Italian Renaissance Rhetoric

The earlier Renaissance humanists wished to promote Christian truth. They did so, however, with skeptical tools that they learned in studying philology and rhetoric. Ancient skeptical writings were of great importance to the Renaissance humanists because they provided support for rhetoric. Rhetoric, along with grammar and poetry, represented the humanist idea of curricular reform. Hence, as devotees of rhetoric, the humanists learned and used skeptical concepts. The great early Italian humanists from Petrarch to Valla learned how to use skeptical concepts from their ancient model and hero, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-55).\(^1\) Skepticism was necessary for their attack on scholastic philosophy or dialectic.\(^2\) The great Florentine humanist, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), for example, indicated that a lack of certain knowledge, or even ignorance, was necessary for the pursuit of eloquence.\(^3\) Moreover, following Cicero, Salutati clearly saw that a great orator or rhetorician must not differ too greatly from his audience or public. Following the basic assumptions of ancient rhetoric, the rhetorician must take the position of a skeptic regarding morality, customs, everyday life, and even the language of his audience.\(^4\) The implication was that the orator must not hold that there was any certain truth or absolute good. In spite of this, the early humanists did not fear that Christian teachings were endangered, and they attempted to create a more moral city-state and society. Therefore, to assert that humanists learned and used skeptical ideas about rhetoric does not mean that they necessarily identified with the ancient skeptics or that they rejected all kinds of certain knowledge.

---

1 Trinkaus, Image, 1: 28.
   Cicero’s skepticism pointed more to questioning dogmas about metaphysics and natural philosophy than to denying all human knowledge.


3 Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, 75.

4 Ibid. and Schmitt, Cicero Skepticus, 48-49.
One has only to look at Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch (1304-1374), the father of the movement, to see that early Italian humanism did not seek to promote doubt about Christian religious teachings. Indeed, Petrarch deserved to be called the father of the movement because he sought to Christianize the classical ideas with which he was so enamored. In his famous writing, *On Religious Leisure* (*De otio religioso*, 1347-1357), Petrarch rejected doubt in God or in God’s mercy. Moreover, he did so using an epistemological argument, reminding his readers that eternal things (that is, all spiritual things) were invisible. He asserted that any person who doubted God’s intention or ability, “... is ignorant of God or fails to consider His power and mercy.”

Petrarch also began the struggle with scholasticism, which was a struggle about method. He found scholastic dialectic to be useless on the grounds that it represented little more than playing intellectual games and making contentions. Moreover, because of its method, he thought scholasticism could not be applied to moral issues or to the interpretation of Scriptures.

Beginning with Petrarch, Cicero was the most beloved of the ancient writers for the Renaissance humanists. Petrarch labeled Cicero the prince of Latin eloquence because Cicero “held the hearts of men in his hands; he ruled his listeners as a king.” Petrarch first attempted to use Ciceronian rhetoric to reform morals as well as

---

5 See Ronald G. Witt, “In the Footsteps of the Ancients”: The Origins of Humanism from Lovati to Bruni (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2000), p. 231, on Petrarch’s significance; namely, he Christianized what until then was a secular movement.


Chapter 4 of Book 1 (pp. 33-42) was a virtual rejection of doubt about the existence of God or the reality of His promise of mercy. Trinkaus translated this title as The Repose of the Religious, which might be a better title since the work was dedicated to Petrarch’s brother and his Carthusian community.


9 Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, 34.
speech, an agenda of most Renaissance humanists. To be sure, Cicero taught that the purpose of rhetorical persuasion was to promote goodness and virtue.\textsuperscript{11}

The virtual veneration of Cicero carried much intellectual baggage with it. First, Cicero owed much to the skeptics. In particular, Cicero taught that the Academic skeptics provided the best philosophical basis for rhetoric.\textsuperscript{12} The various techniques and strategies of rhetoric can provide probable truth, but only probable truth. One must remember, then, that the humanist movement carried skepticism in its methodological arsenal and was responsible, therefore, for promoting virtually all of the ancient skeptical ideas and techniques in the promotion of rhetoric.\textsuperscript{13} Cicero provided a strong connection between the orator and the skeptic. However, for Cicero himself, the contingency of probable truth was limited by his simultaneous adherence to the Stoic view that the probable truth of consensus represented the discovery of innate knowledge.\textsuperscript{14}

Moreover, Cicero owed the linking of eloquence with moral reform to the Isocratean tradition. Isocrates (436-338) defended the sophist teaching of rhetoric from charges that it lacked moral values by claiming that rhetoric was neither good nor bad in itself, but depended on the values of the orators who used it.\textsuperscript{15} Knowledge was good for its social use (not for seeking certain truth), education was for producing social leaders or orators (not philosophers seeking certain truth), and man was a social animal (not a rational one, who could discern certain truth). Until they became familiar with


\textsuperscript{11} Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, 34.

\textsuperscript{12} Seigel, Rhetoric and Philosophy, 16-17 & Trinkaus, Image, 1: 26.

\textsuperscript{13} William J. Bouwsma, “The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought,” Itinerarium Italicum, edited by Oberman & Brady, 43.

\textsuperscript{14} See below pp. 10 & 19-20 and Kahn, Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism, 33-34.

\textsuperscript{15} Cicero took this defense further to claim that only a good man could be a good orator. The rhetorical views of Isocrates carried significant implications regarding knowledge, education, and humankind.
Aristotle’s analytical (logical) studies, humanists from Petrarch to Bruni found the same ideas in Aristotle’s book on topics, too.)\(^{16}\)

From Academic Skepticism the rhetorician could feel no moral qualms about arguing both sides of any case or issue. As a skeptic, the orator could make such arguments, pro and con, for the only truth available in the contingent world of people was consensus. There was no absolute ethical norm, but the rhetorician might propose standards of likelihood and probability.\(^{17}\) Hence, one finds the terminology and techniques of ancient skepticism in the Renaissance promotion of rhetoric: likelihood, probability, consensus, persuasive argument on both sides of any question, and the rejection of dogma.

Second, Cicero’s writings also carried Stoic teachings. He combined the ideas of the skeptics with those of the Stoics, especially with regard to ethical issues. Third, Cicero promoted some Peripatetic views, too, and combined them with skeptical and Stoic ideas. Aristotle’s relativistic views of ethics fit nicely with the middle-period Stoic ideas because they were practical. In order to be able to argue persuasively for and against any particular proposition or assertion, or on either side of a particular case, Cicero used Aristotelian dialectic.\(^{18}\)

Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* showed very clearly what consensus and probability meant in the public forum: “what all believe to be true is actually true.”\(^{19}\) At the same time, Cicero followed Aristotle’s idea that the possibility of prudence

---


Burger connected this Isocratean tradition particularly to Leonardo Bruni’s concept of the *studia humanitarii*.

\(^{17}\) Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism*, 36.


\(^{19}\) Aristotle of Stagira, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1173a, quoted in Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism*, 32; see also p. 73.
(meaning the ability to discern proper behavior) was found naturally within people; people possess an innate disposition to moral virtue.20

Early humanists could readily identify with these ideas as a result of their involvement in philology. The skeptical ideas of consensus and probability were applied to the meanings of words and grammatical constructions in as much as these were simply conventions, not certain truths. Perhaps this identification was made also because these humanists belonged to a civic movement promoting the active life in a republican, city-state environment.21 Nevertheless, one will immediately recognize contradictions to Christian teachings here, with regard to consensus or convention as the way to probable truth in ethical matters. These contradictions were bound to raise doubts, sooner or later, with regard to the idea of absolute truth (that comes from outside of humankind and society) and doubts about any kind of certainty in moral and human questions.

The Roman-born grammarian and philologist, Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457), who represented the epitome of early Italian humanism, turned the use of rhetoric in a distinctly new direction. Valla used the strategies and techniques of the ancient skeptics against pagan philosophies and against the scholastic (and Aristotelian) syllogistic method of demonstrating certain truth.22 However, he was no follower of the skeptics.23 Concerning Christian truths, Valla rejected skepticism and showed

---

20 Kahn, Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism, 31-32.
21 Bouwsma, “Renaissance and Reformation,” 131-135.

Mack was probably right in criticizing Lisa Jardine for saying that Valla played the role of an Academic in writing the Dialectica disputatione, but he goes too far in making the point. Valla was dependent on skeptical sources. Mack used a letter where Valla wrote about his work that it was “quasi more Academicorum,” which he translated as “almost after the manner of skeptics” to support his point. But “quasi” may just as well be translated as “just as” and “sort of.” Monfasani also criticized Jardine for labelling Valla a skeptic, but his attempt to prove the contention by citing examples of Valla’s religious faith failed to take cognizance of Valla’s distinction between religious and philosophical matters; it was only with regard to religious matters and Scriptures that Valla looked for certainty.
that rhetoric based on skepticism was inadequate.\textsuperscript{24} He was able to do this because of the earlier humanist recovery of all of Cicero’s works and the \textit{Institutio Oratoria} of Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (ca. 40-95).

Valla’s first extant work, \textit{De Voluptate}, or \textit{On Pleasure} (1431), already revealed both his aggressive, polemical nature and his Christian purpose.\textsuperscript{25} He revised and republished it as \textit{De vero falsoque bono}, or \textit{On the True and False Good} (1433 and 1445) in order to make his Christian purpose clearer. In the third section of the book, where the Christian interlocutor spoke, Valla attacked the false blend of Neoplatonism, Stoicism and Aristotelianism promoted by many humanists.\textsuperscript{26} The Christian interlocutor defending the dignity of pleasure (\textit{voluptas}). Valla taught that the demonstration of a spiritual or religious principle or thesis, "presupposed an act of faith or belief in the validity of the logic of the proof."\textsuperscript{27} Hence, the Christian rhetorician must generate his own authority in terms of obvious personal faith and reputation. In other words, Valla claimed a basis for proof in writing or oratory that differed from the common idea of making the reader or listener believe through the facts. Instead, it was a matter of faith, which the orator or writer demonstrated with his own witness of faith and a good life.

The same idea of Christian persuasion through faith, rather than the rhetorical notion of proof in facts, may also be found in Valla’s \textit{Elegantiarum linguae latinae}

\begin{footnotesize}

Where Valla stated that he only wanted to show the disposition of his mind one may see how he had rejected the idea that religious matters were subject to factual proof.


\textsuperscript{27} Lorch, "Epicureanism in Valla’s \textit{On Pleasure}," 92-93.
\end{footnotesize}
Valla defined a different kind of rhetorical persuasion in matters of religion, where the probable truth of Ciceronian dialogue did not suffice for the task at hand. The great grammarian also attempted to alter epistemology or method with his *Repastinatio dialecticae et philosophiae libri tres* (1438-1439), which was later reworked twice and has come to be known as the *Dialecticae disputationes* (1444). It showed that philosophy could be understood as rhetoric.

Over the years, Valla's *On the Freedom of the Will* (1438-1439) has probably been the humanist's most controversial work. It was, however, of a piece with the *On Pleasure and Dialecticae disputationes*. Two other books by Valla were very important. One was the *Annotations on the New Testament* (*Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum*). Valla did two redactions (c. 1442-1443 and 1453-1457). Though not published, copies were circulated among a select group of people. The other was the *On the Donation of Constantine* (c. 1440). Both of these demonstrated the excellent use of his new rhetoric of faith in religious matters and both undermined the medieval Church.

These early Italian humanists prepared the way for the Reformation in two broad ways. First, they all created an atmosphere of doubt with their revival of skeptical ideas. Second, Valla also provided a new rhetoric of faith as a solution to the problem of doubt in religious or spiritual matters.

---


In Cicero and Quintilian, persuasion entailed causing the listener to believe (*facere fidem*) with proof.


30 See Bentley, *Holy Writ*, 34-35 & Lorch, "Lorenzo Valla," 346-347 on the likely, dates of these books. According to Bentley, it was Erasmus who changed Valla's title *Collatio novi testamenti*, to the *Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum* when he published the second redaction in 1505. Valla saw his work as a comparison or collation of texts rather than as notes. The second redaction is often called the Annotations, however, in order to distinguish between them.