

This article was downloaded by: [CDL Journals Account]

On: 8 November 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 785022369]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Rhetoric Society Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t716100769>

A Review of: "Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University", by William Clark.

Paul G. Cook ^a

^a University of South Carolina,

Online Publication Date: 01 June 2008

To cite this Article Cook, Paul G.(2008)'A Review of: "Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University", by William Clark.',Rhetoric Society Quarterly,38:3,352 — 355

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02773940802171908

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02773940802171908>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Book Review

Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University, by William Clark. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 662 pp.

Since its publication, William Clark's massive tome *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* has attracted attention from quite a few critics and commentators in several academic disciplines. It has also garnered some recognition from the popular press, which, as "academic" books go, is no small feat. The cynic in me views this as the public's continuing (if annoyingly inconsistent) fascination with academia, its archaic codes and rituals, the bizarre disciplinary idiosyncrasies, and the leftover remnants of a life from another time that few understand but that most people generally assume someone else does. This fickle fascination, by the way, is precisely what this book is all about: the ineffable, quasi-religious, often magical force Clark identifies as "academic charisma."

Clark's book traces the circulation and function of academic charisma through a Foucauldian micro-engagement with the material practices and artifacts of the early research university. Like any good historical microanalysis of power relations, the book serves as a reminder that successive historical practices do not just seamlessly meld into one another, and that academic rituals as familiar and commonsensical as the peer-reviewed journal article or as self-evident and banal as the graduate seminar (as opposed to the undergraduate lecture hall) often developed despite powerful forces of opposition.

Academic Charisma does two things with equal parts capaciousness and precision: it (1) traces the development of the modern research university from its humble (and really quite strange) beginnings in late-medieval/early-modern Europe and (2) offers a compelling account of how the academy was radically transformed by the shift from the oral to the written, or what Clark variously refers to as the "triumph of the eye over the ear" (29) and the "hegemony of the visual and legible" (339). I use the term "account" here advisedly and in a double-sense; on the one hand, it suggests one of the book's most readily noticeable strengths: Clark never shies away from giving the reader the benefit of his astoundingly comprehensive knowledge of archival data—a task he devotes himself to with the patience and perseverance of the most scrutinizing tax auditor.

On the other hand, “account” underscores the narrative elements that inhere in both the style and overall organization of the book, making it at times a wry, genuinely humorous read. As Clark is quick to note in the first few pages, *Academic Charisma* is comprised of what are essentially a series of “stories” about the academy, individual accounts concerning everything from “The Lecture Catalogue” (Chapter 2) to “The Lecture and the Disputation” (Chapter 3) and “The Research Seminar” (Chapter 5) to the role that that new-fangled notion of “originality” would come to play in both the doctoral dissertation (Chapter 6) and in the professor’s production of paperwork (Chapter 7)—what we have come to know as the modern “professorial ethos of publish or perish” (92). These narrative strands come together quite nicely under the book’s overarching conceptual/narrative framework, namely, the shift from a traditional, juridico-ecclesiastical orientation to a world dominated by the modern politico-economic regime, with its “radical rationalizers” (20), its fetish for original research and publication, and its fervent belief in salvation through bureaucracy.

To move the plot, so to speak, Clark singles out three major character-categories that together form what he calls the book’s “ethnographic empirical base” (21), which are not to be confused with the book’s recurring cast of actual historical individuals (e.g., Schiller, Hegel, Kant, Oken, Wolff, and many others) who appear and reappear at different points throughout the narrative. At one extreme are the traditionalists, the English at Oxford and Cambridge (“Oxbridge”); at the other end of the spectrum are the Jesuits, whose role is to “play the arch-rationalizers” of the book (26). In the *via media* are the predominately Protestant “Germanies,” the “amorphous sociocultural space in Central Europe in which the German language held sway” (26), and the geographic region with which the book is obviously most concerned. Although Clark remarks on the first page that “German academia thus provides the focus, to which English and Jesuit academics will offer interesting points of contrast” (3), I am not the first reviewer to point out that, really, the vast bulk of *Academic Charisma* is overwhelmingly concerned with the rise of the German research university, to which Clark refers, often in the same breath, as the “vehicle for spreading European science and academics globally” and the “final and most insidious phase of European colonialism” (29).

The stage set, the book’s “grand narrative” (353) unfolds against the colorful backdrop of early modern and modern European academies, focusing primarily on the period from about 1770 to the 1830s. To the extent that it is concerned with the materials of the academy—such quotidian trappings of academic miscellany as paperwork, lecture catalogues, and the construction

of chairs and tables (both wooden and paper, literal and figurative)—*Academic Charisma* is also concerned with showing how academic charisma became the counterpart to techno-bureaucratic rationalization. Among the many “themes” that appear and re-appear throughout the book, of particular interest to scholars of rhetoric may be the recurring emphasis on the transition from academia as a primarily oral space of conversation and disputation to one nearly obsessed with literacy in all its various forms and guises. This is abundantly apparent in Clark’s chronicling of the rise of writing and its proliferation and eventual installation as the central technology in the everyday functioning of the academy.

Clark finds writing everywhere in the early university, from the most banal—for example, letters of application and reference or magisterial visitation reports (an early incarnation of the classroom observation)—to the utterly sublime work of academic specialization: the book. From the ashes of the medieval disputation—actually an ancient holdover from Roman declamatory practices—came the hegemony of the written over the oral, and with it, the rise of the written exam for undergraduates; the seminar paper for graduate students; and, especially, the doctoral dissertation and the centrality of original, written research.

Structurally, the book is broken up into two parts: first, in chapters 2 through 8, Clark explores such written, legible artifacts as lecture and library catalogues, the writing that went on in research seminars, and the rise of written examinations and elaborate grading rituals from oral disputation exercises. This section also examines the role played by rationalization and bureaucracy in the rise of the research university, and each chapter takes on another seemingly mundane aspect of the academy, only to mine it for its explanatory potential in the complex narrative Clark constructs. So, we have a chapter on “The Research Seminar,” followed by a chapter devoted to that rather odd Johnny-come-lately, “The Doctor of Philosophy.”

In the second part, chapters 9 through 11, Clark shows how the formidable forces of techno-bureaucratic rationalization and the market were met with resistance by certain traditional holdovers; that is, in some areas of the academy, vestiges of the traditional, oral academic culture inhere to this day, often in rather strange ways (e.g., the persistent influence of word-of-mouth in hiring practices, or Stephen North’s notion of lore and its significance to the teaching of writing). Thus, in part 2, we have a chapter devoted to “Academic Babble” and another to “Academic Commodification.” The larger set-up—the transition from oral to written, from a juridico-ecclesiastical mindset to a thoroughly politico-economic society—provides the general analytical framework for the book, although Clark is

careful throughout to let his three major players (the English, the Jesuits, and the Germans) perform most of the explanatory roles on the narrative stage on which he sets them.

This book can do some productive work for scholars in rhetoric and composition studies, particularly those interested in the intellectual and material history of the discipline. Although histories of composition studies or of rhetoric in early American colleges and universities typically begin somewhere in the nineteenth century, this book renders visible the fact that writing, broadly conceived, has been responsible for much of what we now consider commonplace in the university, whether we are talking about written reports to the dean, the glossy lecture catalogues universities use as thinly-veiled advertisements, or the doctoral dissertations we use to keep score and mark time. Of course, as Clark deftly illustrates, the increased emphasis on the written and the legible is part-and-parcel to the development of universities as techno-bureaucratic assemblages deeply immersed in the circulation of capital. However, what I am suggesting here, if you will pardon a rather clichéd turn of phrase, is the extent to which an historical perspective like the one Clark offers is indispensable to understanding not only where we are, but also where we might be going.

Paul G. Cook
University of South Carolina