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Rezensionen

Rafał Toczko: *Crimen Obicere: Forensic Rhetoric and Augustine's anti-Donatist Correspondence*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 120, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2020, ISBN 978-3-525-56722-7, 232 pp., € 59,99.

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The discovery of 31 previously unknown letters of Augustine by Johannes Divjak in 1981 caused Peter Brown to consult Augustine's *corpus epistularum* to reconsider his famous biography of Augustine, in which the letters were formerly underestimated. The 318 preserved letters of Augustine cover the whole period of his intellectual activity, giving us a sample of the development of his thinking. Since they constitute a specific genre—intended for immediate communication, having a public character and being rhetorically structured—, they provide interesting comparative material for study of his systematic writings. Reflecting the variety of his commitments and thinking, an analysis of the content of the *epistulae* is necessary to comprehensively understand Augustine. The free online tool *Scrinium Augustini: The World of Augustine's Letters* (<http://www.scrinium.umk.pl/> [accessed 19 July 2021]) provides an outstanding resource for researching the content of this rich collection of sources in need of a comprehensive study. It comes as no surprise that Dr. Rafał Toczko, the author of the book under review, is one of the founding team members of this thematically organized digital instrument. In short, Toczko uncovers—for the first time—the forensic-rhetorical strategies underlying Augustine's anti-Donatist *epistulae*.

To situate Toczko's highly original approach, I would like to preliminarily mention two quite recent studies, each offering a specific approach to Augustine's correspondence. A first approach is to study Augustine's letters as an internal tool for safeguarding the orthodox thinking of the members of his own Christian community. Jennifer Ebbeler, in her *Disciplining Christians*,¹ argues that Augustine transformed the classic genre of epistolary correspondence, from friendly exchange (as dialogue with absent friends) to an instrument of public correction. This latter form was seen as an act of *caritas*, because it was—according to Augustine—aimed at the salvation of the correspondent. Augustine expected that his erring correspondent would reply, and that a corrective dialogue would hence be

¹ Jennifer V. Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians: Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters* (Oxford, 2012).

opened. That Augustine's correspondents did not always share his expectation is made obvious by their resistance in their replies (e. g., Jerome) or in their unwillingness to reply (e. g., the Donatists). Furthermore, that Augustine did not try to initiate a corrective correspondence with Pelagius, which would seem to have been Augustine's natural first step in correcting erring Christians, is according to Ebbeler noteworthy to observe. The fact that Augustine did not attempt this was his way of making clear to the international Church that Pelagius was beyond amicable epistolary rebuke, and that for this very reason the African episcopate hence immediately applied public tools, such as councils and condemnations. A second approach entails considering the bishop of Hippo's letters as an external tool to find external support for dogmatic discussions, using not a dogmatic style or theological genre, but making recourse to another, thus external, format to express these dogmatic ideas. Laurence Dalmon, in her *La correspondance entre l'Afrique et Rome à propos de l'affaire pélagienne (416–418)*,² studies the exchange of letters between Augustine and the North African episcopate on the one hand, and the Roman bishops Innocent, Zosimus and Sixtus on the other hand, resulting in the condemnation of all so-called Pelagians. Dalmon shows that the doctrinal content of the letters is shaped by their specific format. The African bishops clearly opted for the rhetorical-polemical strategy. They were not interested in presenting the ideas of their opponents in an unbiased way. They sketched them in a way that made it easier to condemn them firmly. The answers issued by the bishops of Rome are labeled by Dalmon as "literature of chancellery" (cf. ch. 3), indicating that the Romans were more interested in their legal status and diplomatic agenda rather than in the content of a theological debate. Toczko's innovative study presents a synergy of Ebbeler's and Dalmon's monographs: the juridical/formal format Augustine instrumentalized in his *epistulae* in order to gain the upper hand in his polemics with the Donatists.

The Polish philologist defines the purpose of his book as follows: "to offer an insight into how Augustine used rhetorical tools inherited from classical theory in building and developing polemical strategies in his anti-Donatist letters" (p. 12); "to prove that Augustine's polemical correspondence is teeming with examples of rhetorical tricks commonly used in courtroom argumentation" (p. 13). Toczko analyzes the way in which Augustine made use of techniques of forensic rhetoric in the 36 preserved *epistulae* with a clear anti-Donatist intent. Toczko starts by contextualizing Augustine's anti-Donatist correspondence. The first chapter pre-

² Laurence Dalmon, *Un dossier de l'Épistolaire augustinien. La correspondance entre l'Afrique et Rome à propos de l'affaire pélagienne (416–418). Traduction, commentaire et annotations* (Studia Patristica Supplements 3; Leuven, 2015).

sents in a clear and systematic way this specific collection of letters—how they are to be classified, how Augustine staged his dispute with the Donatists in them and thus intentionally created a readership. In the second chapter, Toczko delves into the genre of forensic rhetoric, and especially the *Hermagorean status* on which Augustine's forensic arguments in the said group of letters is based—his desire to offer (anti-Donatist) arguments that could easily be recognized and grasped by his intended (broader) audience. In the second part Augustine's charges against the Donatists are put under the microscope: the Donatists committed a schism (*status qualitatis*: their separation is based on false motives; *status definitionis*: the Donatists do not properly understand *ecclesia*; ch. 3); they administer a second baptism/rebaptism (*status definitionis*: the Donatist claim that Catholics are not baptized validly is based on a wrong definition of baptism; *status coniecturae*: Augustine refers to Donatist scandals in the context of [re-]baptism; ch. 4). Turning the tables in part three, Toczko illustrates Augustine's defense against accusations brought forward by the Donatists against the Catholics. Augustine refutes the charge that the Catholics unlawfully persecute their Donatist brethren (*relatio criminis*: Donatists are legitimately and validly punished for the crimes of schism and violence; *comparatio criminis*: this legal persecution is less evil than remaining in schism and hence is beneficial for the Donatists; *status translationis*: Donatists themselves appealed to state support in suppressing internal dissidence; ch. 5). Augustine finally defends the Catholic party against the **accusation** of committing *traditio* (*status translationis* and *status coniecturae*: Caecilianus was not a *traditor*; the Donatists cannot properly prove this allegation, of which, on the contrary, they are guilty themselves; ch. 6).

Crimen Obicere illustrates that as bishop Augustine relied heavily on his training in secular rhetoric, and in particular on the theory of *status*. In addition to studying the content, historical context, etc., of Augustine's *epistulae*, the current study showcases that we have to combine epistolary theory/practice and classical rhetoric in order to fully grasp Augustine's objectives in dictating them. Toczko convincingly argued that the structure and the quality of argumentation play a pivotal role in Augustine's anti-Donatist letters. The strategies of persuasion and patterns of argumentation deployed therein are shaped by and based on forensic rhetorical techniques. Obviously, I am looking forward to future research on how this theory of *status* is present in other genres of Augustine's oeuvre, for instance in sermons directed against the Donatist movement, or in other controversies Augustine was entangled in, for instance in his later approach to the Pelagians.

The current exemplary study shows that the objection sometimes heard, namely, that hardly anything new can be discovered or done in Augustinian studies, is completely wrong. This meticulously researched and amply substan-

tiated book opens new and original perspectives on the Donatist controversy; on Augustine's anti-Donatist polemics, his epistolary career and the ways in which he acted as a strategist, rhetorician and politician; and on how in Augustine's thinking genre/format and content hermeneutically influence each other.