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Gerhild Scholz Williams. *Ways of Knowing in Early Modern Germany: Johannes Praetorius as a Witness to His Time.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. ix + 251 pp. $94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5551-0.

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The Construction of Knowledge and the Spirit of the Age

The casual reader might be tempted to think that the two halves of the title of Gerhild Scholz Williams's most recent book conflict with each other: the first uses some of the linguistic signals of the most recent scholarship in history of knowledge, while the second employs the language of a more traditional sort of intellectual history. This latter sort of history was written before the linguistic turn, and in it scholars discussed matters under the rubric of "the spirit of the age." Williams draws on the first of these two elements for the subject of her analysis and on the second for the style of her presentation. Rather than providing a critical thematic analysis of the work of Johannes Praetorius, Williams presents him via a sort of running annotation of or commentary on his works. Thus we see him dealing both as perceiver and transmitter of information in an age that Williams stresses was characterized by "the simultaneity of things not simultaneous" (p. 2), an expression that refers to the turmoil of social, political, economic, and cultural transformations occurring in the seventeenth century. The result is a highly accessible book that provides an intellectually satisfying and often entertaining read.

The book is comprised of four longish essays, each presenting a facet of the work of Johannes Praetorius (1630-80), a polymath author of works aimed at bringing a compendium of contemporary knowledge and news to the interested mass audience. In his case "the simultaneity of things not simultaneous" refers to the curious panoply in his writing of matters often considered epistemologically incompatible today: popular superstition and Lutheran theology, popular knowledge and scientific discovery, antiquarianism and history, chronicle and narrative. Williams concentrates on several of Praetorius's most famous works to show the ways in which his books reflected an intellectual world of "both … and," and how they sought to transmit this attitude to his readership. In chapter 1, Williams treats Praetorius's *Anthropodemus Plutonic* (1666), a study of the different peoples of the world that includes a number of "wondrous" figures and whose details were drawn from contemporary anthropological texts, elements of Paracelsian theory, and apocalyptic warnings. Chapter 2 focuses the reader's gaze on the wondrous within German lands in its discussion of Praetorius's *Daemonologia Rubinzalii* (1662) and *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung* (1668); here Williams provides a description of the thinker's "dual mapping," in which geographical description of the topological and visible features of the landscapes discussed are intertwined with an occult geography of the places and circumstances where the Giant Rübezahl and the Harz witches are said to be active. In many ways, Praetorius's rather prosaic engagement with the topics of witches and demonology provides a demonstration of Stuart Clark's argument that supernatural beings were a necessary element in making functional the natural world as it was constructed by early modern thinkers. Chapter 3 attends to a matter of great significance to early modern readers: the appearance of (especially celestial) wonders and prodigies. Here Williams considers Praetorius's cosmetology and chronicles of the 1660s. Praetorius drew selectively on Matthaeus Merian's important *Theatrum Europaeum* (1633ff), but commented upon its information (along with other news he received in printed and oral form) in his own specific way; he seems to have been particularly occupied both with issues of practical science and medicine that he could assume his audience was heavily interested in, as well as political events (such as the emergence of Shabbetai Tzvi, the Fire of London, and the advance of the Turks) that jived with the apocalyptic mood of his age. Nonetheless, the extreme brevity of many of his accounts appears to move his works toward greater neutrality in presentation, feeding the desires of his audience for quick news upon which they would themselves reflect. In chapter 4, Scholz discusses two of Praetorius's tracts on women as a way of examining his understanding of class (and his resulting sharp

social critique which divides "virgins" and "maids" decisively as regarded their lives and expectations) and of motherhood (in which we learn, in an entertaining way, both how much women resent their marriages and the real details behind their pregnancies). While these works connect with some themes of the books discussed earlier (such as wondrous births and the silliness of fashion), Praetorius appears to have taken a much more biting, funnier tone in his writings on women. A conclusion rounding out our perspective on Praetorius's worldview ends the volume.

A number of interesting perspectives emerge from the volume, particularly the ways in which the experience of the Thirty Years' War seems both ubiquitous and often uncommented upon. A second pleasant discovery is the apparently voracious quality of Praetorius's intellect, which unites disparate matters in a way often incomprehensible for the modern reader, and is able to discriminate between different kinds and qualities of information. In light of Praetorius's selectivity, it would have been interesting to read a bit more about the social and intellectual background of the sort of reader that constituted his audience, but the task of treating early modern reception is a notoriously difficult one. If any criticism of Williams's excellent analysis is to be noted, it might be a neglect of theological matters that leads to a slightly flat notion of what constitutes the "strict Lutheranism" Williams claims for her protagonist. This tendency might be caused or at least enhanced by the series in which the book is included, which points its authors toward the intersection of literary and scientific matters as opposed to the interaction of theology and natural philosophy. Still, a closer discussion of the relationship of much of Praetorius's knowledge to the biblical and confessional standards of the period (particularly his discussion of matters such as crypto-Calvinism in light of his treatment of transformative miracles, and his apparent continued credence of apocryphal biblical traditions like the idea that only one of Noah's sons survived the Flood) would have cast a further relevant and useful light upon this author. As for Williams's theme of the age's intellectual turmoil, I would have liked more discussion of Praetorius's uses of acronyms (referenced frequently in his discussion of giants and witches) as a technique for mastering knowledge in light of late medieval and early modern discussions of *memoria*; one implicit point of the book seems to be the rapid expansion of knowledge at a rate that exploded the bounds of human memory or even comprehension–despite the valiant efforts of authors like Praetorius.

The great strength of this study lies in its exposition of an author who scholarly readers of all stripes are likely to ignore–not least because it is hard for us to know what to do with the specific blend of materials in Praetorius's writing. As Scholz correctly notes, "Praetorius's ways of telling … challenge the modern reader's persistence" (p. 219). Moreover, Williams succeeds admirably in fulfilling both halves of her title: she effectively discusses his "ways of knowing" without prejudice as to their truth-content in light of modern science, while all the time giving us a sense of the intellectual world of the age in which he wrote. While reading one often feels as if one is listening to an erudite plenary speaker at a conference who uses her narrative skills to bring a distant, hard-to-grasp figure closer to her listeners. Williams's approach, akin to the "dual mapping" she describes Praetorius using, accomplishes this arduous task and succeeds in her goal of awakening our interest for a writer we might otherwise dismiss. One hopes that similar techniques might be used to elucidate some of the hundreds of similarly puzzling and fatiguing books that survive from early modern libraries. Williams's book, in short, is highly recommended reading as a contribution that allows us to attempt to understand Praetorius in his context without having to "make sense" of him except on his own terms.

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