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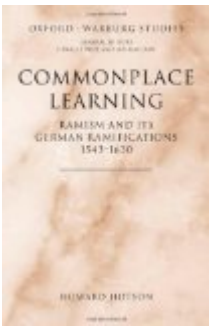

Howard Hotson. *Commonplace Learning: Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543-1630.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xvi + 333 pp. $135.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-817430-1.

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The dichotomous tables that owe their origin to Pierre de la Ramée, or Ramus, are familiar to anyone who works in the intellectual history of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Ramus became (in)famous for his attack on Aristotle and for his method of analyzing texts from any discipline by defining and then dividing topics into dichotomies with increasing levels of detail. After Ramus died in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, his disciples set out to rewrite the entire curriculum taught in the schools and universities of Protestant Europe. Ramism proved particularly congenial to those within the Reformed tradition, dominating instruction in Reformed academies on the Continent and becoming popular with Puritans in both England and the New World.

Despite Ramism's influence, few works present its goals, methodology, and impact in a clear fashion. Historians of philosophy generally dismiss Ramism as intellectually lightweight and not worth taking seriously as a contribution to their discipline. Readers of Walter Ong's classic work on Ramism will attest that it is both quirky and frustrating, due to Ong's own ambivalent attitude toward Ramus.[1] Perry Miller's older study, *The New England Mind* (1939) provides an objective summary of Ramism, but the book offers little information on the development of Ramism on the Continent. More recently, scholars working on the history of education and the humanist curriculum have produced a growing number of articles that deepen our understanding of Ramus and his impact. Therefore, the time is ripe for a book in English that updates the older view of Ramism in light of current research. Hotson's book incorporates this research and further strives to highlight Ramism's significant place within the German academic world.

Commonplace Learning actually addresses two different topics, which are connected through the work of the Herborn professor and encyclopedist Johann Heinrich Alsted. The first half of the book traces the development of Ramism over three intellectual generations, focusing on its popularity in the Reformed schools and gymnasia of northwestern Germany. Expanding on a point first made in his biography of Alsted, Hotson ar-

gues that Ramism's defining characteristic was its ability to produce educated individuals quickly, efficiently, and cheaply.[3] This feature made it attractive to the small imperial counties and Hanseatic cities that needed an educated cadre to fill positions in government, church, and school. Ramism found its first German home in and around Westphalia, the birthplace of the earlier reforms to dialectic instruction popularized by Rudolph Agricola and Jean Sturm, Ramus's teacher. The first generation of German Ramists helped establish Ramism in schools and gymnasia in this region. From there, Ramism gradually spread upward to the level of academies and universities. By the last decade of the sixteenth century, a second generation of post-Ramist authors were combining Ramist method with Aristotelian concepts, originally those transmitted through the textbooks of Philipp Melanchthon but also drawn from the works of Aristotelian philosophers such as Jacopo Zabarella--hence their reputation as Philippo-Ramists or Semi-Ramists. Ramism also acquired a confessional tone, since many Ramist texts reflected the Reformed perspective of their authors. Hotson looks particularly at the career and works of Bartholomaeus Keckermann, who undertook the most thorough effort to apply Ramist method to the university curriculum.

With Keckermann, Hotson makes the transition to the second focus of the book, the development of the encyclopedic tradition. A student of Keckermann's, Alsted oversaw publication of Keckermann's philosophical works and adapted his teacher's methods of organization and analysis in his own encyclopedic publications. Hotson describes Alsted as a third-generation post-Ramist, continuing his teacher's efforts to combine Ramist organization with Aristotelian content, but going beyond Keckermann by including disciplines and approaches outside of Aristotle, including (to cite the example of physics that Hotson gives) Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, the Pentateuch, rabbinic and cabbalistic interpretations, and alchemical writings. The incorporation of more information from competing philosophical systems brought out irreconcilable contradictions within disciplines and created increasing problems of organization as new material had to be fit into the older schema. The Thirty Years' War brought an abrupt end not just to Alsted's efforts to organize this vast amount of material but to the German Ramist tradition as a whole. The closure (or weakening) of the Reformed academies and universities in Germany led to a dispersion of Ramism as teachers and students moved to the Netherlands, England, and eastern and southeastern Europe.

Hotson's most valuable insight is his emphasis on the evolving nature of Ramism. Instead of defining it as a specific set of ideas, he describes Ramism as a pedagogical approach that developed over the course of three generations. The common concern of all German Ramists was to develop a pedagogy that was efficient, effective, affordable, and useful. This concern bound them together despite differences in content, emphasis, or organization. Indeed, Hotson's description of German Ramism makes it sound somewhat like an early modern version of "no child left behind." However, Hotson distinguishes Ramism from such modern efforts of pedagogical reform in one important way. Hotson claims that rather than "teaching to the test," later Ramist textbooks used eclectic approaches that indirectly encouraged students to use their own judgment to reconcile divergent positions. In turn, this approach contributed to the undermining of older philosophical certainties and prepared the way for the new philosophical outlook of the later seventeenth century.

Hotson makes a compelling case for the significance of social, economic, and political factors that contributed to Ramism's prominent place in the educational institutions of northwestern Germany. However, his focus on this region leads him to neglect other parts of German-speaking Europe. By the early seventeenth century, Ramism

was as firmly entrenched in Basel and Bern as it was in Herborn, and an explicit comparison between German and Swiss developments might have strengthened his argument. His speculation about the larger relationship between Ramist pedagogy and the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century also deserves further investigation. Because he ends his study in 1630, he cannot make those connections any more explicit, but he promises that his next book will examine the Ramist tradition outside of Germany after 1620. In *Commonplace Learning*, however, he makes clear why students, teachers, merchant oligarchs, and territorial princes would support Ramist principles of pedagogical innovation and curricular reform. For those wanting to understand both the attraction of those dichotomous tables and the historical circumstances that contributed to their popularity, this book is an excellent place to start.

Notes

[1]. Walter J. Ong, S. J., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

[2]. Howard Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted 1588-1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 16-20.