Marc Hanvelt. ***The Politics of Eloquence: David Hume's Polite Rhetoric.***
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Hume Studies Volume 38, Number 1 (2012), 119-122.

Hume Studies
Volume 38, Number 1, 2012, pp. 119–122

Book Reviews

Marc Hanvelt. *The Politics of Eloquence: David Hume's Polite Rhetoric*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 217. ISBN 978-1-4426-4379-6, Cloth, $50.00. ISBN 978-1-4426-9695-2, E-book, $49.95.

Hanvelt's analysis in *The Politics of Eloquence* can be summarized as follows: Hume sees faction and fanaticism as significant problems. While rhetoric can contribute to these problems, neither is necessarily caused by rhetoric. In fact, rhetoric of a certain kind can cure these ills, specifically a rhetoric characterized by accurate and just reasoning, politeness, and an idealized ancient eloquence comprising Aristotelian, Ciceronian, and Demosthenic elements. Hanvelt's three major aims are to demonstrate that Hume's conception of mind commits him to assigning rhetoric an important role in political life, synthesize Hume's writings on eloquence in order to describe his conception of rhetoric, and show that Hume's conception of rhetoric continues to be relevant today (7).

In the introduction Hanvelt describes and defends his objects of study and method. He chooses to limit "rhetoric" to "political oratory," based on Hume's writings and interests, as well as on his (Hanvelt's) interest in addressing a significant question: what ought to be the role of rhetoric in democratic politics? Hanvelt proposes to analyze Hume's *Treatise*, both *Enquiries*, a number of essays, and the *History of England* (8). Although Hanvelt asserts that his objective is more descriptive than critical—he intends to define Hume's outlook on politics rather

than assess "the accuracy or even the defensibility of Hume's vision" (9)—in the concluding chapter he makes a case that Hume's analysis is relevant to contemporary democratic politics.

Hanvelt's chapter 1 describes Hume's political project: how to address fanatics and fanaticism. Here and elsewhere (for example on pages 82 and 98), Hanvelt notes that Hume's discussions of rhetoric are motivated by his concerns about religious and political enthusiasm (19). The question is what kind of rhetoric could promote "public zeal" (142) rather than religious and political zealotry. In chapters 2 and 3, Hanvelt begins identifying Hume's view of this kind of rhetoric. Hanvelt observes that Hume describes rhetoric as a neutral tool that can be used to either contribute to the common good or create faction, "because his philosophy of mind does not allow for a distinction in kind between different feelings of belief" (40). Hanvelt analyzes how Hume characterizes good rhetoric, as opposed to merely effective rhetoric (8–9). Good rhetoric features politeness, comprising manners and decorum, sociability, and "a generalist approach to learning" (59).

In chapters 4 and 5, Hanvelt compares Hume's views on rhetoric with those of other Scots (mainly Adam Smith and George Campbell) and the ancients (mainly Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Cicero). In chapter 6, Hanvelt turns to the *History of England* to show what Hume considers to be zealous, hypocritical rhetoric, poor reasoning, rhetoric thin on emotion, and rhetoric thin on reasoning. Hume praises Thomas Wentworth, first Earl of Strafford's speech in his own defense at his impeachment for being directed at the public interest, for using reasoning "grounded in the experimental method" and vivid imagery, and for "engaging his accusers in conversation" by posing questions and respecting "the judgment of his individual audience members" (141). Hanvelt concludes that Hume's view of the public sphere involves opposing interests engaged in combat by means of good rhetoric that can avoid creating faction and fanaticism.

In chapter 7, Hanvelt argues that Hume's "account of rhetoric and the sentiment-based conception of judgment that underlies it are highly relevant to contemporary theorists interested in improving the quality of democratic practices" (145). He focuses on how Hume's conception of high rhetoric addresses Isaiah Berlin's position that "values are irreducibly plural and often incommensurable" (145). The core problem is how citizens can "defend their views forcefully and passionately in an effort to persuade others of their merits without resorting to manipulation, without fomenting the factionalism and fanaticism that can be so destructive to a democratic society" (147). Hume's account of high rhetoric suggests one way of doing so.

My main criticism of this work concerns what is left out rather than what is included. Hanvelt writes that he excludes writing and focuses on political oratory

because in "Of Eloquence" Hume writes about oratory (7). The exclusion is questionable, both because using "rhetoric" to refer to oral or written style was commonplace, and because writing is an important medium for political discussion. Limiting rhetoric to political oratory also excludes from consideration other significant rhetorical practices. For example, conversation is a mode of political discussion among ordinary citizens, but Hanvelt treats it tangentially when he discusses conversation only insofar as the topic enables him to explain Hume's concept of politeness with respect to political oratory. Likewise, criticism is relevant to the question of what ought to be the role of rhetoric in democratic politics. Cultivating taste and practicing criticism disciplines emotional experiences and displays in the service of social harmony and political stability. This point is left out of Hanvelt's analysis.

Expanding "rhetoric" to include modes of discourse other than oratory would make it possible to analyze more than just Hume's commentary on speeches in the *History of England* in order to explain his view of good rhetoric. The popularity of Hume's essays is a sign of Hume's own rhetorical facility, and the topics of the essays as well as their style coach readers in what Hume thought were appropriate matter and manner of conversation. Indeed, the popularity of history in eighteenth-century Britain, Hume's facility in that genre, and the fact that Adam Smith discussed historical writing in his lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres make it tempting to suggest that even history ought to fall within the realm of rhetoric and be used to analyze how Hume's own rhetorical practices enact his view of good rhetoric.

The book's main limitation, however, is the thin intellectual context provided for Hume's thinking about rhetoric and its role in politics. Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke are important intellectual predecessors, for example, as are continental authors such as DuBos, Buffier, and Rollin. Readers of Hanvelt's book will seek critical reflection upon the issues of rhetoric's role in politics and what "good" rhetoric is. Insofar as critical reflection upon how Hume addresses these issues involves making comparative judgments with how others address them, and engaging scholarship on views of rhetoric, reason, emotion, and politics in Hume's time and throughout the rhetorical tradition, critical reflection remains outside the scope of Hanvelt's project.

Nonetheless, the book provides important methodological reminders for readers new to the history of rhetoric and its relationship to politics. Hanvelt analyzes Hume's oeuvre broadly rather than focusing only, or primarily, on the *Treatise*. As a result, Hanvelt can lay claim to a more complete, accurate, and insightful account of Hume's position on the role of rhetoric in democratic politics. Discussing Hume's analysis of political speeches in the *History of England* helps us understand Hume's vision of high and low rhetoric. And Hanvelt not only

reminds us that Hume's writing on rhetoric was motivated less by theoretical elegance than by significant political problems, but he also demonstrates Hume's relevance to our thinking about the relation between rhetoric and politics even today.

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