

Book Reviews

Boerhaave's Orations, translated with introductions and notes by E. Kegel-Brinkgreve and A. M. Luyendijk-Elshout, Leiden, E. J. Brill for the Sir Thomas Browne Institute, 1983, 8vo, pp. vii, 374, Dfl.96.00.

Fahrenheit's letters to Leibniz and Boerhaave, edited, translated, and annotated by Pieter van der Star, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1983, 8vo, pp. x, 195, [no price stated] (paperback).

Boerhaave cast a huge shadow on the medical life of eighteenth-century Europe. In his three simultaneous professorships at Leiden he trained three generations of physicians. Students notoriously vote with their feet: and, in their hundreds they willingly trod the path to Boerhaave's door. Yet we know so little about what they came for, what they found, and what they took away with them from Boerhaave's teaching. Huge as his influence was, Boerhaave is still a shadow to us.

This splendid volume of translations of Boerhaave's academic orations gets us a significant bit nearer to understanding what it was that was so compelling in what all those students were hearing from Boerhaave's lips. And hearing is the appropriate word. For these were orations: formal, structured rhetorical pieces given on grand occasions. I suspect that other historians of medicine, like me, are aware of some of the recent fascinating studies on the history of rhetoric, yet when it comes to looking at "texts" in our own area, we find it tempting to concentrate on the "contents" of the work in question, to the neglect of the structure. As the editors of the present work rightly insist, this is to miss the point. For the structure according to which a past speaker or author was speaking or writing was more than just a convenient or conventional way of stringing his thoughts together into a presentable form. Instead, a given formal structure largely controlled *what* could be said, as well as *how*; it determined what could *not* be said, too; and it gave the occasion for saying anything at all! Without an adequate appreciation of the structure of past "texts" we simply do not know what kind of things they are: our interpretations of their "contents" is inevitably vitiated by our ignorance of the form.

In this case, however, the editors have made the oration format their chief concern, and in doing so their work is reminiscent of Kenneth Myrick's pioneering analysis of Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of poesie*, written half a century ago. By elucidating the structure of the orations the editors have been able to show what Boerhaave was doing at every point in these orations, and they have given very useful technical summaries of each oration as well. What seemed to be the public ramblings of a great man are thus suddenly shown to have had point and bite: what is more, we are enabled to appreciate something of the effect these orations would have had on their intended audience.

When, equipped with the technique of reading the orations, we come to their "contents", this too is very interesting, and the editors make a particularly good case for the way in which Boerhaave over the years put forward a different, maturing, reading of his favoured authors: Bacon, Hippocrates, Newton, and Sydenham. This gives us a purchase on the uniquely Boerhaavian synthesis of the competing philosophies of the seventeenth century, the synthesis which his students took back with them to the corners of Europe. The editors are to be congratulated on a job well done. I have only one reservation about the translation and commentary: every page has Boerhaave speaking of "science", "research", "physics", and "facts". The Latin terms in question are indeed difficult to translate, but I feel that this particular choice of English terms gives us a Boerhaave who is far too modern.

In the second work under review Boerhaave features as the recipient of a stream of unsolicited letters from Fahrenheit, over the period 1718 to 1729. These are printed in Dutch and English translation, and have been used by the editor to reconstruct the way in which Fahrenheit made his thermometers and sought a reliable way of calibrating them. These letters are now in Leningrad, so it is valuable to have this edition of them. Boerhaave used some of the information from Fahrenheit in his own lectures on chemistry, though from the one-sided nature of the correspondence (as presented here) it is impossible to tell what (if any) medical implications all this held for Boerhaave.

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