

The Rational Shakespeare

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The Rational Shakespeare

Peter Ramus, Edward de Vere, and the
Question of Authorship

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PREFACE

This book summarizes a project that emerged from an interest in the French philosopher Peter Ramus. Born in 1515, raised with a limited education, but determined on an academic life, Pierre de la Ramée settled in Paris in 1527. Poor but diligent, Ramée enrolled at the College of Navarre, where he assumed the name Petrus (Anglicized as Peter) Ramus. His search for a natural method of rational inquiry posited a readiness to court controversy in the pursuit of methodological truth. The manner of Ramus's return to first principles—he titled his master's thesis *Quaecumque ab Aristotele dicta sunt, commentitia sunt* (*All of Aristotle's Doctrines Are False*)—confirmed his refusal to compromise. Ramus's humanism was nothing less than radical.

“If the term ‘humanism’ in current discourse tends to connote an abstract resistance to the materiality of language,” explains David Norbrook, “then Renaissance humanism was a very different phenomenon” (249). Renaissance (or second or late) humanism was a reaction against its scholastic counterpart. As the dominant epistemological movement of the period, Renaissance scholasticism ostensibly forwarded the cause of rationalism in deferring to classical authority, but implicitly diverged from that objective in retaining much of the religious dogma of its medieval foundation. This divergence had already precipitated one irreparable schism. “An open conflict between rationalism and irrationalism broke out for the first time in the Middle Ages,” as Karl Popper chronicles, “as the opposition between scholasticism and mysticism” (434). Renaissance humanism, which emerged from this divided background, also forwarded the cause of

rationalism supposedly championed by late scholasticism, but did so unashamedly.

Ramus's principled attitude, his humanist vision, or Ramism, was at once a philosophy, a method of reasoning, and an approach to teaching. In returning to first principles, Ramus dismissed the preeminence of Aristotle, and this rejection had religious as well as philosophical implications. Of the three elements of Aristotelian dialectic—doctrine, nature, and exercise—Ramus dispensed with the first. Instead of doctrine, as advocated by the university, he prized the practical use (or exercise) of trained reason. Ramus's approach, as a condemnation of Aristotle, also censured the Catholic Church. The Parisian authorities formally addressed these contentions in 1544. The resulting edict at once suppressed Ramus's publications and restricted his duties as a university lecturer. Support and admiration for Ramus were never entirely lacking, however, and the authoritarian decree served to bolster his reputation. By 1547, the authorities felt duty bound to lift the edict, with Ramus emerging from these machinations as the most controversial philosopher and pedagogue of the age. He overshadowed the intellectual landscape of Europe.

Opposition from members of the University of Paris, as a center of late scholasticism, was to be expected. Yet, many academics from the University of Strasbourg and Heidelberg University, which were the bastions of late humanism, also balked at Ramus's uncompromising attitude. Nonetheless, some academics in Germany openly conferred with Ramus, as did their congeners in Switzerland. Ramus's reception in Italy also exhibited extremes. While Giordano Bruno labeled him an "archpedant," Leonardo Fioravanti and Simone Simoni defended Ramus, finding themselves ostracized as a result. During his time in Poland, Ramus received the offer of a well-endowed chair, a mark of academic respect that recurred in Hungary and Transylvania.

Ramus never visited Britain, but his impact there was profound, spawning successive generations of followers. The foremost of these Ramists came from Cambridge University. Thomas Smith (1513–77), an Essex farmer's son, headed the first generation. Ramus, as a commoner himself, dismissed the educational barrier of class; Ramism was a practical philosophy, and Smith accepted this basic practicality. At the university, Smith assembled a band of like-minded academics, which included John Cheke, Roger Ascham, and William Cecil (1520–98). These gifted and ambitious men followed Ramus's lead. They challenged the staid ideas of their elders in an attempt to extend the boundaries of knowledge. Ramism suited their

Protestant outlook, but following the execution of Cambridge University Chancellor Thomas Cromwell (d. 1540), Smith's coterie disbanded. Stephen Gardiner, the new chancellor, was hostile to the republican sentiments of second humanism.

Smith accepted a role in supervising religious reformation under King Edward VI. An important aspect of that reform was the Ramist promotion of a meritocratic state, a quasi-republic that would close (or even abolish) the tiers of social class. Having withdrawn from public life during the reign of Mary Tudor, Smith reentered government service under Queen Elizabeth, who sent him as ambassador to France. His first tour of duty lasted from September 1562 to May 1566. During this time, Smith counted Ramus among his *convictiores* and their friendship influenced Smith's commonwealth vision, as published posthumously in *De republica Anglorum* (1581). Elizabeth valued Smith for his nerve on matters of foreign policy, but she found him personally irksome and his ideas on sovereignty too radical. William Cecil, Smith's junior and erstwhile pupil, became her trusted advisor. Ramism helped Cecil to order and manage the political and religious landscapes of Elizabeth's reign. He adopted but softened Smith's commonwealth vision, promoting a meritocracy that did not close (let alone abolish) the social hierarchy.

The long and unbroken friendship between Smith and Cecil owed much not only to their common grounding in Ramism but also to their shared charge, Edward de Vere (1550–1604). The Sixteenth Earl of Oxford, John de Vere, removed his son Edward from the family home to Thomas Smith's household during Edward's early childhood. The unexpected death of John de Vere on 3 August 1562 left Edward under the authority of the Master of the Court of Wards and Liveries. The queen had appointed Cecil to this position the previous year. Under Cecil's auspices, tutors followed the latest trends in humanism, and preeminent among these trends was Ramism. Of outstanding intellect, and making undoubted use of Cecil's magnificent libraries, Edward de Vere soon outstripped his teachers. He came to understand the weaknesses as well as the strengths of Ramism in practice as well as in theory.

This rounded appreciation separates Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, from William Shakspeare (1564–1616) of Stratford. Shakspeare boasted neither the educational nor the courtly provenance for such an understanding. In 1572, Shakspeare's father appeared in court on charges of illegal wool purchases; within four years, he was broke; there would be neither money nor time for his children's schooling. William Shakspeare

received a poor education. Nor did he have unlimited access to great libraries. These details, which confirm the gulf between the Ramist credentials of Oxford and Stratford, are crucial to the authorship debate that surrounds the name of William Shakespeare. For, “however deeply the poetic impulse stirs the mind to which it is granted,” as Giovanni Boccaccio asserts, “it very rarely accomplishes anything commendable if the instruments by which its concepts are to be wrought out are wanting” (40).

The present volume hereby supports the Oxfordian side of the authorship debate: Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, rather than William Shakspere of Stratford, was the man behind the Shakespeare nom de plume. Indeed, the rationality that marshaled Oxford’s critical response to Ramism superintended not only his instrumental aim but also his ultimate goal. During his middle years, those that covered his majority (1571) to his second marriage (1591), Oxford was rarely self-denying. The conventional interpretation of this attitude damns him for squandering the inheritance of the oldest patrilineal dynasty in England. Such readings misconstrue Oxford’s instrumentality. Although born of noble ancestry, Oxford did not make that heritage his *raison d’être*. Oxford’s creative need was his ultimate priority. That need found satisfaction with a state annuity of £1,000, which Queen Elizabeth granted him in perpetuity in 1586.

When recast in ultimate and instrumental terms, therefore, Oxford’s largesse looks rather different: that supposed waste becomes a necessary investment. Oxford invested his inheritance in books, theatrical troupes, literary patronage, foreign travel, and other grist to his aesthetic mill. Put succinctly, his spending aimed toward his ultimate goal, and that goal was writing. Oxford’s state annuity sealed his compact with the Policy of Plays. That policy, as a promotion of the Protestant state under Queen Elizabeth, was (in part) a delayed reaction to the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572. That massacre, which immediately accounted for 10,000 Huguenots in Paris, and which finally accounted for over 100,000 Huguenots in France, had provoked anger, sorrow, and fear across England. One of the most prominent victims of the massacre had been Peter Ramus. Three of Elizabeth’s most outraged courtiers had been Thomas Smith, William Cecil (now Lord Burghley), and Edward de Vere.

As a pupil of two renowned Ramists, a member of Elizabeth’s court, and an annuitant associated with the Policy of Plays, Oxford would turn his critical appreciation of Ramism to excellent effect. Ramus accepted the inherence of natural reason: the dialectically capable mind understood its intersubjective environment as one composed of other dialectically capable

minds. Yet, Ramus eventually transformed the dialogue of negotiation into a one-way process of persuasion. When confronted with trenchant or well-founded opposition, he attempted to force an opponent into submission. If this approach failed, then an intersubjective impasse ensued. Coercion and deadlock were not the natural outlets for dialectic. When fully realized, Ramus's pedagogy encouraged this unfortunate transformation, creating singular minds incapable of discussion. The resultant barrenness matched that of second scholasticism. Ramus hereby failed Ramism. Oxford, who learned to treat intersubjectivity as a series of dramaturgical events, witnessed and experienced this practice firsthand, as a ward, as a courtier, and as Burghley's son-in-law. He also witnessed and experienced Burghley's efforts toward implementing Smith's commonwealth vision. Those efforts resonated to Ramus's demands for the recognition of personal merit.

The mature Oxford appreciated Ramus's committed but ultimately self-defeating Ramism, his dilemmas of intersubjectivity, his attempt to force opponents into submission, and his vision of a commonwealth built on assurance. Oxford intuitively valued these issues as matters of coordination. In these strategic situations, people must make choices in the knowledge that other people face the same options, that a coordination condition equivalent to silence pertains between the participants, and that the outcome for each person will result from everybody's decisions. Such a situation is particularly problematic when a logical approach to its solution establishes a circle of conjecture that demands an arbitrary choice from the solutions on offer.

While the works attributed to William Shakespeare reveal Oxford's intuitive appreciation of coordination problems, the theory of games of strategy (or game theory) formally models such situations. John von Neumann founded this mathematical discipline in 1928, but prescient authors have always appreciated coordinative dilemmas, however implicitly, and Shakespeare's insights remain among the most important. The present volume supports this claim by examining unrestrained Ramism in *Love's Labour's Lost*, pedantic reasoning in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, and the most common coordination problems, the subset known as social dilemmas, with reference to *King John*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Henry V*. These primary texts ensure that this study covers the standard taxonomy of Shakespeare's dramas—comedy, tragedy, history, and problem play—in drawing on the basics of game theory, a theory mooted but ultimately denied by Ramus. Rather than review the multiple strands

of research that comprise the Oxfordian argument to date, the ongoing argument draws on the relevant material from this excellent back catalogue, with the social dilemmas of Oxford's life and times aligning him with the works of both Ramus and Shakespeare.

In total, then, the following book comprises two main sections. Section 1, "Ramus, Smith, Cecil, and Oxford," comprises five chapters. They present Peter Ramus's life and works in both historical and philosophical contexts, slowly introducing a detailed analysis of Ramism, on the one hand, and the exposure of Smith, Cecil, and Oxford to Ramism, on the other. Section 2, "The Rational Shakespeare," comprises an introduction, eight subsequent chapters, and a conclusion: the introduction summarizes the concepts and terms of game theory necessary to the dramaturgical analyses that follow; the book then closes with a concise summary of its findings.

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