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**THE METADISCOURSE OF
RENAISSANCE HUMANISM**

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Introduction

This book is dedicated to the topic of metadiscourse in the works of the Renaissance humanists. The word ‘metadiscourse’ is not commonly used among historians or literary scholars, but most of us have an intuitive understanding of its meaning. This is how the Oxford English Dictionary defines it:

Any discourse which is concerned with or alludes to other discourses. Also: a general or universal discourse which sets the parameters within which other discourses are employed.

In this volume, metadiscourse is understood as a reflective discourse about discourse, particularly as theorization on a work or genre. As such, it is a discourse that sets the parameters for the production and interpretation of texts. This kind of reflective discourse can be found both in paratextual material – prefaces, dedicatory letters, commentary, etc. – and embedded in texts themselves. Metadiscourse necessarily reflects the shared values, priorities, and conventions of a cultural community. It can be used to construct a cultural identity and also to reinforce, promote, and disseminate a cultural matrix.

This definition of metadiscourse may be new to those familiar with its use in applied linguistics and discourse analysis, where the term has a different meaning. There, it is used mainly to describe how authors interact with readers in the text, guide them through it, and help them structure and interpret the material (‘signposting’).¹ Although metadiscourse in this sense can be – and has been – studied in historical texts as well, this is not how we choose to approach the concept in the present volume.²

Our use of the term ‘metadiscourse’ originates in the research project “Cultural Encounter as a Precondition of European Identity,” run by Aarhus University and the Danish Academy in Rome. The project formulates its main hypothesis around this concept. Its aim is to investigate the cultural encounter that took place as Renaissance humanism was received in Northern Europe from the end of the fifteenth century onwards. This encounter was, among other things, a confrontation with the classical tradition as it had been transformed by Italian fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanism and later modified by Northern humanism. It was a

¹ Vande Kopple 1985; Hyland and Tse 2004; Hyland 2005.

² For studies on this kind of metadiscourse in historical texts, see: Boggel 2009; Taavitsainen 2008; Taavitsainen and Hiltunen 2012; Domínguez-Rodríguez and Rodríguez-Álvarez 2015. But the word is used in various ways. For an approach closer to the one adopted in this book, see e.g. Hoek 1985.

confluence that touched almost all aspects of life and that influenced the cultural identity of Northern Europe, forming habits that are still active. The “Cultural Encounter” project examines how and in which forms the culture of Renaissance Italy migrated north. Rather than identifying external factors such as the political, geopolitical or socioeconomic, the project focuses on metadiscourse as an internal driver of the spread of humanism.³

Reflection and theorization in the writings of Renaissance humanists is not a new subject in the field of Renaissance studies, but it is underexplored. Recently, Patrick Baker has studied humanistic biographies in order to determine which features and characteristics the humanists themselves considered to be essential to their movement.⁴ Baker makes the case that the humanists’ self-perception and self-conceptualization should be central to our understanding of the movement, which too often is influenced by modern concerns.⁵ Like Baker, the “Cultural Encounter” project studies the success of the humanist movement by focusing on contemporary humanist accounts. Unlike previous studies, it compares instances of metadiscourse in various genres and contexts.

The present volume is the fruit of a workshop organized at the Danish Academy in Rome in January 2016. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the various guises taken by metadiscourse in the writings of Renaissance humanists. Thus the case studies in this volume explore metadiscourse on translation, letter writing, Biblical criticism, poetry, and Latin grammar and composition. In addition, the papers examine the role played by metadiscourse in the dissemination of Renaissance humanism, and how the authors communicate key elements of the humanistic cultural programme.

Marianne Pade’s case study explores a body of metatexts on Renaissance translations, taking as its point of departure Lorenzo Valla’s 1452 translation of Thucydides’ *Historiae*. Pade discusses Valla’s preface in the context of contemporary translation theory.

The Latin language plays a central role in the humanist movement, and reflections on its correct use are the subject of Camilla Horster’s paper. Comparing theory with practice, Horster concentrates on grammatical

³ The project, which runs from 2015 to 2018, is funded by the Carlsberg Foundation and the Danish Council for Independent Research. For a description of the project, see <http://www.acdan.it/projekter/ce/index.html>.

⁴ Baker 2015.

⁵ Baker 2015, 3–6. Baker mentions Trinkaus 1960 and two chapters in McManamon 1989 as positive exceptions. For a similar approach in the field of humanist translation theory, see Baldassarri 2003.

discussions of *quia* and its use in the neo-Latin writings of fifteenth-century Italian authors.

Annet den Haan discusses Valla's reflections on Biblical criticism, proposing that these should be read in the context of contemporary humanist Biblical scholarship at the court of Nicholas V, rather than in that of his more programmatic works on the relative merits of rhetoric and Latin eloquence compared to scholastic learning.

From Antiquity, writers have been taught to structure their discourses, whether oral or in written form, with the help of *loci communes*. Marc van der Poel examines how Erasmus adapted ancient practice to new needs in his *Encomium matrimonii*.

In Johann Ramminger's contribution, the casus is letter writing. The paper examines the reception of Italian epistolary theory in the context of German *Frühhumanismus* in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, addressing how the classical models, filtered through Italian humanism, came to be articulated in the evolving humanist practice and theory of letter writing north of the Alps.

Trine Arlund Hass's paper examines metadiscourse on bucolic genre decorum in the *Bucolica* of the Danish writer, Erasmus Lætus. On a central position in his work, Lætus's narrator renegotiates the conventional poetic ambition of striving towards heroic epic. By comparing Lætus's renegotiation with a similar passage in Baptista Mantuanus' *Adolescentia*, Hass discusses how metadiscourse on genre can be read as a vehicle for allegory.

These explorations of metadiscourse allow us to draw several tentative conclusions. First, metadiscourse appears in various forms and contexts, ranging from metadisciplinary texts (such as Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae* in HORSTER and Rudolph Agricola's *De inventione dialectica* in VAN DER POEL) to metadiscursive comments accompanying propositional content inside a text (as in RAMMINGER). In between, we find paratextual material (letters and treatises) that comments both on particular texts and on the genre to which they belong (PADE, DEN HAAN). Metadiscourse can also be ingeniously embedded inside a literary work, to be fully appreciated only by readers thoroughly familiar with the genre, as in Erasmus Lætus's case (HASS). Metadiscursive comments range in nature from the reasons and justifications given by authors for engaging in the practice they describe to practical instructions as to how to engage in it, and these comments problematize the gap between theory and practice (esp. HORSTER, RAMMINGER, VAN DER POEL).

Second, the case studies show – perhaps not surprisingly – a preoccupation with classical examples. Antiquity is held up as a gold standard, resulting in a preoccupation with correct Latin (HORSTER) and an earnest

desire to conform to the conventions of the classical genres (RAMMINGER, VAN DER POEL, HASS) – although the humanist authors discussed in this volume occasionally disagree as to the best classical models to follow. But the reception of Antiquity is not always direct. Humanists interpret their classical models through mediators such as Late Antique commentaries (HASS), and they themselves can, in their turn, become examples for their peers and successors. Thus Italian humanism laid down norms for Northerners who wished to identify with the movement (RAMMINGER, HASS).

Furthermore, the reception of the classical matrix took place in more than one way: humanists debated norms among themselves (PADE, DEN HAAN), and they could choose not to adopt earlier humanist transformations of ancient practice, opting to turn directly to the classics instead (as in the case of Erasmus and Agricola, VAN DER POEL).

Systematic discussion of the impact of metadiscourse on actual practice is beyond the scope of this book, but the contributions show that it did shape the dissemination of humanism in at least three ways. Metadiscourse plays a role in the construction of a common humanist identity, and it is also an indicator of familiarity with a cultural matrix – as long as a practice is perceived as ‘foreign,’ explanation is necessary (HORSTER, RAMMINGER). Third, discussions of ancient literary genres that were at first glimpse academic could become part of broader ideological debates. Erasmus’s *Encomium* was read as an endorsement of Lutheranism (VAN DER POEL); Mantuanus’s poetical reflections are also comments on a conflict within the Carmelite order (HASS); and humanist translation theory is appropriated by Luther in his *Sendbrieff von Dolmetschen* and is used as a propaganda text for his Reformation (PADE). Thus the contributions in this volume – necessarily limited in scope – illustrate the potential of humanist metadiscourse as a field of study, and will hopefully provide a starting-point for more research on the subject.

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