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Ramus and Reform

University and Church at the End of the Renaissance

James Veazie Skalnik

Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies Volume LX
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Peter Ramus (1515–1572) was a difficult man. His colleagues in the University of Paris found him unbearable; one of the more mild-mannered among them called him “either rabid and demented or else perverse and criminal.” Scholars abroad, in London, Heidelberg, Geneva, Tübingen, and elsewhere felt the same way. Catholics labeled him a heretic, and Protestants a rebel. Even the king of France got into the act, branding him ignorant, impudent, arrogant, and a liar. Ramus’s ability to annoy people was remarkable, and what is more remarkable is that it has survived him by more than four centuries. Modern scholars, reviewing “the more undesirable features of [his] personality, which were many,” echo the sentiments of the sixteenth century.

What annoyed Ramus’s contemporaries the most were his persistent, rash assaults on the most esteemed and cherished foundations of religion and learning in France. He was “always ready to upset what is best ordered,” Theodore Beza complained, and his life was in fact a series of rebellions. These began on a grand scale in 1543 with Ramus’s root and branch attack on Aristotle’s logic, the basic framework of theology and the arts in the sixteenth century. Condemned by the king for

1. Even his name presents difficulties. Born Pierre de la Ramée, he adopted a Latinized form of the name, Petrus Ramus, for his scholarly work. When that work was translated into English, the translator kept the Latin form of his surname but rendered his first name as “Peter.” English-speaking scholars have generally referred to him as “Peter Ramus.”


his temerity and prohibited from teaching philosophy in the future, Ramus turned his attention to the other great thinkers of the ancient world, proclaiming that Cicero and Quintilian knew nothing of rhetoric, Galen and Euclid were ignorant of proper method, and in general that the heroes of the Renaissance had feet of clay. Eventually he even challenged the worth of the common coin of the religious and scholarly world, the Latin language itself. No wonder his detractors thought him perverse and demented.

Ramus was no less tenacious in his attacks on the institutions of religion and scholarship. In 1557, he wrote and published a report which blasted the University of Paris for its structure, its teaching, and its personnel—his fellow professors. In the early 1560s, he attacked the Catholic Church in the same areas. By the mid-1560s, he was in court to oppose the royal professors of France for their recruitment and teaching practices, despite having been one of their number since 1551. And after his conversion to the Reform in the late 1560s, he lashed out at the doctrine and governance of his new church. Given his history, this last assault does not come as a great surprise. What is perhaps surprising is that Ramus persisted in his challenges to all these institutions despite the growing penalties for his actions, which included the loss of his position in the University and even years of exile from France. Only his death in the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572 brought a halt to his outrageous slanders. It is no wonder that he appeared “rabid” to those around him. But what made Ramus so contentious?

For modern researchers, the most bothersome thing about him is not his contentious character, but the fact that he became something of an authority himself by virtue of his academic brainchild, Ramist method. This oversimplified, unsubtle, and mechanical system of the arts and sciences, of which he was so enormously proud, was intended to supplant the works of the ancients he so strenuously attacked. It presents a major problem in the intellectual history of his era, because despite its defects—and they were many—Ramist method took sixteenth-century Europe by storm and earned him his royal professorship. The success of Ramism created resentment among his peers and puzzles historians today. What made Ramism so popular?

The two most ambitious studies to date explain both Ramus’s contentiousness and the popularity of Ramism as results of a fundamental change in the way Europeans looked at and thought about the world, “a discontinuity in the episteme of
western culture” which took place in the sixteenth century. In both, Ramus is the 
erald of the new worldview, and Ramism is its embodiment. The two works are 
nonetheless fundamentally opposed, because they do not describe the same shift in 
the Western Weltanschauung. One sees the march of progress with Ramus in the 
vanguard. The other sees decadence, and Ramism as its major symptom. 

Ramus is a hero in Charles Waddington’s 1855 work, Ramus: Sa vie, ses écrits et 
ses opinions, which despite its age remains the best biography of Ramus yet pro-
duced. Waddington used nearly all of the relevant sources in composing his clear 
and dramatic narrative, and as narrative it is unsurpassed. As an explanation of the 
place of Ramus and Ramism in history, it has serious problems. To Waddington, 
Ramus lived and wrote as he did because he was the prophet of a new age. He was 
the standard-bearer of Renaissance light against medieval darkness, of unfettered 
reason against bigoted authority, and of free conscience against Catholic constraint. 
Ramus stood alone, cloaked in virtue and light, while the forces of evil and ignorance 
raged against him from every side. A champion of truth and liberty, he died a 
martyr for the cause of humanity. 

His virtue lay not in what he created but in what he cast aside. Ramism freed 
the mind of Europe by breaking the bonds of superstition, ancient authority, and 
dogmatic intolerance. That Ramus had not found anything very interesting to put in 
their places was of no great moment. To him belonged the credit for reason’s emanci-
pation, and left to itself it would soon enough build an edifice far more glorious than 
that which Ramus had torn down. 

Not many modern readers will find Waddington’s explanation satisfactory. His 
blend of romantic hero worship and Enlightenment faith in progress and reason 

7. The phrase is from Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences 
Foucault believed that the European mind had undergone such a fundamental change, but he dated that 
change to “roughly half-way through the seventeenth century” and placed Ramus firmly on the earlier 
side of the divide (ibid., 35). In his Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason 
Plon, 1971), 39, Foucault chooses the year 1656 as a landmark date for the commencement of the “Age 
of Reason.” 

reprint, Dubuque, Iowa: Brown Reprint Library, n.d.). This is an expanded French version of Wadding-
ton’s doctoral dissertation, De Petri Rami vita, scriptis, philosophia, scripsit C. Waddington-Kastus, philoso-
phiae professor, in Parisiis literarum facultate ad doctoris gradum promovendus (Paris: Joubert, 1848). 
Waddington also published a brief reply to a critic of his work “Charpentier et Ramus,” letter to the 
testantisme français 30 (1881): 286–87, and a short article on “Les panégyristes de la Saint-Barthélemy à 
diverses époques: Le théologien Genébrard, archevêque d’Aix: Jacques Charpentier, doyen du Collège de 
France; L’annaliste de l’Illustre Orbandale (Chalon-sur-Saône),” Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Pro-
seems more quaint than convincing.\textsuperscript{9} The reader who will make allowances for his naively Whiggish tone will nevertheless find much of value in his work.

Walter Ong is not such a reader. Ong, the author of \textit{Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue} (1958), saw Waddington's point of view as evidence of a "persecution complex" and even of "psychopathic identification" with Ramus.\textsuperscript{10} Ong's language is extreme, but it mirrors the difference between his interpretation and Waddington's. Waddington put Ramus on a pedestal, while Ong did not care much for Ramus or Ramism and could not imagine why anyone in his right mind would.\textsuperscript{11}

Ong paints a portrait, not of a hero, but of a particularly philistine schoolteacher, whose career was dedicated to turning the intellectual heritage of the West

\textsuperscript{9} One modern expert summarizes the problem with Waddington's interpretation by pointing out that it was "inspired by and to a certain extent biased by a passionate attachment to the martyred hero"; Gilbert, review of Ong, \textit{Ramus, Method and the Decay}, 269. When Waddington's book first appeared, critics noticed the same feature, but for the most part they considered it a strength rather than a weakness. Thus the anonymous reviewer in \textit{Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme français} 4 (1855): 167-72, asked: "Quelle plume était mieux qualifiée pour écrire la vie de ce dernier de nos anciens professeurs publics protestants, que la plume doublément filiale du seul protestant qui professe aujourd'hui la philosophie dans l'université de France?" Similarly, Christian Bartholoméss, in his review in \textit{Revue chrétienne} 3 (1856): 89–106, recommends Waddington to whoever loves "les grands causes, l'humanité, la liberté de pensée, la religion, la méditation philosophique, le progrès moral et la dignité de l'âme." Critics praised Waddington's book because it was a moralizing tract. Bartholoméss in particular was happy to think of Ramus as a sort of Protestant saint, and of Waddington's book as an exercise in hagiography.

Even at the time, however, Waddington encountered some opposition to his view. Bartholoméss thought that he might have exaggerated the value of Ramus's work, and Emile Saisset was sure of it: "La Réforme de Ramus," \textit{Précurseurs et disciples de Descartes}, 2d ed. (Paris: Librairie Académique/Didier, 1862), 61–79, "La Réforme de Ramus." The harshest critic by far was the mathematician Joseph Bertrand, who wrote a long letter to the \textit{Revue des deux mondes} 44 (1881): 286–322: "Jacques Charpentier: Est-il l'assassin de Ramus?" to challenge Waddington's interpretation. He was especially interested in defending Jacques Charpentier against Waddington's accusation that he had engineered the murder of Ramus, but in the course of doing so he portrayed Ramus as a poor teacher, an opponent of academic freedom, and on the whole a thoroughly bad apple. None of Waddington's critics, however, challenged his vision of the Renaissance as a fundamental shift in the European mind.

\textsuperscript{10} Walter J. Ong, \textit{Ramus: method and the decay of dialogue: from the art of discourse to the art of reason} (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1958), 19. This work was published simultaneously with Walter Jackson Ong, \textit{Ramus and Talon inventory: a short-title inventory of the published works of Peter Ramus (1515–1572) and of Omer Talon (ca. 1510–1562) in their original and in their variously altered forms with related material} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Oxford University Press, 1958), a magnificent example of careful scholarship which displays the fruits of Ong's labors in libraries all over the United States and Europe, locating, collating, and describing hundreds of editions of Ramus's works. Ong's articles on Ramus and Ramism are too numerous to be listed here; see the bibliography at the end of this study. It may be worth mentioning that, to the layman, at least, Waddington's work shows no particular signs of mental illness.

\textsuperscript{11} The different attitudes of the two authors are signaled by the epigrams they had printed on the title pages of their works. Waddington quoted Voltaire: "La Ramée, bon philosophe dans un temps où l'on ne pouvait guère en compter que trois, homme vertueux dans un siècle de crimes, homme aimable dans la société [!] et même, si l'on veut, bel esprit." Ong instead quoted Justus Lipsius's unflattering admonition: "You will never be a great man if you think that Ramus was a great man."
into the sort of pabulum adolescent schoolboys could swallow. Ramus sacrificed accuracy, subtlety, and depth to the exigencies of teaching and writing for little boys. As a result his famous logical method, and a fortiori all the works he produced with its aid, were no more than exercises in shallowness and vulgarization.

Such an evaluation presents problems, of course. If Ramus’s approach to learning was so superficial, why did it enjoy such a vogue, even among educated men? Ong argued that Ramus owed its popularity to a revolution in the European mind brought on by the rise of the printed word. The Ramist method of analysis by dichotomy and diagrams was, Ong claimed, peculiarly well suited to the printed page. Together, Ramism and the printing press appealed mightily to a world which was beginning to think of knowledge in visual and spatial terms—as a thing—rather than as an oral and almost spiritual communication between teacher and disciple—in Ong’s term, as a “wisdom.” Ramus and the printing press helped change learning into a standardized, mass-produced commodity, “congenial to persons who habitually deal with reality in terms of accounting rather than in terms of meditation or wisdom.”

Ong’s scholarly and meticulous study of Ramist logic and method, based on a solid knowledge of the history of logic and an exhaustive acquaintance with Ramus’s works, will remain a standard work on the subject. Only a very brave or a very foolhardy author would attempt to match his massive erudition and detailed analysis. Still, his thesis has not attracted the loyalty of many historians.


13. Ong’s work was greeted with praise all around, but his thesis came under attack almost immediately. Thus, Gilbert’s review questioned Ong’s explanations, which Wilhelm Risse, Deutsche Literaturzeitung 81 (1960): cols. 7–11, thought were more a product of Ong’s preconceptions than of the evidence. Even D. P. Walker, who approved of Ong’s effort to place Ramism in the broadest possible perspective, acknowledged that the results were “provisional and incomplete”; French Studies 14 (1960): 355–57. Pierre Mesnard, Bibliothèque d’humanisme et renaissance 21 (1959), went further than any other critic by flatly denying that the print revolution caused a “decay of dialogue”, 568–76. In her study of the impact of printing on Europe, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein gave qualified support to the main features of Ong’s thesis: “This line of argument dovetails neatly with Walter Ong’s earlier studies of Ramism and print culture—perhaps too neatly in the judgment of some medieval scholars who see evidence in medieval manuscripts of those diagrammatic features which Ong reserves for the printed page.” Still, “even if all parts of the argument are not deemed equally acceptable, the basic point still seems valid”; Elizabeth Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 67.
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