

Ryan J. Stark:

*Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England*

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One of the aims of Ryan Stark's *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* is to reappraise the rhetorical plainness of the seventeenth-century 'new philosophers'. Thomas Sprat's eloquent "invectives against 'swellings of style'" have been read as hypocritical given his own blatantly "imaginative and rhetorical" use of language. The charge laid against Sprat and his contemporaries at the Royal Society, that they produce an "anti-rhetorical rhetoric", is challenged by this study (p. 1). Stark accepts that the new science created a different style of writing, but he argues that experimental philosophers were not rejecting rhetoric but rather repudiating "magical and mystical theories of eloquence" (p. 3). Aiming to tell the history of a paradigm shift "from enchantment to plainness" and back again, Stark recuperates the imagined affective eloquence of magicians and witches with a view to recovering the spiritual dimension of language that was lost with the Enlightenment. Crucial to his argument is the "fundamental Christian intuition that language is connected to the Word" (p. 5). We now understand words and tropes as "cold instruments". Stark promises to trace the history of the taming of affective language, and he makes a case for "the return of enchanted rhetoric" (p. 6). But his study does not always make its case convincingly, and it is not always a reliable guide to some promising material.

The book is organized into six chapters, all of which are paired. Chapter 1 ("Charmed and Plain Tropes", pp. 9-46) and Chapter 2 ("Language Reform in the Late Seventeenth Century", pp. 47-87) are concerned with the rhetorical plainness of the new philosophers and their rejection of "charmed rhetoric". Chapter 1 explores the arguments of Francis Bacon and Daniel Sennert against magical language, which anticipate the Royal Society language reforms. As becomes clear, the object of their attack is as much alchemy as rhetoric. Bacon rejects "alchemical correspondences and occult verisimilitudes", and in so doing he "plant[s] the seeds for the decline of metaphysical poetry" (p. 15). The "new chemist" Sennert rejects both "the alchemical universe" and its "rhetorical dimensions": he rejects the magical view of language as powerfully meaningful, as effecting change, transmogrifying reality (p. 21). This chapter briefly compares Thomas Browne and Thomas Hobbes. The former entertains the idea of "rhetorical magic" (p. 25), the latter very clearly does not. It ends with a consideration of Joseph Glanville's rhetorical reform, attending particularly to his changing philosophy of style. Chapter 2 is concerned more directly with the Royal Society's program of language reform. It includes a vindication of Sprat, who is not "anti-rhetorical" but rather "anti-occult" (p. 53). Sprat, Stark argues, is rejecting the false application of figures (p. 52). Abraham Cowley makes the new scientists of the Royal Society rather than the inspired poet "the champion of radiant truth" (p. 60), while Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* is reclaimed as a satirical attack on magic and mysticism. Towards the end of this chapter, Stark considers the role played by the

bishops who were members of the Royal Society “in theorizing and circulating the new plain sensibility” (p. 71).

Chapter 3 (“Natural Magic”, pp. 88-114) is concerned with what Stark calls magical rhetoric, the view that language “contained the power to transmogrify reality, when figured properly by the expert magician, who by implication was also an expert rhetorician” (pp. 89-90). Central to this argument is Rosicrucian sorcery, against which the new scientists, Stark argues, defined their language reforms. Mystics like John Webster see the “cosmos as a charmed utterance”; while the wizard John Heydon explains “how spell-casters imbue words with the mysterious forces of planetary conjunctions” (p. 95). In this chapter, though, Stark is mostly interested in responses to natural magic from the other side: he considers in passing Henry More’s criticism of the sorcerer Thomas Vaughan, and Jean van Helmont’s dismissal of magic as demonic. Similarly, Chapter 4 (“Demonic Eloquence”, pp. 115-145) explores representations of the “demonic”. Stark lists the figures of inversion associated with demonic speech and he offers some literary examples of “demonry”, mostly from Shakespeare but also Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Stark also considers uses of demonic inversion to stigmatize Catholics, and seductive and shrewish women.

Chapter 5 (“Merick Casaubon on Rhetorical Enthusiasm”, pp. 146-173) and Chapter 6 (“John Dryden, New Philosophy, and Rhetoric”, pp. 174-202) offer case studies of the rhetoric of two later seventeenth-century thinkers and writers, Merick Casaubon and John Dryden, both of whom are seen as representing the new Enlightenment philosophy of plainness and who, arguably, are the villains of this book. Chapter 5 is dedicated to recovering the neglected Casaubon, and Stark focuses on his *Treatise Concerning Enthusiasm* (1655). He argues that this work is concerned with the way in which religious enthusiasm led, not simply to the Civil War, but also to “mass demonic possession”. In this treatise, “natural rhetorical enthusiasm easily becomes demonic rhetorical enthusiasm” (p. 152). John Dryden, Stark notes in Chapter 6, was a member of the Royal Society for several years, serving on its “committee for the improvement of the English language” (p. 176). His key contribution to the reform of English was to “improve” Shakespeare. Dryden and William Davenant would “translate” Shakespeare’s *Tempest* into the language of the modern paradigm” (p. 177), which included an attempt to dispel the occult from this play. Then, noting Dryden’s preference for “plain *enargeia*” (p. 182), Stark considers several early seventeenth-century writers who fail to represent this, mainly, Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets.

In his Conclusion (“The Importance of Philosophy of Rhetoric”, pp. 203-207), Stark articulates his grievances against Enlightenment rationalism and the rise of modern scientific rhetoric. The latter has resulted in rhetoric being regarded as an “art” that “packages” rather than creates knowledge, divesting early modern language of the “numinous auras and capabilities that swirl through, in and as words and tropes” (p. 206). With “the Enlightenment materialization of language”, an appreciation of the spiritual dimension of language has been lost. In contrast, early modern magicians knew that “witchery works”. We should also remember, Stark reminds us, that “prayer works” too (pp. 206-207). This study is resistant, to say the least, towards scholarly skepticism.

The book contains some valuable insights. Stark helps us to understand that Bacon, Sennert, and Glanvill, among many others, were never only concerned with the so-called abuses of rhetoric, and that there is a close relationship between magic and oratory in the way in which both are described and conceived. This is also a very wide-ranging study, as the chapter summaries above should make clear. Moreover, Stark is raising some intriguing questions. He is surely right to turn the attention of historians of rhetoric to other ways of thinking about language that clearly preoccupied early

modern writers, and to which the art of rhetoric hardly seems to do justice. Time and time again I have come across collections of similes, metaphors, and parables from the Bible, the reading of which is understood, quite literally, as good for you. Where does this view of the efficacy of figures come from, and how does it fit with the rhetorical tradition with which we are more familiar? I am eager to know.

Yet, Stark's book did not provide satisfying answers. Indeed, I lost patience with its mode of argument. One problem is that Stark does not explain carefully enough what he understands as "charmed rhetoric", or "occult rhetoric", or "demonic rhetoric" (all these terms are used), or the relationship between these kinds of rhetoric and the classical rhetorical tradition. In general, he describes classical rhetoric as "charmed rhetoric", and when he explains "demonic rhetoric" he draws upon the devices of the classical art. But I am still no clearer. Because of this lack of definition there is a continual imprecision in the argument; almost any kind of linguistic play or deficiency seems to become associated with occult rhetoric. Sometimes this becomes very complicated: Dryden tries to improve Shakespeare's "'affected pompous words,' which are also 'obscured by figures'" in *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), and in so doing "he appeals to one aspect of classical rhetoric (Quintilian) in order to repudiate an occult dimension of both ancient and Renaissance sublimity – the rhetorical obscurity of Aeschylus and Shakespeare" (p. 179). Moreover, many of the quotations that Stark offers to support his argument do not help either. A long quotation from Butler's *Hudibras* about linguistic obfuscation (among other things) is not obviously associated with the "world of magic", as Stark claims (p. 65).

This lack of focus is not the only reason for feeling frustrated by Stark's failure to grasp the implications of his topic. This book is organized around some simplifying dichotomies: Renaissance versus Enlightenment; charmed tropes versus decorative tropes; believers versus non-believers. Sometimes this leads to sweeping assumptions, for example, that the rhetoric of antiquity and the Renaissance is "mystical" and "charmed": "In most classical and Renaissance accounts of rhetoric's origins", Stark argues, "the great orator appears as a mystic or magician" (p. 19). Stark is referring to Cicero's myth of the origins of society that opens *De inventione*. But this *is* a myth, and it is often used rhetorically in Renaissance handbooks that are concerned primarily with persuasive speech as an 'art'. Is this evidence of charmed rhetoric? Or is it an example of orators using a myth to represent and 'talk up' the power of the skill they wish to teach?

There is also a series of claims made about what constitutes "demonic" eloquence that are so broad as to be of little use. Stark describes the tropes typical of "demonic" language as antithesis (including chiasmus and antimetabole) and irony (including antiphrasis, litotes, hyperbole, and dissimulation). "It was a matter of common sense to most seventeenth-century intellectuals", he writes, "that these tropes, when figured together, potentially signaled demonic activity" (p. 116). Just when we might suppose that Stark imagines that all early modern literature is "demonic", since these are common tropes, he clarifies what he means: only "the nefarious use of antithesis combined with irony" (pp. 116-117). But then it seems that he does, after all, mean a good part of early modern literature (or perhaps he has just chosen the wrong examples): "Representations of the demonic in Renaissance literature", he argues, "superbly illustrate [the] dynamic of wicked inversion". Who represents this? Shakespeare's King Lear, who "mimics the good king", Falstaff, who "imitates the trusted friend", and Lady Macbeth, who "mimics the good wife" (p. 119). I would accept that Lady Macbeth can be read as an example of "demonry" at work, although this is far from straightforward, but Lear and Falstaff?

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But most troubling to me is Stark's assumption that because he is a believer he is a better scholar of what he calls "occult rhetoric". "[T]hose who believe in a spiritual world", he suggests late in the book, "usually have an advantage over skeptics in part because the impulses to mock, dismiss, and qualify *ad infinitum* go by the wayside, allowing non-skeptical philosophers to approach the ideas with more discernment" (p. 143). This is an extraordinary claim. Would Stark believe that his own religious faith disables his ability to read skeptical thought and writing with discernment? It seems unlikely that he would agree. His belief in his own critical powers leads to some strikingly careless and ungenerous responses to the critical community. Sweeping claims, which are poorly founded and serve simply as fuel to propel the author's own arguments, are made about tendencies in Renaissance criticism or specific works. One or two examples will have to suffice. We learn that "philosophers and historians of rhetoric have romanticized the inversionary impulses of the Renaissance masquerade". Stark is referring to Wayne C. Rebhorn (p. 136). And he then immediately follows this with a reductive account of Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the Renaissance carnival, and critical debates about the carnivalesque (none of which is Rebhorn's concern). We also learn that "Freudian critics of Shakespeare" (Stark does not say who) "fail to explain convincingly" what "Renaissance demonologists clearly comprehend", namely that "evil operates as the force behind such topsy-turvy impulses, not the capricious energy of the unconscious mind" (p. 119). This lack of generosity and care with other people's work is a methodological weakness, and one, I would argue, that seriously mars Stark's project.

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