

Markku Peltonen, *Rhetoric, Politics, and Popularity in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 285pp., ISBN: 9781107028296, £60.00.

Rhetoric, Politics, and Popularity in Pre-Revolutionary England challenges traditional views of early modern politics, emphasizing its participatory and adversarial nature in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Markku Peltonen argues that the training in classical rhetoric provided in the grammar schools at that time was central in developing these characteristics. Peltonen argues that our understanding of English politics before the 1640s is incomplete if we do not understand both the political nature of rhetorical education and the rhetorical character of politics.

Peltonen structures the book in two parts. The first discusses rhetorical training and its implications for political culture; in other words, the link, borrowed from antiquity, between education and good citizenship. Part One also examines how rhetoric was taught in grammar schools, a relatively neglected area of research among early modern historians. Peter Mack's 2011 work *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380-1620*, as well as Ian Green's *Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* (2009) are, however, recent studies of this rhetorical education, although they take different approaches to that of Peltonen. Studies of education in the early modern period have rarely explored the political element present in classroom texts and teaching methods, and this is perhaps the strongest section of Peltonen's book, as it presents a very thorough explanation of how rhetoric was actually taught and learned in practice. Schoolboys were instructed in the persuasive and adversarial nature of rhetoric, and school exercises, such as letter-writing and delivering orations, dealt with political themes, whether classical or contemporary. Those skills used later in life by politicians were first learned in the grammar schools, which, as Peltonen argues, were far more concerned with politics than we might suppose. Rhetoric was a 'popular' art, intended to persuade a wide audience, yet learnt by a small section of society. Peltonen never talks about persuading the masses, just other members of parliament, and it would be useful to know how rhetoric was used outside of parliamentary speeches. The teaching of rhetoric was also not confined to the elite, as Peltonen frequently notes that even the smaller grammar schools were providing this instruction.

Part Two examines a series of six case studies demonstrating the use of rhetoric in practice between the 1570s and the 1620s, during which time classical rhetoric had become firmly established in the English grammar school curriculum. They illustrate the centrality of the art of

rhetoric in politics, particularly as used in the House of Commons, drawing upon common journals, diaries, and the House of Lords' reports of Commons speeches, analyzing their structure, argument, word choice, and use of rhetorical terms. Speeches in parliament followed the formal structure of an oration, and their success was judged according to rhetorical standards. Peltonen says we, too, should approach parliamentary speech-making through this 'lens of rhetoric' (p. 216).

At the very beginning of the work, Peltonen quotes Thomas Hobbes as saying in 1668 that parliamentary rhetoric had been a cause of the English Civil War; the aim of this book is to put that statement into context (p. 1). Peltonen is not seeking here to isolate rhetoric as a cause of the war, which would be well beyond the scope of the book. He does make it clear in the later case studies, however, that a significant development under James I was the use of 'deliberative rhetoric', with both king and parliament speaking on both sides of a topic, allowing for debate with the monarch (p. 159).

The Epilogue explores the dangers, observed by contemporaries, inherent in rhetoric's popular nature, particularly its republican associations and its potential to create conflict (pp. 218-20). Peltonen raises here some useful points about early modern views of rhetoric, but these may have fit more logically into part one, in building up a picture of early modern perceptions of rhetoric: eloquence and rhetoric opposed wisdom and knowledge, and rhetoric persuaded, but did not teach, with the power to either pacify or stir up an audience. The orator had enormous persuasive power, but so did the schoolmaster who taught the orator. Peltonen cites Thomas Hobbes as saying that even the most loyal schoolmaster could 'unwittingly cooperate in disposing the citizens' minds towards sedition', which profoundly affects our understanding of both politics and education in this period (p. 242).

Focused and readable, this is a book which historians of politics, education, rhetoric, or even the English Civil War, could find useful, as it explains the ways in which rhetoric was perceived during the early modern period, and sheds light on the connection between education and politics. It also helps answer the question of how much an early modern English schoolboy could put his education to use. Peltonen raises several questions, but does not, within the scope of this book, answer them. He devotes two whole chapters to how rhetoric was taught in the grammar schools, yet says very little about how those skills were developed in the universities. This is a relatively minor criticism in that it leaves the way open for further study of the subject,

but not including the universities here does leave a gap between practising rhetoric as a schoolboy, and putting it to use in one's political career: what happened in between, at the universities, which many members of parliament did attend? Just how many MPs attended university and studied rhetoric there? These are important questions which Peltonen's book does not fully address. Other questions are raised by this book: for instance, what about those grammar school boys who did not follow political careers? What did they do with their rhetorical skills? This is also an under-explored area of study. But these questions do not greatly detract from the quality of Peltonen's argument, but instead open up other areas for historians to explore, and Peltonen has provided a valuable starting point for doing so.

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