

Gerhild Scholz Williams. *Ways of Knowing in Early Modern Germany: Johannes Praetorius as a Witness to His Time.*

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Johannes Praetorius (1630–80) was one of those vastly prolific early modern authors whose wide range of subject matter and gargantuan tomes tend to defy the abilities of modern specialists to grasp them fully. A popular author from Leipzig whose proximity to the university provided him a library, but who eked out a living by his pen alone, he wrote on a variety of subjects, including the world's peoples, wonders of all kinds, witches, demonology, celestial signs, current events, and contemporary women. Gerhild Scholz Williams's learned and elegantly written study provides a beautifully coherent analysis of Praetorius's thought and of the seventeenth-century intellectual culture that informed it.

Williams characterizes Praetorius as a popularizer more than an innovator, and perhaps as a polyhistor, one who tackles numerous topics and cites numerous authors, including Athanasius Kircher, Conrad Gessner, Georg Agricola, and Paracelsus, among many others. Her discussion of the *Anthropodemus plutonic* (1668–73), Praetorius's two-volume, thousand-plus-page tract on wondrous human and human-like peoples, brings home again something crucial for the study of early modern history: that early modern categories often differ radically from modern ones. Praetorius's entries in this compendious discussion of wondrous peoples include mountain spirits, subterranean and sea people, spirits of the air and wind, giants, stone people, wood people, werewolves, satyrs, dwarfs, and lifelike images of constructed people in books. His most important criterion for accepting or rejecting a particular kind of wondrous person or person-like being as real is, Williams emphasizes, experience.

Praetorius's writings on the giant Rübzahl and on witches prompted him to describe as well contemporary topographies, geographies, and peoples. He describes the giant who lives in the Reisenberge Mountains that separate Silesia from Bohemia and the witches who live in the Harz Mountains. The giant is a highly ambiguous creature, not associated with demons, but subject to fits of anger with the ability to cause bad weather, while also helpful to the hardworking mountain people. Witches, in contrast, are unambiguously associated with Satan and demons. Williams shows that rather than revealing a separation between occult and scientific mentalities, Praetorius combines natural philosophical and occult "ways of knowing." She also points to his diverse rhetorical strategies including the extensive use of acrostics.

In a chapter on Praetorius's annual chronicles (*Zodiacus Mercurialis*, 1666, 1667, 1668), his tract on comets (*Adunatus Cometologus*, 1665), and his collection of tracts on wonders (*Wunder-Chronik*, 1678), Williams explores the way in which this author utilizes — and himself contributes to — a relatively new form of communication, the printed news. Praetorius used newspapers as well as postmen extensively for obtaining novel information which he parlayed into his own news accounts. While he treated some news stories in detail (such as those concerning the Jewish messiah Sabbatai Sevi in the mid 1660s), often his news stories were unadorned factual accounts, reports lacking any surrounding context. Williams here investigates the emergence of objective news: that is, the essentially rhetorical stance of unbiased news reporting as she also explores other developments such as plagiarism and the crediting of sources.

Praetorius wrote a number of tracts on women — *Dulc-Amarus Ancillariolus*, on unmarried urban women, explores the gulf between the damsel and the lower-status maid. Praetorius is a misogynist whose work is filled with sexual innuendo, but who also provides a vivid portrait (through male eyes) of the life of early modern women. He defends the maid, underscoring her hard life. The *Apocalypsis Cybeles* is a comic, gossipy tract about the six-week lying-in period after birth in which the husband and other men were excluded from the bedchamber and women visited and gossiped (in Praetorius's tract they are overheard by male eavesdroppers).

Praetorius, who wrote to sell books, uses a multitude of heterogeneous sources and puts forth his own opinions as well. He embraces "the wondrous and monstrous, the scientific and the superstitious, the sexual and the social" (219). Williams's skillful analysis of a broad selection of his writings provides numerous examples of his diverse "ways of knowing" as it also provides fascinating insight into the lives of early modern men and women in the area of Leipzig. This exemplary study includes extensive, carefully-composed footnotes after each chapter and a bibliography.

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