogued in his two bibliographies and his index of manuscripts by providing Spanish translations of key passages from the literature on epistolary theory up to 1600 and by footnoting the original quotations.

This monograph might be described as two books in one, not so much because it is divided into two parts as because it takes two approaches to its subject: a historic and a systematic one. Part One on antiquity and the Latin Middle Ages, Chapters 1 and 3, and Part Two on Renaissance Latin and Vernaculars, Chapters 5-9, describe the history of epistolary theory. Part One, Chapters 2 and 4, and Part Two, Chapter 10, offer a systematic analysis of theory in antiquity, the Latin Middle Ages, and the Renaissance respectively. Inevitably much material presented as the result of one approach must be repeated in a different form under the other. Readers in a hurry may prefer to follow one approach through the volume rather than reading the whole.

Chapter 1 briefly surveys the history of epistolography from Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE, through Demetrius's *De elocutione*, the *progymnasmata*, Greek typologies of letters, classical letter collections with their scattered remarks on letter writing, and comments by Latin rhetoricians from Quintilian to an eighth-century manuscript from Monte Cassino. Chapter 3 treats the transmission of the ancient tradition through the collections of the Church Fathers and Seneca, the proliferation of Latin letter writing from the eleventh century on and of vernacular letter writing from the twelfth century on, adaptation of rhetoric to the *ars poetria*, *ars dictaminis*, and later medieval *artes* (*praedicandi*, *arengandi*, *memorativa*), and shifts in the relative weight accorded the three arts of the *trivium*. Although Martín Baños acknowledges that classical rhetoric was not exclusively oral and that medieval rhetoric was not exclusively written, he nevertheless traces a general movement from orality to literacy in medieval culture. These topics are covered at such a pace that the fierce rivalries of Boncompagno and the contest between French and Italian approaches to letter writing are scarcely noticed.

The treatment of Renaissance letter writing is much longer and more detailed than the background chapters on antiquity and the Middle Ages. Martín Baños describes two phases of Renaissance Latin epistolary theory. The first is a transitional phase in which the *cursus*, the accentual prose rhythm developed by the medieval practitioners of the *ars dictaminis* or art of prose composition, is gradually abandoned. However, neither the *ars dictaminis* nor medieval dependence on the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* disappears, in spite of the recovery of many other ancient rhetorical treatises and letter collections. The second phase replaces the *ars dictaminis* with new ways of understanding the letter as a genre. The *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* (Basel: Froben, 1522) of Desiderius Erasmus is read as a convenient divider between these two ages of Renaissance epistolary theory. Erasmus attacks medieval vestiges in the letter-writing textbooks of early humanists, such as Carolus Virulus and Engelbert Schut, rather than in the *ars dictaminis* itself. Conceiving the letter as different from the oration, he nevertheless refuses to limit it to the classical tradition of familiar letter writing. Rather, he follows Francesco Petrarca and Angelo Poliziano in describing the genre's heterogeneity and *decorum*. Erasmus therefore uses the system of rhetoric as a guide to the classification and composition of letters. The influence of Erasmus on other sixteenth-century treatises on letter-writing is so extensive that Martín Baños must describe the second Renaissance period as having two major tendencies, both with Petrarcan roots. The first tendency adapts letter writing to a wide range of epistolary occasions and arguments developed with appropriate use of rhetorical devices and styles, as Erasmus advocated in the tradition of Poliziano. The second tendency imitates the conversational structure and style of the familiar letter of classical tradition, the letter to friends, as championed by Juan Luis Vives and Justus Lipsius.

In the first, transitional phase of the Renaissance, Italian Quattrocento humanists, having recognized historic changes in language, begin privileging classical, especially Golden Age and Ciceronian Latin, over medieval usage and rules. Martín Baños recognizes but disparages the Quattrocento focus on grammar in epistolary theory. He finds both too medieval and too grammatical the influential study of *compositio* or artistic composition of Gasparino Barzizza and his many fifteenth-century followers. Barzizza merges Quintilian's treatment of word order as an aspect of *compositio* (*Institutio oratoria* 9.4.19-22, a passage on periodic syntax unknown before Poggio's 1416 discovery of a complete manuscript at St. Gall) with the treatment of *elegantia*, *compositio*, and *dignitas* (taste, artistic composition, and distinction) in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* XII.17-18. For Martín Baños, the grammaticized Latin rhetoric that results remains too medieval both in its dependence on the pseudo-Ciceronian (but classical) *Ad Herennium* popular in the Middle ages and in its promotion of classical word order as artificial rather than natural (that is, vernacular). Martín Baños also criticizes the application to letter writing of the concept of *elegantiae* or *venustas* (charm achieved by adopting ancient, as opposed to contemporary, usage of diction and syntax) that was subsequently developed by Lorenzo Valla and his successors. Identifying *elegantiae* with eloquence and ornament, the epistolary rhetoric taught by Valla's followers remains too closely bound to treatments of style and does not yet sufficiently distinguish the letter from other genres, such as the oration. In general, humanist treatises inconsistently describe the medieval parts of the letter even as they promote imitation of Cicero. A century and a half after Petrarca's recovery of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, Poliziano and Erasmus finally celebrate the versatility of the genre and escape their contemporaries' legalistic adherence to rhetorical rules by emphasizing *decorum*. The late-fifteenth-century diffusion of Greek epistolary treatises – Demetrius's *De elocutione* and the epistolary typologies of pseudo-Demetrius and pseudo-Libanius – also encourages humanists to break with the *ars dictaminis* by offering an alternative conception of the letter as conversational.

Martín Baños is clearly eager for this development. His history of epistolary theory cheers those who nourish modernity by hacking away the medieval weeds choking the ancient roots of the familiar letter. The *ars dictaminis* finally dies when late Quattrocento humanism distinguishes such genres as the civil speech, letter, sermon, dialogue, poetry, history, and everyday conversation and when letter writing becomes preliminary rather than central to education in rhetoric. He sees the development of teaching ‘method’ in northern humanism from Rodolphus Agricola through Philipp Melanchthon to Johann Sturm and his successors as positive because it pushes letter writing out of the curriculum. These humanists teach rhetoric, along with dialectic, as prescribing not so much rules for composing as tools for analyzing texts to be imitated in composition. Their ‘method’ results finally in Ramism, a movement that neglects epistolary theory. Ramism also influences some Spanish and Italian humanists, but Paolo Manuzio promotes historical and philological analysis in reaction to Ramism. The second, sixteenth-century phase of Renaissance epistolary theory is led principally by Juan Luis Vives and Justus Lipsius, whose works on letter-writing theory half a century apart are linked by many editions, translations, and commentaries of classical, especially Greek epistolary treatises, including Epistle 51 of Gregory Nazianzenus, which becomes well known only after Pietro Vettori uses it in his commentary on Demetrius’s *De elocutione* in 1562.

On the whole, Martín Baños treats Erasmus favorably as the architect of a synthesis of the rhetorical and familiar traditions of letter writing for his age. In *De copia* Erasmus moves beyond the confusion of rhetoric with grammar – and of eloquence with style – of the Quattrocento. He demonstrates how to vary and amplify not just words but also subject matter. He also recognizes that phrases are not inherently more or less elegant; rather, their elegance depends on their context. Erasmus develops an eclectic, Quintilianist posture but does not become belligerently Anti-Ciceronian until the Rome of Pope Leo X promotes linguistic purity as a weapon against everything Lutheran and Germanic. Martín Baños finds Erasmus’s tone in the *Ciceronianus* of 1528 parodic and unjust toward Ciceronianism, which could be rational, rhetorically legitimate, and not indifferent to stylistic originality.

Martín Baños insists that the concepts ‘Ciceronian’ and ‘Anti-Ciceronian’ are not useful in describing Renaissance letters. In *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* and other writings before 1524, Erasmus opposes the stylistic preoccupation of some humanists who avoid words and expressions not found in Cicero, but such ‘Ciceronianism’ is not a well-defined, homogeneous movement. Moreover, the familiar letter is not an exclusively Ciceronian genre. Martín Baños would limit the use of the terms ‘Ciceronian’ and ‘Anti-Ciceronian’, even in discussing the works of later sixteenth-century humanists such as Jacobus Pontanus and Justus Lipsius, to the issue of *latinitas* or purity in Latin style. He especially objects to the conclusion of Morris W. Croll that anti-Ciceronianism alone guided the first steps in the development of modern prose, but in that observation Martín Baños is surely flogging a dead horse. Few scholars now accept as current the early twentieth-century interpretations of Croll, however useful his research remains.

Chapter 9 of this history of Renaissance epistolary theory focuses on treatises in several vernacular languages. Martín Baños observes the influence of Latin epistolary theory on these works but finds them more practical and formulaic than the Latin manuals. They sometimes include legal material that in the Middle Ages had been taught in the *ars notaria* separately from the *ars dictaminis*. Their instruction in orthography is analogous to instruction in linguistic purity in Renaissance Latin treatises. Courtly language, however, provides vernacular writers

with their principal model for imitation. Thus courtesy books sometimes include instructions in letter writing. Manuals describing the office of the secretary have affinities with Cicero's descriptions of the ideal orator.

Martín Baños formulates his systematic analysis of epistolary theory in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance (Chapters 2, 4, and 10) in a rhetorical framework. Even though classical authorities carefully distinguished the letter from the oration, he presents ancient epistolary theory under the categories of definition, subject matter, and the parts of rhetoric: *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. The same rhetorical structure in the analyses of epistolary theory of the Middle Ages and Renaissance is, of course, clearly appropriate. Using it also for antiquity not only helps the reader draw parallels among the three ages but also reveals unexpected relationships between the classical arts of letter writing and oratory. In general, then, I found the structure surprisingly effective.

Martín Baños's analysis acknowledges multiple points of view about letter writing within each period, carefully citing sources. Taken together, the historical surveys and systematic analyses of this study present a thorough description of epistolary theory in Latin and the vernaculars from 1400 to 1600 against the background of antiquity and the Middle Ages. As an impressive compilation of current scholarship about a growing field of study, this monograph will serve researchers as a useful reference to the subject and a generally reliable map of primary and secondary sources. In describing Renaissance theory, Martín Baños has investigated not only manuals of letter writing per se, but also grammars, rhetorical treatises, vocabularies, dictionaries, commentaries, and other sources that touch on the subject.

Yet much territory remains to be explored. Even in 736 pages, Martín Baños cannot hope to treat every work in detail, and he often resorts to merely listing treatises that appear to fall into the same category. I am not always convinced that they do. Above all, I miss in the historical surveys and even more in the systematic analyses an investigation of contexts and of motivations for the many changes and controversies that one finds in epistolary theory. For example, the Reformation, a major influence on education and therefore on epistolary theory in the sixteenth century, is mentioned rarely. Although Martín Baños is surely right that Erasmus's *Ciceronianus* of 1528 was a response to Rome's desperate dismissal of all things Lutheran and Germanic, he is surely wrong to assert that relating Ciceronianism and anti-Ciceronianism to letter writing, one of the principal genres of an age obsessed with imitation in all genres, is useless. He would like to trace a tradition of the familiar letter stretching from Demetrius to Cicero to Petrarca to Vives to Lipsius (who has been called anti-Ciceronian). In either the historical narrative or the systematic description thus conceived, the continually changing, politically charged labels that Renaissance humanists hurled at their opponents become simply a burdensome complexity. Martín Baños does perceive better than some scholars that there are multiple varieties of Ciceronianism and anti-Ciceronianism in the Renaissance, but he does not want to trace them.

His six useful appendices do, however, show a dedication to curious details in epistolary theory. Giuseppe Billanovich (*IMU* 19, pp. 112-14) observes that a late-fifteenth-century reader annotated the only complete surviving manuscript of Julius Victor's *Ars rhetorica* (BAV, ms. Ottob. Lat. 1968, 12th c.). In Appendix I, Martín Baños argues that this reader was the author of a *Compendium de rhetorica* attributed to Giulio Pomponio Leto in an Oxford manuscript (BBO, ms. D'Orville 152, fols 53v-58v). The appendix reproduces in parallel columns the sections on *De epistolis* from the *Compendium* and from Halm's edition of Julius Victor. Appendix II offers

a bibliography of surviving and lost Spanish epistolary arts and formularies of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Appendix III transcribes sections of a manuscript (BNM, ms. 8470, 18th-19th c.) that contain information about Alfonso de la Cámara, mentioned here as author of an art of letter writing. Transcriptions, often in parallel texts, also demonstrate the conclusions of the next three appendices. Appendix IV argues that Justus Lipsius in *Institutio epistolica* was not influenced by Hermogenes' *Ideas*, as Marc Fumaroli claims, but that Pedro Juan Núñez in his *Institutiones rhetoricae* (1585) was; Martín Baños considers this influence a unique case in Renaissance epistolary theory. Appendix V shows that sections of the *Arte de retórica* (1578) of Rodrigo de Espinosa de Santayana merely translate the *Quadriuo* (1562) of the Italian Orazio Toscanella. Appendix VI demonstrates that *El arte de escribir cartas familiares* (1589) of Tomás Gracián Dantisco is a Castilian version of Francesco Negro's *Modus epistolandi* (1488), lacking the model letters.

Having demonstrated his mastery of scholarship on Renaissance epistolary theory and offered a map to others in an extraordinarily ambitious dissertation, Martín Baños will no doubt contribute to further scholarly exploration of this vast and still insufficiently known field of study for many years to come.

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