

VIVES' DE CONSULTATIONE
AND THE RENAISSANCE SCHOOLROOM:
DELIBERATIVE RHETORIC AND THE THESIS EXERCISE

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Juan Luis Vives is known as the greatest Spanish humanist of the sixteenth century and is surpassed in the European tradition as a whole perhaps only by Erasmus (Bolgar 199). He wrote widely on a number of topics and was invited to Henry the VIII's court by Wolsey whereupon he became tutor to Mary Tudor. Among Vives' numerous writings are the well-known rhetorical treatises *De ratione dicendi* and *De conscribendis epistolis*.

The first is unusual in that, although it appears by its title to be a traditional art of rhetoric, it is known mainly as a work on literary rhetoric because it deals primarily with style and the interpretation of literary texts rather than with the production of orations (Vickers 283). The second is not unusual because it falls well within the tradition of rhetorical treatments on letter writing (Vickers 289).

In volume II of Vives' works, between these two longer rhetorical treatises, is the short work entitled *De consultatione* which has not received much attention as a rhetorical treatise. Yet Vives makes a point of treating deliberative rhetoric apart from the other rhetorical genres saying that this work is separated from his other rhetorical works by the request of its addressee, Ludovicus of Flanders (*Petis, Vir Clarissime, ut de genere deliberativo separatim a reliquo artis Rhetoricae corpore scibam. . .*) (238).

The addressee's request aside, Vives' separation of this treatise on deliberative rhetoric from the other rhetorical works is significant for other reasons. The distinction between arts of reception and arts of production is significant in these three rhetorical treatises. The *De ratione dicendi* appears to be an art of literary reception, while the other rhetorical treatises, *De consultatione* and *De conscribendis epistolis*, are both arts of production and are different in kind. This last distinction of genre is intriguing and I would like to enter on a protracted explanation as to why the *consultatio* is interesting as a separate genre. I will first discuss the prose curriculum common in

Renaissance schools then suggest the significance of Vives' treatise for this curriculum and for Renaissance literature.

The most popular prose composition curriculum in the Renaissance was the *progymnasmata* (Baldwin 69, 288). These were a series of exercises, progressing in levels of difficulty, that trained students in various rhetorical genres. They derived from Hellenistic schools and became very popular in Roman and Medieval schools, and Renaissance schools as well. The earliest one known was written by Theon of Alexandria in the second century A.D. Another was written by Hermogenes of Tarsus also of the second century. Around 515 A.D. Hermogenes' *progymnasmata* were translated into Latin by the famous grammarian Priscian. Thus these exercises became part of the grammar that widely influenced the Middle Ages. This translation was also extensively used in the Renaissance (Clark 259).

The latest Greek schoolmaster to write *progymnasmata* was Aphthonius of Antioch, who taught during the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He patterned his exercises after Hermogenes, but his popularity among subsequent schoolmasters can be attributed to the model essays included for each of the exercises (Clark 259). Aphthonius' *progymnasmata* were translated into Latin first by Joannes Maria Catenaeus in 1507, then by the Dutch humanist Rudolph Agricola in 1532, and then were published with scholia by Reinardus Lorichius in 1542 (Clark 261). These Latin versions of the exercises were immensely popular during the Renaissance (Baldwin 62, 288; Clark 261).

The exercises of the *progymnasmata* increased in difficulty and contained fourteen stages. The first two exercises were narrative retellings of fables and tales. Exercises three and four were the *chreia* and proverb, which taught the skills of repetition for emphasis, pithy statement, comparison, contrast, illustration, and example. The fifth and sixth exercises were refutation and confirmation. The seventh was commonplace which taught skills of amplification. The eighth through the twelfth exercises were *encomium* and vituperation, then comparison, next impersonation or *prosopopoeia*, and then description or *ekphasis*. The thirteenth exercise in the curriculum was the *thesis* or *consultatio*. In this exercise the schoolboys practiced giving advice on a general question.

The fourteenth exercise was called legislation and trained the boys in arguing legal cases, usually from ancient history (Clark 260).

It is the *thesis* or *consultatio* that Vives devotes an entire treatise to when he writes of deliberative rhetoric. In order to better understand Vives' treatment, it is important to understand the exercise as it had been recorded centuries earlier by Aphthonius. Here is what Aphthonius says about this exercise:

The *thesis*, that is the consultation, is the inquiry of some matter to be investigated by speech. Of the consultations, however, some are civic and others are contemplative. The civic are those which have the action accommodated to the state, for instance: whether a wife must be taken, whether a voyage must be taken, whether fortifications must be built. By all these, for instance, the status of the state is maintained. Indeed the contemplative are those which pertain to the reflections of the mind alone. They are, of course, whether the heavens are spherical, or whether there are many worlds. These, for instance, do not come into the use of men, but are perceived by the mind alone. The consultation, however, differs from the hypothesis, that is, from a suit (*causa*) because the suit is definite; the consultation is indefinite. The definition, moreover, may be in accordance with person, matter, argument, and the rest, as in the example "walls must be built." This inquiry is without person. A suit is for example when the Lacedemonians counsel to encompass Sparta with a wall from the Persian invaders. This indeed has persons: the deliberating Spartans; it has matter: the wall of Sparta; it has a reason: the invading Persians. First of all the tasks, however, consultation exercises objection and response even as examination does. The *thesis* is first divided by that which we call the entrance which you put in the place of the proemium; then you use the final headings for the right, the just, the useful, and the possible. (61)

It is necessary to distinguish between the types of exercises described here. The *thesis* or *consultatio* is a general treatment of a question that is either civic in that it deals with the actions of humans, or it is contemplative in that it deals with the speculations of the mind. A *hypothesis* differs from a *thesis* in that it deals with

the specific. Whether it is better to marry would be a *thesis*. Whether it is better for John to marry Linda would be a *hypothesis*. This is all Aphthonius says about this exercise before he includes a model essay as an example. But many Renaissance editors took the occasion to write commentary about what the exercise entailed.

Vives is unique in respect to the *consultatio* because in lieu of commentary he wrote a separate treatise on consultation published in Oxford in 1523. *De consultatione* is an elaborate explanation of how to give counsel and advice, and harks back to the schoolroom *thesis* exercise. I would like to examine briefly what Vives says in his treatise and suggest why it is useful.

First Vives gives a passing nod to the rhetorical genres saying that he is writing this treatise exclusively about deliberative rhetoric by request. The treatise is organized in Aristotelian fashion after the three modes of proof: arguments from the nature of the case, the nature of the speaker, and the nature and disposition of the audience. He must also follow the prescribed canons of invention, arrangement, and style. Rather than summarize what Vives says about invention, arrangement, and style in logical, ethical and pathetic arguments, I will discuss some of what he says about logical and ethical invention because herein he offers some perspectives emphasized in the Humanist view of deliberative rhetoric.

In his discussion of logical invention, the reader is struck with the applicability of these topics not just to political debates, but to the general conversations one might have on very ordinary matters. When considering the nature of the case, Vives says that matters before, contemporary with, and after the case must be considered. Matters before would include predecessors and precedents, the ancients, that which was done or said formerly: fables, history, oracles, prophecies, witty sayings, opinions, common sayings, and proverbs (239).

Matters contemporary with the case include those things in the mind and in the body and those external to both. Those in the mind are qualities of fancy and memory, talents of nature such as docility and discretion, those things which are improved by industry and use such as disciplines and arts, and those gifts enhanced by training such as prudence and virtue and their opposites.

Those matters contemporary with the case and in the body are strength and weakness, health, stature, proportion, beauty or deformity, age, name, and that which proceeds from all of these. Those matters external to both mind and body are riches, pleasant pursuits, family, things not in our control such as grace and charm, the state, the region, and their qualities: whether they are mountainous, rocky, swampy, flat, passable, impassable, and their parts such as the home, marketplace, fields, and the position of the place whether it is among friends or enemies, near far, below, and above (239-40).

He also considers time contemporaneous with the case in terms of its natural divisions such as hours, days, months; time in terms of the workings of men such as festivals, feasts, planting, or harvest; and time according to the accidents such as famine, plague, prosperity, and peace (240-41).

He likewise discusses the matters to be considered after the case in terms of what is likely to happen and what is able to be affected by human will and skill. This requires a knowledge of the persons involved, their characters, human motives, the external factors likely to be involved, and the way each person is likely to behave in a given circumstance (241-42).

As part of deliberating about the future, the counselor must know what goods are to be sought, for we seek the good and avoid the bad. The chief goods are the useful and the noble. The goods that are useful to the mind are courage, learning, wit, and wisdom. The goods useful to the body are learning, friendship, dignity, power, charm, authority. The most noble things pertain to God such as piety, desire for the highest things, knowledge and adoration of God's omnipotent nature, love, liberality, justice, kindness, temperance, wit, judgment, learning, dignity, honor, praise, glory, charm, authority, power, distinction of birth (242-43).

Vives also offers a list of priorities so as to enable the one giving counsel to recommend the best choice when faced with recommending useful, but mutually exclusive, courses. He states:

For usefulness, those things are uppermost which are found to preserve life, and are not only prepared in the present, but also can be prepared afterwards And then all

profitable and safe things, not so much for us as for them whom we hold dear, or will hold dear. . . . Next are those things which are for delights and pleasures for all our senses, and which are delightful to the mind, which are the best and are very noble and long lasting; then come those which leave in their wake the least bit of regret. . . . The final things are splendid and magnificent . . . which things are greatly to be praised for their utility to the many. . . . (244)

This hierarchy of utilities aids the counselor in recommending the best course of action when all choices being considered are useful.

What is striking about Vives' discussion of logical invention is that these topics of invention seem equally applicable to planning a journey as to planning a military campaign. In fact, this is exactly the design of the civic part of the consultation exercise. Whether one is planning marriage, a journey, or fortification of the city, he must learn the topics to help him conduct his life in all of its demands that concern deliberation about future action. The assumption is that one needs to know how to comport himself reasonably in all of his behavior, not merely in his discussions concerning matters of state.

Vives' treatment of ethical arguments is interesting because it depends upon the presumption of probity and prudence in the one being counselled rather than in the counselor. This alters the traditional notion of ethos because now the ethical presumption is transferred to the audience rather than residing in the orator. In this respect Vives also feels that Christian rhetoric must diverge from Classical rhetoric because for Christians what is decent must precede that which is useful.

Formerly the Roman people would often employ in deliberations this saying, "May utility prevail," which is reprehended by the wisest and noblest of the people and repudiated by a philosophical school. The Romans probably thought that the same advantage from which the cry was made would also be the most advantageous to the country as a whole. But let us say truly, "May decency prevail," or better, "May religion prevail." (251)

In addition, Vives talks about what kind of relationship is to be had toward each type of person one might advise, whether one's

superior or inferior. He talks of what kind of behavior is suitable for each kind of person and how to decide which choice to make when two noble goods conflict (252).

Beside giving us an interesting look at Renaissance society and its values and customs, Vives' treatise seems to be a lengthy list of all possible considerations when someone gives advice to another. In part this is true, but it is more than that. More significantly, *De consultatione* provides a comprehensive taxonomy of all significant lines of reasoning that can possibly come into play when someone gives advice to another either on a practical or a contemplative matter. The assumption was that if someone could master the *thesis* or the *consultatio* exercise, he would have at his disposal all the necessary mental equipment to give advice in any possible situation. That is, knowing in general the forms of reasoning available would help him give specific advice in a particular set of circumstances. Or knowing how to find all the reasons why one should marry would allow him to give good advice to his friend John regarding why he should marry Linda. This would not involve giving all possible reasons, but only those applicable to the case at hand. In other words the exercise was designed to teach schoolboys never to be at a loss for words and to make those words count. The exercise presumes judgment beyond inventional fecundity.

Vives states that the skill of giving advice extends well beyond the assembly and senate. He says that all these things are of use to the household that deliberates and adds that skills in advising are useful for private cases in which one must counsel irresolute friends as well as for public cases in which one must counsel in the courts of princes (258). This same every-day application is also suggested by Erasmus in his letter writing treatise, *De conscribendis epistolis*, where he devotes a section to letters of advice (199-203).

Evidently giving advice was seen as an ordinary function of life from the most formal to the most casual of settings. And the *consultatio* exercise was designed to meet this discursive expectation. Indeed one of the most common examples of the *consultatio* given in textbooks was not one taken from the assemblies or senate, but from every-day experience: whether it is better to marry or not.

The applicability of advice-giving to all situations is one of the skills the humanist curriculum sought, and I believe that this widespread schoolroom exercise is responsible for the vast advice literature of the Renaissance. Vives' separate treatment of deliberative rhetoric as advice-giving in *De consultatione* is evidence of the importance of this genre in Renaissance society. As examples of Renaissance advice literature Vives' own advice *On the Education of a Christian Woman* comes to mind. But one can easily think of many others: certainly Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Garver has already shown how thoroughly Machiavelli was dependent on the topics of rhetorical argument in that treatise. But one could just as easily add Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*. Think also of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* or Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince* or William Bude's *The Instruction of a Prince*. In the English tradition think of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* or Sir Thomas Elyot's *Book Named the Governor* and Bacon's *Essays or Councils* and many more. You may also think of the many exhortations to marry as in Erasmus's book on writing letters or Jeremy Taylor's famous sermon on marriage. And well this claim could be extended to numerous other examples of this genre in the Renaissance.

In some respects Vives' treatment of deliberative rhetoric is interesting in the tradition, namely in placing humanist emphasis on the everyday use of deliberative rhetoric and in presuming the good moral character of the one receiving counsel. The importance of Vives' treatise, however, is not that it is unique, but that it is comprehensive. It gives a full view of the complexity of training that students received in this schoolroom practice, a practice that shaped an entire literature of advice during the Renaissance.

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