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Peter Ramus and a Shift of Logical Cultures

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to our present day where logicians, both formal and informal, are usually taken to be personages not known to draw attention to themselves either in the academic or societal setting, Petrus Ramus (aka Pierre de la Ramée) is quite notable. He began his academic career in Paris in 1536 only to find that his criticism of Aristotelian scholasticism lead to two of his works, *Aristotelicae animadversions* and *Dialecticae Institutiones* being prohibited. He himself was prohibited from teaching logic and rhetoric. His teaching situation improved when he left the University of Paris and was appointed Regius Professor at the College de France (1551). However, he converted from Catholicism and began a Huguenot in 1561, a move that only compounded his difficulties. He was ultimately decapitated in connection with the St. Bartholomew Day Massacres on August 26, 1572.1

Biographies of Ramus and historical entries in philosophy texts generally highlight his anti-Aristotelianism, his anti-scholasticism, his pedagogic and curricular revisionism, his humanistic orientation, and his Renaissance character and approach. Often these epithets are left without much explanation about the precise nature of Ramus’ ideas and efforts. The aim of this paper is to fill in some of the details for these rather abstract claims by examining sections of one of his most important works, the *Dialectica*. This work is central to understanding the pivotal role Ramus played in changing the understanding and role of logic and argumentation in his time.

Although the name of Ramus might not be mentioned much today among logicians of either the formal or informal sort, intellectual interest in him is on the rise,2 and his historical importance for philosophy and modern thought in general is hard to overestimate. Works attributed to him and to Omer Talon, a collaborator, existed in close to eight hundred editions between 1543 and 1650. His *Dialectica*, which serves as the

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focus of this paper, appeared in approximately 250 editions;\(^3\) even the great English poet and writer, John Milton, produced a Latin edition of Ramus.\(^4\) Another remarkable feature of this work is that Ramus first published a French version of the work in 1555 before the Latin version which then became the subject of so many subsequent editions. This version, *La Dialectique*,\(^5\) whose contents diverge some from those of the Latin version, was consistent with Ramus’ divergence from the established academic world, its narrow traditional interests, and its isolation from the emerging culture of the times. A close study of the structural layout of the work and an examination of some of its contents will help to situate Ramus against the background of earlier medieval and ancient logic, showing the resemblances and dissimilarities between his approach and those of earlier thinkers.

Ramus becomes a focus of several ways in which culture and cultural shifts affect argument. The shift from Medieval to Renaissance periods, the shift from an Aristotelian to a post-Scholastic approach to logic, the shift from logic as deductive to dialectical, the shift from logic’s employment about abstract ontological/theological issues to its application to applied multi-disciplinary topics, the shift from the style of medieval writers and their Latin to that of ancient writers of both classical prose and poetry, the shift from a single unalterable text to one subject to hefty revisions, and even the shift from Latin as the only language of scholarly philosophizing—all these and others make Ramus a paradigm figure in the discussion of “Argument Cultures.”

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In viewing Ramus’ achievements one must situate him against the historical background of his writings. The change in logic with which he has always been associated—such that people could be referred to as Ramists or anti-Ramists—has always been linked to a kind of opposition with the Aristotelian logic that had dominated through the Middle Ages. Of course, the type of logic taught did not persist through the whole period without change. Initially the logic was based on the translation of the few works of the *Organon* (*Categories, On Interpretation*) rendered into Latin by Boethius (480-525 A.D.) along with the Porphyrian Isagoge (introduction) that became very important for the medieval problem of universals. These were the works of Boethius on logic that came to constitute the so-called *Logica vetus* (*Old Logic*) which extended up to the time of Abelard (1079-1142). When the remaining texts of the Aristotelian corpus became widely accessible and the *Analytics* came to be utilized in Western thinking, the so-called *Logica nova* (*New Logic*) was born. Although one cannot make a clean cut between the parts of Aristotle’s logic, much less dichotomize them, one can at least claim with some certitude that Ramus was not interested in the formal side of Aristotle’s logical enterprise. That is to say, he did not write a commentary on the *Prior* or *Posterior Analytics* of Aristotle. However, one can say that his interest in rhetoric inclined him to focus on those aspects of Aristotle that would be linked to the less formal side of Aristotle’s logical enterprise. The very title of his famous work *La Dialectique (Dialecticae duo libri/Dialectica)* as well as the

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\(^4\) Joannis Miltoni Angli, *Artis Logicae Plenior Institutio ad Petri Rami Methodum concinnata*, Londoni, 1672

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*Dialecticae Institutiones* point to this. Now, this must be said with some qualification. Anyone perusing either of these will find forms of reasoning that appear very much like syllogisms—a sight familiar to those reading the *Analytics*. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Ramus does not employ letters as variables or place-holders as Aristotle did in his *Analytics*. Furthermore, one finds the very things admitted as syllogisms would only be recognized as such by Aristotle if the Peripatetic were using the term ‘syllogism’ homonymously.

However, before pursuing that matter, it might be helpful to locate how exactly Ramus stood vis-à-vis Aristotle. One of his basic criticisms about the Old Logic is that it simply did not provide an inventive or practical way for the mind. An interesting passage regarding this occurs within Ramus’ *Aristotelicae Animadversiones*. After making some critical remarks about Aristotle he writes:

But we have been delaying too long in the entrance way, let us go in, let us look at the categories: do they contain any power of invention (discovery) and some doctrine that is both true and useful? I here see no art, no utility of any art whatsoever, but a most uncomfortable confusion of all arts; what, you say, can there be any wiser and more useful counsel to men than to partition all of nature by means of genera, species, and differences gradually and orderly into the ten highest ranks—just what Aristotle did in the categories?\(^\text{6}\) (p. 14, l. 38)

Of course, the question is bitter with sarcasm. Later, he offers another image, a militaristic and strategic one, bearing on the *Categories* of Aristotle. He writes,

> don’t you see the very camps fortified and enclosed by bulwarks from one side and another (they call these the ante-predicaments and the post-predicaments)? I see, I said, but camps hostile to dialectical truth and bulwarks inimical to it […]\(^\text{7}\)

The ante-predicaments and the post-predicaments that Ramus is referring to are basically those elements treated by Aristotle in the three chapters of the *Categories* preceding and the five chapters following respectively his elaboration of the individual ten categories (chapters 4–9), i.e., substance, quality, quantity, relation, etc. This division is a long-standing one in the Aristotelian tradition (although not in Aristotle himself) and can be found in scholastic textbooks into the 20th century.\(^\text{8}\) Among the ante-predicaments one finds the division of univocal, equivocal, and denominative terms, the distinction of complexes and simples, the presence-in-a-subject and predictability-of-a-subject, etc. Among the post-predicaments are the properties that are said of the categories proper themselves, e.g., opposition, priority, simultaneity, etc. However, all of this, as is clear from the quotations above are not yielding the type of logical tool to increase knowledge. One could infer, of course, from the very title of his work (*Dialectica*) that Ramus’

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\(^{6}\) P. 14, line 38 ff.: “At in vestibulo nimium diu moramur, introeamus, categories intueamur: an inveniendi vim, doctrinamque aliquam et veram, et utilem continent? Nullam artem hic video: nullam artis cuiusquam utilitatem, sed confusionem atrium omnium incommodissimam, quid (inques) potestne sapientius esse consilium et hominibus utilius, quam omnem rerum naturam per genera, species, differentias gradatim, atque ordinatim descriptas in decem egregias acies (quod in categoriis fecit Aristoteles) partiri?”

\(^{7}\) P. 14, line 15—p. 15. Line 3: “Non vides veluti propugnaculis hinc et inde (antepraedicamenta, et postpraedicament nominant)castra ipsa septa, vallataque? Video, inquam, sed castra hostilia et inimica propugnacula dialecticae veritati […]

\(^{8}\) See, for instance, J. Gredt’s, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae* (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), pp. 147-153 and pp. 185-188.
approach was arising more from the *Topics* of Aristotle where the development of *topoi* (loci or places of argument) is given.

But, as one commentator has noted, it is not always clear to what extent the ravings against Aristotle are decidedly against the Peripatetic or to what extent they are determined by the polemical environment in which Ramus finds himself and by the opponents with whom he is confronted. The program of pedagogical reform in which Ramus was engaged and which seems to have directed the arc of his whole career was a major factor in his writing. He came to be associated with the Royal College that itself had been established to break with the very long and burdensome program of the University. A logic that would be useful in the training, not of clerics but of administrators to work outside of the confines of Church and university seemed to be just what the King wanted and the government needed.

Nonetheless, Ramus was well-recognized as a critique of Aristotle. This was so widely recognized that later Francis Bacon would warn that though he too was also anti-Aristotelian, confusion with Ramus was to be avoided since he himself was not,

in league with that recent rebel […] Peter Ramus. I have nothing in common with that hide-out of ignorance, that pestilent bookworm, that begetter of handy manuals. Any facts that he gets hold of and begins to squeeze in the rack of his summary method soon lose their truth, which oozes or skips away, leaving him to garner only dry and barren trifles. Aquinas, Scotus, and their followers out of their unrealities created a varied world; Ramus out of the real world made a desert. Though that was the character of the man he has the effrontery to prate of human utilities. I rate him below the sophists.9

There are passages in Ramus where the criticism of Aristotle himself runs very deep. Consider, for instance, his *Dialecticarum Scholarum* Bk. IV, c. 1 he criticizes Aristotle for not following his own rules by failing to define what a category is, either generally or specifically.10 In c. 6 he notes that substance is not defined,11 and that it is no excuse to claim that it cannot be defined because it is one of the highest kinds since other such terms as genus, species, and difference are defined. But it is in c.13 (*De usu Categoriarum*) that we find what is probably the core of the criticism that Ramus is making of Aristotle: he does not treat of the more particularly relevant items and he does not provide examples.12 Below we will see how this gets supplied in detailed by Ramus.

However, one can find in other examples raised by Ramus a greater positive rapprochement with the teaching of Aristotle. For instance, in the *Dialecticae*
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_Institutiones_ one finds page after page of syllogisms of the sort that would be found in other writers.\(^{13}\) Consider, for instance,

\[
\text{ Whatever participates in reason is a dialectician } \\
\text{ Every man participates in reason } \\
\text{ Every man is a dialectician}^{14}
\]

Yet, a few pages later he provides examples that would seem to deviate considerably from Aristotle’s logic:

\[
\text{ Junius gave birth to liberty for his country by his blood and that of his family } \\
\text{ Brutus was Junius } \\
\text{ Therefore, Brutus gave birth to liberty for his country by his blood and that of his family}^{15}
\]

Or again,

\[
\text{ Agesilaus was not painted by Apelles } \\
\text{ Alexander was painted by Apelles } \\
\text{ Therefore Alexander is not Agesilaus}^{16}
\]

What is striking about these syllogisms, in addition to the classical references which will be remarked upon below, is that they both involve the use of identity and they both are dealing with individuals in the term positions rather than universals. As most will recognize, Aristotle did not use individuals (apart from one instance in the _Prior Analytics_ I, c.33—Miccalus and Aristomenos) for exemplifying either his valid or his invalid moods of the syllogism. Later logic books would have to struggle to make individual terms fit into the Aristotelian system. In such syllogisms as

\[
\text{ All men are mortal } \\
\text{ Socrates is a man } \\
\text{ Socrates is mortal}
\]

The consensus developed that Socrates was to be taken as a class unto himself and thus the propositions in which he occurs should be taken to be "A" (universal affirmative) propositions.

\(^{13}\) Consider Peter of Spain, _Summule Logicales_, Tractatus 4.  
\(^{14}\) _Quidvis particeps rationis est dialecticus_  
_Omnis homo est particeps rationis_  
_Omnis igitur homo est dialecticus_ (p. 21, l. 19)  
\(^{15}\) _Iunius suo et suorum sanguine patriae libertatem peperit_  
_Brutus erat Iunius_  
_Brutus igitur suo et suorum sanguine patriae libertatem peperit_  
\(^{16}\) _Agesilaus non est pictus ab Apelle_  
_Alexander est pictus ab Apelle_  
_Non est igitur Alexander Agesilaus_.

However, another feature of interest in the case of these examples is that one begins to see the content has undergone a shift. The difference of the last two syllogisms from the prior two involves a paradigm shift from the preoccupation with standard medieval abstract philosophical issues. The later two examples display historical references to actual figures in antiquity—more than the just the usual "Sortes" (= Socrates) that one finds in such writers as Ockham and others. Further, they are not just articulating hackneyed philosophical truths as does the one given immediately above—a type found in such an author as Peter of Spain.

Nonetheless, one can see that there is reason to take seriously the position that Ramus was not rejecting the older tradition entirely. One can see this, first of all, from some remarks made by Ramus that indicate his objections were directed more toward the scholastics and their traditionalist methods that showed no creativity or ability to break the inherited moulds of reading Aristotle. Second, the extremely systematic approach found in his *Dialectica duo libri* seems structurally to emulate the methodological architectonic of the scholastics.

3. RAMUS’ APPROACH EXEMPLIFIED

One aspect of this “architectonic” is seen in the schematic layouts that one finds underpinning his work and the sequential exposition of topics and subdivisions in his *Dialectica*. Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate this in a twofold fashion: first, by looking at some diagrammatic schemes that interrelate the various chapters of his treatise and second, by examining his consideration of what we might today call “indicator terms” in the inferences.

The diagrams in the appendices contain three reproductions of the division trees that govern his layout. These are found in the introductory material provided in the 1672 Cambridge Latin edition by Guilielmus Amesius under the heading *Resolution of P. Ramus’ Dialectica into Tables*. The second diagram illustrates the division of chapters close to the one dealing with the topic of Similars (c.21/20) examined below and provides a final divisions in one of the furthest branch of the tree diagram. A table number is included in the box of “Comparatives” which is superordinate to the treatment of the similars. There are three aspects here that need to be noted. First of all, the trees of division go back to antiquity, beyond the tree or Porphyry who was an authoritative person for the medievals to Plato who employed these divisions in his later dialogues, the so-called Method of Collection and Division. Second, there is a dichotomizing tendency that appears here. This need not be a restriction in the organizing activity itself or even a limitation imposed by Ramus himself. However, there does seem to be, among some of his followers, the belief that such dichotomizing constituted a basic part of his approach. Third, one can see here that there are strong pedagogic benefits in organizing things in this way. Of course, the use of trees in contemporary logic, whether it be the more formal usage of the truth-functional sort for symbolic logic or the informal usage in analyzing argument structures, continues to be profitable. Regarding at least this point, then, one can say that Ramus contributed a practical dimension to a logic that had become abstract and aloof. Still, one can always overdo a good thing. The diagram in Appendix 3, dealing
with the life of Cicero, shows how Ramus thought this method could even be employed on the life of a particular historical figure.

Ramus’ logic became so widely influential largely because it seemed easily applicable to various areas of investigation. Indeed, even the varied and many editions of his *Dialectica* testify to this; many of them appeared with commentaries that invoked examples arising from a number of different disciplines. A fascinating example can be found in the early 1574 London edition of Rolando Scotus whose Latin title racket reads (in English): *The two books of Dialectic of the P. Ramus, Royal Professor, illustrated by examples of all the arts and sciences, non only the divine ones, but also the mystical, mathematical, physical, medical, legal, poetical, and rhetorical*. A dialectic (or logic) with this sort of reputation obviously will have great appeal across the wide spectrum of educated people, and shatters the “schoolman” image that apparently had shackled logic and its applications in earlier times. As noted earlier, it has been claimed that the position of “royal professor,” which Ramus occupied, was created—along with the royal college—to break free of the limitations which the medieval tradition had imposed on the educational system. One is tempted today to draw an analogy with the numerous applied areas of logic and the institutional changes of that time to attempts, arising today, at the “mobilization of knowledge” and the “entrepreneurial orientation” in higher education.

Perhaps a useful illustration of this application can be found in the Scotus edition in chapter two (three in the Amesius edition) where Ramus is dealing with “On efficient, procreating and conserving cause.” Ramus himself uses only three citations from antiquity to illustrate his points, one from Ovid (*de Remedio Amoris*, 1.135), one from Virgil, (*Georgics* 2.490) and one from Virgil, (*Aeneid* 4.365). Scotus however, expands this to four pages of text, filled first with a quotation from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, then with a (dubious?) text of Pythagoras, then with a mathematical generation of a line from a point (more reliably Pythagorean), then with some remarks on efficient causes that preserve health (taken from Galen), then with a reference to Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* (? , bk I, c.9) concerning the role of the sun as an efficient cause, then with mention of contract as the cause of legal obligation, then with a reference to Isocrates bearing on the causal role of the kingly office, then with the causality exerted by the laws, citing Demosthenes, then the causal role that memory plays, citing Cicero; then a citation about divine causality from Porphry’s (lost) *On the History of Philosophy*. The examples continue. One does see in this huge variety of authors, examples, and disciplines cited that the spirit of Ramus has opened up logic in a way that was not found in earlier texts.

A close examination of at least part of a single chapter in Ramus will make more accessible a number of features mentioned thus far. First, it will show how there has really been a shift in argument culture in terms of the move from the medieval scholastic and theological modes of thinking to the Renaissance outlook. While the text remains in Latin, it is easy to see from a single chapter the contrast of a literary style resonant of the old schoolman Latin to both the elegant prose of a chief Latin stylist like Cicero and the crafted verse of such poets as Ovid and Vergil. Also to be noted as quite remarkable, is the absence of citations from the Church Fathers such as Augustine or Jerome—a practice that had been widespread in the Middle Ages. Second, one can see that Ramus

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17 *P. Rami Regii Professoris Dialecticae Libri Duo. Exemplis omnium atriun et scientiarum illustrati, non solum Divinis, sed etiam mysticis, Mathematicis, Phisicis, Medicis, Iuridicis, Poeticis et Oratoriiis.*

18 Again, the earlier version of this work was the French edition *La Dialectique.*
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retains a certain scholastic rigor in his presentation of material, but he simplifies the material by presenting it through definitions and divisions, frequently governed by a dichotomizing tendency that became almost sacrosanct among some of his followers. Third, his presentation seems to be void of any metaphysical or theological issues or examples that preoccupied the philosophizing of the earlier period. His logic is meant to reach a broad audience and enable them to have a practical tool for all sorts of topics. To illustrate these points, consider the following chapter from what became his most influential work, the Dialectic. The consideration focuses on Book I, Chapter XXI, On Similars. The complete text of the chapter is provided in Appendix 4.

I have inserted into the text certain things left out by Ramus. Often his references to works are not terribly precise. He refers to a specific book of a work but not a line; he sometimes leaves out the author whose work he is using. Often these are easy to supplement, especially in the case of authors. He seems especially fond of Cicero, Vergil, and Ovid. The French edition does not contain all of the examples below, it actually has some alternatives as well as translations of the ancients (mostly by Ronsard).19 Locating the lines has proved more challenging, but where possible they have been added. Many of the texts are less familiar to most academics today than they would have been in Ramus’ age, the contexts of the citations are unknown, and thus the illustrations might, at first, seem less helpful to us. However, close attention to the words and phrases themselves does make the point of the examples understandable. I have added numbers after each term to aid in making the corresponding connection to the text below.

Up to this point the comparison was in quantity. Now follows comparison in quality by which the things compared are said to be such (quales), namely, similar or dissimilar. Those are similar whose quality is the same. A similitude is said to be a proportion and similar things are proportional. The indicator terms (notae) of a similitude which are included under a single term are: similar (similes – 1), image (effigies – 2), after the fashion of (more – 3), likeness (instar – 4), as (tamquam – 5), just as (sicut – 6). Then there is the negation of dissimilitude: scarcely otherwise (haud secus – 7), not otherwise (non aliter – 8).

Aeneid (Virgil)1.588: “Similar (1) to a god with respect to mouth and shoulders.”
Phillipic (Cicero): “Although Servius Sulpicius was able to leave no clearer monument than the image (2) of his morals, virtue, constancy, piety, genius—a son.”
Trist 1 (Ovid): “For either no one, or only he who brought those wounds to me, is able to remove them in the fashion of (3) Achilles.”
In Piso (Cicero): “That one day was indeed to me the likeness of (4) immortality, the day I returned to the fatherland.”
In Verrine (Cicero): “But suddenly at that moment, as (5) by means of a cup of Circes, he became a boar from a man.”
For Pompey (Cicero): “And so all indeed now in these places see Cn. Pompey as (6) someone not sent from the city but fallen from heaven.”
Aeneid 3.236: “Scarcely other than (7) as ordered, they did.”
Phormio (Terence): “I am, and was, in no way otherwise (8) than he.”

Although the passage continues, this much probably suffices to provide some insight into how Ramus’ work proceeds. This chapter occurs somewhat after the midpoint of the first book. The chapters preceding and following are much the same. Ramus produces definitions, sets up divisions and classifications, and provides exemplifications.

19 Pp. 85-86
What is striking in his work is the considerable precision in the formulation of definitions, the balancing of the divisions, and the sequencing of the examples. It is clear from the above that, not only does Ramus illustrate each of the indicator terms (*notae*), but also does so in the exact sequence in which they are first listed. This shows a rigor beyond that of many current textbooks for critical thinking. Ramus sees the definitions, divisions, and terms as tools to be effective in any area of inquiry or any discipline. There is really little doubt that it was this spirit that enable his admirers to carry through with his plan in their many and varied editions of his work in different areas of study and application.

4. CONCLUSION

Ramus had an enormous impact on the development of philosophy and pedagogy in the Modern period. The impact was due not simply to his powerful personality but also to the events of his life as well, of course, as his own writings. His efforts to force a transition from the confined, inherited culture of the traditional university, from a rigid “Aristotelianism” to a more flexible philosophy of times, from abstract to more applied logical and methodological approaches mark him as someone who saw the study of reasoning as open to a new diversity. The popularity of his approach may also have been enhanced by his own daring use of the vernacular in his first edition of *Dialectica*, alongside his Renaissance expertise in classical Latin. Many English versions and commentaries appeared in subsequent decades and centuries. Even his own conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism may have contributed to the popularity he enjoyed in Protestant lands and among Protestant thinkers. He can be seen as a philosopher par excellence of the topic of this conference—a philosopher of argument spanning cultures and of the many cultures of argument.