

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*English literary criticism: the medieval phase.*

By J. W. H. ATKINS. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1943. Pp. ix+211.

In his *Literary criticism in antiquity* (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1934; cf. *MP*, XXXIV [1936], 195-97), Mr. Atkins traced the complex alterations and interrelations of the numerous devices and theories of literary criticism which passed from the Hellenic to the Greco-Roman world. Literary criticism during the Middle Ages, Mr. Atkins points out in his present study, was conditioned during its entire length (and the influence continues, although Mr. Atkins intimates the contrary, into modern criticism) by the heritage of Rome, for rhetoric as developed by Cicero and his successors had become the means not only of writing, interpreting, and judging prose but also of appreciating poetry and of developing all varieties of thought and action. Many of the roles which rhetoric played in the Middle Ages emerge clearly in Mr. Atkins' account, and the elucidation of rhetoric and its devices constitutes the important contribution of his book toward the ends he sets for it: to fill in a gap in the history of criticism and to provide a background for the understanding of Elizabethan literature and criticism. But the clarity which results from the emphasis on rhetoric is somewhat obscured by the simple oppositions of rhetoric to the other arts of the trivium into which Mr. Atkins is betrayed by his conception of Humanism (the emergence of which he seeks in a proper appreciation of literature) and Scholasticism (which is antagonistic to Humanism). The story of English literary criticism therefore begins in the eighth century in the works of Bede and Alcuin, who are grammarians, simple in their approach but not opposed to literature; it flowers in the twelfth century in the humanistic taste and erudition of John of Salisbury, who is critical of logic-choppers and antihumanists; the new poetics emerges in the thirteenth century, when Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland

borrowed its foundations from rhetoric and when Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, and Richard of Bury developed some of the intellectual consequences of their opposition to Scholasticism and the domination of logic; and finally the "native literary problems" are treated from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries in the defense (with the aid of rhetoric) of natural themes and simple prose by the author of *The owl and the nightingale*, Wiclif, and Chaucer as well as in the return (also with the aid of rhetoric) to extravagances of style and convention reflected in the critical writings of Caxton, Hawes, and Skelton.

The history is limited to English literary criticism, and the medieval figures like Alcuin, John of Salisbury, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, John of Garland, Roger Bacon, who spent at least parts of their careers on the Continent, are separated somewhat artificially from the German, French, and Italian fellow-workers who shared and opposed their doctrines. Even the tendency to the practical as opposed to the speculative, which Mr. Atkins finds characteristic of "English thought" (p. 191), scarcely justifies the limitation since it is better explained by one phase of the development of rhetoric than by national characteristics and since it is shared by many Continental writers (who are excluded from this survey), while, on the other hand, many English logicians of the fourteenth century (who are likewise excluded) contributed to the advance of theoretic speculation. The limitation to English criticism has, however, the virtue of isolating a simple line of development which might be lost in the more complex interplay of European thought, and such defects as may be found in the history derive from the virtues of that simplification.

In the fuller picture the lines could not be so sharp nationally, chronologically, or doctrinally. There was no "English literary criticism" in the Middle Ages; the stages of the development of literary criticism are not so

abrupt or late; literary criticism is not found exclusively in a narrowly defined Humanism. English critics find their place in the development of European Latin criticism, and their contributions are not, in any simple sense, characteristically English. The treatment of poetic as one of the parts of logic did not begin in the thirteenth century (p. 114): it was a commonplace in the tenth century, long before the introduction of the "new logic" or the translation of Arabic compendia in the twelfth century (cf. *Speculum*, XVII [1942], 16 and 18). It is not true that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* were "practically unknown" in the Middle Ages, "all that was available in the matter of texts being Alfarabi's Glosses on the *Rhetoric* and the paraphrases of the *Poetics* due to Averroës" (p. 135): both works were translated directly from the Greek in the thirteenth century (cf. G. Lacombe, *Aristoteles Latinus* [Rome, 1939], pp. 17 and 77-78 for the two known thirteenth-century translations of the *Rhetoric*; for the *Poetics*, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 18 and 79, and also A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles Poetik* [Berlin, 1934], pp. 29, 257-58, and E. Franceschini, "La Poetica di Aristotele nel sec. XIII," *Atti del R. Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, XCIV [1935], 523-48). More important than the national or chronological separations, however, are the hard doctrinal lines according to which grammar and certain varieties of rhetoric are made sympathetic to Humanism while logic and other developments in rhetoric become antipathetic to it. The broader story is more complex, both in devices and in subject matter. Rhetoric is sometimes limited, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to the consideration of one of the five traditional parts of rhetoric—style—and it sometimes embraces all five; consequently grammarians were very much influenced by rhetoricians in the early Middle Ages and the differentiation of dialectic from rhetoric was the subject of learned inquiry and dispute in the later Middle Ages. Similarly, with respect to subject matter, grammatical devices revolutionized the study of law and theology before grammar itself became speculative and a part of philosophy, while, conversely, the philosophers who made

poetic a part of logic and who studied "poetic" arguments returned most surely and first to Aristotle's conception of poetic as a science distinct from the practical and theoretic sciences. If Mr. Atkins had broadened his field beyond the writers who happened to have been born in England, he might have been induced to examine the use of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic in the interpretation of sacred and secular texts in law, theology, and philosophy as well as literature, and he might not have passed over the development of logic as irrelevant to his purposes except as hostile to literature. In the separation of the several senses and uses of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic the simple opposition of Humanism and Scholasticism would have been seriously damaged, and, although the clear outlines of his story might have been smudged in that process, he might have found less occasion to justify the doctrines he studies for their historical importance while apologizing for their lack of intrinsic interest, and he might have been saved the embarrassment of discovering rhetoric to be both the villain and the hero—indifferently and for the same reasons—in the emergent vernacular literature.

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