

## Controversy, Competition, and Insult in the Republic of Letters

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**Kai Bremer and Carlos Spoerhase**, eds., *“Theologisch-polemisch-poetische Sachen”*: *Gelehrte Polemik im 18. Jahrhundert*. Zeitsprünge: Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit 19. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2015. Pp. viii+364. €49.00 (paper).

**Kai Bremer and Carlos Spoerhase**, eds., *Gelehrte Polemik: Intellektuelle Konfliktverschärfungen um 1700*. Zeitsprünge: Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit 15. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2011. Pp. iv+440. €40.00 (paper).

**Sari Kivisto**, *The Vices of Learning: Morality and Knowledge at Early Modern Universities*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. Pp. 304. US\$163.00 (paper).

It might seem straightforward to suggest that quarrels have pervaded the European history of humanities. From the Christian world chronologies of Africanus and Eusebius through the medieval nominalist and realist philosophers to the battle of the classical philologists in nineteenth-century Germany, humanists' passion to advance sweeping views has often accompanied authentic innovation in their disciplines. Actually, in the books under review, polemic and hostility come as a major change in our received picture of the Republic of Letters, the prolific international community of scholars that flourished across Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. We have been far more accustomed to hear of these humanists as sociable and polite citizens of an invisible and somewhat utopian state. In these new histories of conflict, and in the vigorous rise of similar scholarship in recent years, we can repeat John Milton's discovery in *Paradise Lost*: Satan is a more interesting hero than Adam.

For the last three decades, a highly stable discussion centered in France has shown how the Republic of Letters worked.<sup>1</sup> The question arises because humanists often operated outside formal institutions, and their relationships often crossed national and religious boundaries. The conversation has centered on two great foundations

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1. The most recent argument, eloquent and perhaps conceiving of the Republic of Letters' ideals and “citizens” as forerunners to the French Revolution, is Marc Fumaroli, *La république des lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

for the humanists' world. First, they subscribed to high ideals of friendship, universal community, and learning. On the practical plane, they exchanged polite and endless letters conveying news, questions, introductions, advice, and the odd clipping from medieval manuscripts. The emphasis has been on the social lives of intellectuals but rarely on their actual work, although the rise of the "correspondence network" has greatly enriched our histories of humanities and science.<sup>2</sup>

In everything that ensued the letter was the thin end of the wedge. It was first inserted by English speakers familiar with sociology and the philosophy of language. Anne Goldgar and Peter Miller, writing in 1995 and 2000, argued powerfully that the Republic of Letters worked but that its ideals were self-interested and socially constructed; Goldgar pointed especially to the hierarchies and religious divisions that communitarian ideals had to overcome.<sup>3</sup> Alan Bray stressed external structures of power, noting that manuscript letters were seen by many and that their stylized declarations of allegiance readily became a currency for political survival and advancement.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most spectacularly, Lisa Jardine took up Erasmus as a leader and emblem of this community: she suggested that his letters and speeches were European technologies for conjuring the presence of a charismatic Erasmus from the printed page and that to regard them as either factual or authentic in our sense would be to miss their point.<sup>5</sup>

The books under review belong to an even more expansive demolition of the Republic of Letters' peace and harmony, international in scope but emanating especially from Germany and accelerating to a diabolical pitch in the last five years. In the first place, correspondence and "correspondence networks" have been subjected to enthusiastic debunking, as scholars have incisively exposed wide divides between polite letters and underlying intellectual, confessional, or political enmity.<sup>6</sup> The eight-volume publication of Joseph Scaliger's letters in 2012 offers the reader an unprecedented the-

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2. An exception dealing with humanists' teaching, writing, and speaking is Françoise Waquet, *Le latin, ou, l'empire d'un signe: XVIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Michel, 1998).

3. Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

4. Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 42–67.

5. Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. 173–74.

6. See Jeanine de Landtsheer and Henk Nellen, eds., *Between Scylla and Charybdis: Learned Letter Writers Navigating the Reefs of Religious and Political Controversy in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and Anselm Schubert, "Kommunikation und Konkurrenz: Gelehrtenrepublik und Konfession im 17. Jahrhundert," in *Interkonfessionalität, Transkonfessionalität, binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität: Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz et al. (Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2003), 105–31.

ater of scholarly spleen, jaundice, and bile: the brilliant Leiden philologist's enormous epistolary reach exposed him to the endless conflicts of others, in addition to the many he stoked himself. The editors have compiled an online glossary of several dozen of Scaliger's Greek and Latin insults, such as *latrina Cerberi* (the hellhound's latrine) and *nequissimus bipedum* (most incompetent of bipeds).<sup>7</sup> And in an essential article, Siegfried Bodenmann and Anne-Lise Rey argue forcefully that controversy was normal practice for the creation of early modern knowledge itself. According to them, controversies carried out by letter "not only established community norms but also went hand in hand with the constant search for a space of exchange and dialogue; with the articulation of ideas; and with the evaluation of hypotheses and experimental results."<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, the entire social infrastructure of erudition has turned quarrelsome and querulous. Censorship was already discussed in two articles in Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet's *Commercium litterarium* (1994), but now every environment a scholar entered apparently offered room for intrigue and dismay.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Grafton found uncomfortable hierarchy and serial misunderstanding in the early modern printing house.<sup>10</sup> Vera Keller showed that scholarly travel and souvenir albums, or *alba amicorum*, were anything but innocuous or politically inert.<sup>11</sup> As for personal patronage, Carol Pal discovered that male humanists like Montaigne and André Rivet could energetically support erudite female protégées in private while deriding women's abilities in print.<sup>12</sup> The national churches also gave scope for heated dissension involving totally scholarly arguments, as in a seventeenth-century Dutch debate over the proper length for men's hair discussed by Dirk van Miert.<sup>13</sup> Of course, England throughout

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7. Paul Botley and Dirk van Miert, eds., *The Correspondence of Joseph Justus Scaliger*, with supervisory editors Anthony Grafton, Henk Jan de Jonge, and Jill Kraye, 8 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 2012); "Scaliger's Abusive Language: A Glossary," <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research/projects/scaliger/scaligers-abusive-language/>. For discussion, see Kristine Louise Haugen, "Joseph Scaliger's Letters: Teacher, Collaborator, Impresario," *History of Universities* 28 (2014): 105–47.

8. Siegfried Bodenmann and Anne-Lise Rey, "La guerre en lettres: La controverse scientifique dans les correspondances des lumières," *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 66 (2013): 233–48, esp. 238.

9. Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, eds., *Commercium litterarium, 1600–1750: La communication dans la République des lettres* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1994), 261–79, 281–300.

10. Anthony Grafton, *The Culture of Correction in Renaissance Europe* (London: British Library, 2011).

11. Vera Keller, "Painted Friends: Political Interest and the Transformation of International Learned Sociability," in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Marilyn Sandidge and Albrecht Classen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 661–92.

12. Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. 83–91.

13. Dirk Van Miert, "Claudius Salmasius and the 'Hairy War' (1640–1650): Historicizing the Bible in the Dutch Republic on the Eve of Spinoza," forthcoming.

the seventeenth century saw incessant political and religious strife that shaped nearly every form of scholarship.<sup>14</sup> By now it looks as if the only reason a scholar got any work done is that he refused to speak to his neighbor—or entered a prison, which happened all too often at the hands of princely patrons, the Inquisition, or the bankruptcy laws.<sup>15</sup>

The books under review reflect two especially copious veins in the new interest in conflict: the humanists' actual research and the early modern university. The two volumes on *Gelehrte Polemik* are largely devoted to polemics in fields such as philology, theology, literary criticism, and music, often paying searching attention to the combatants' audiences, argumentative tactics, and methods of publication. To mention only one earlier installment, we have excellent new discussions of the fearsome Reuchlin affair of the early sixteenth century, which neatly combined a university fight, rivalry for princely patronage, serious theological and philological beliefs, and one of the early modern world's most devastating pamphlet wars.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the university was passed over for obvious reasons in earlier discussions of gentility and friendship. It is now the scene of many episodes of *Gelehrte Polemik* and nearly the sole setting of the attacks and complaints in Kivisto's *Vices of Learning*. But not only can we easily see that the early modern university gave its inhabitants a livelihood, responsibilities, colleagues, a printing house, and often a research agenda. The German universities also form a special question mark in the great story of how Germany became modern, and not only because Humboldt's Berlin even-

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14. On England, see, e.g., Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *"I Have Always Loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 164–230, 253–85; Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England, 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

15. Nicholas Popper, *Walter Raleigh's "History of the World" and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella: The Book and the Body of Nature*, trans. David L. Marshall (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010); José Barrientos García, *Fray Luis de León y la universidad de Salamanca* (Madrid: Ediciones Escorialenses, 1996); Kristine Louise Haugen, "Thomas Lydiat's Scholarship in Prison: Discovery and Disaster in the Seventeenth Century," *Bodleian Library Record* 25 (2012): 183–216.

16. Wilhelm Kühlmann, ed., *Reuchlins Freunde und Gegner: Kommunikative Konstellationen eines frühneuzeitlichen Medienereignisses* (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2010); and Sari Kivisto, *Creating Antiloquence: Epistolae obscurorum virorum and the Humanist Polemics on Style* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2002). See also two collected volumes on humanist conflict: Uwe Baumann et al., eds., *Streitkultur: Okzidentale Traditionen des Streitens in Literatur, Geschichte und Kunst* (Göttingen: V&R, 2008); and Marc Laureys and Roswitha Simons, eds., *Die Kunst des Streitens: Inszenierung, Formen und Funktionen öffentlichen Streits in historischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: V&R, 2010).

tually succeeded Melanchthon's Wittenberg. In *On the Process of Civilization* (1939), Norbert Elias proposed that in the eighteenth century the German middle class, specifically formed by the universities, began to challenge the courtly aristocracy for cultural and intellectual supremacy, a challenge that substantially succeeded by the nineteenth century. He identified that university culture as virtuous, industrious, and self-congratulating, even though the middle class simultaneously seized on aristocratic manners, in part transforming itself. More recently, an extraordinary contribution by Wilhelm Kühlmann has moved the same cultural competition earlier and directly into the universities, including the heavy degree of protective coloration. On Kühlmann's evidence, the seventeenth-century universities exported useful political philosophy, but they were also full of attacks on pedantry, useless learning, and trivial learning—precisely the insults against the university being launched from the gallant world outside. To be relevant, it seemed, a professor must act the parts of a man of fashion and a pedant simultaneously.<sup>17</sup> Sari Kivisto's universities, preoccupied with moral values but aware of a world outside, also form a convincing prehistory for Elias; with Kühlmann's help, we can also see her professors' insults as an uneasy amalgam of public performance and self-flagellation.

The most widespread story about the German middle class, of course, is Jürgen Habermas's famous argument about the rise of a public sphere in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of the humanities, as the contributors to *Gelehrte Polemik* (2015) point out, this is hardly any story at all: it assumes the total eclipse of the universities and of erudition, instead tracing the quite real explosion of polite, easy reading matter with broad circulation. In fact, it looks as if expert knowledge remained profoundly exciting in the public realm in the late eighteenth century: to take a single example, the *Fragmentenstreit* over H. S. Reimarus's thoughts on biblical authority generated more than fifty publications. What we learn instead from the books under review is how universities and professors changed during a time when their disciplines were largely stable but the outside world was ambitious and volatile. For example, in 1741, a German-language comic epic called the *Battle of the Poets* irrupted during a quarrel over literary theory between German and Swiss professors: every sentence in Alexander Nebrig's fine article (*Gelehrte Polemik* [2011]) shows why the same story would never have unfolded in 1641.

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17. Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias* 3 (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2012); Wilhelm Kühlmann, *Gelehrtenrepublik und Fürstenstaat: Entwicklung und Kritik des deutschen Späthumanismus in der Literatur des Barockzeitalters* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1982).

18. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

An enormously successful and wide-ranging research group at the Humboldt University in Berlin produced the two volumes on *Gelehrte Polemik*.<sup>19</sup> They have recovered scholarly conflict as a colossal fact of early modern intellectual life, shown that it was often constructive and innovative, and reminded us that polemic could become a potent experiment in creating a wider public audience for scholarship. The editors' introduction to the 2011 volume sets out fundamental questions about early modern controversies, which, as they point out, were both debates about knowledge and events in a social world of institutions and publication media. Conflict demonstrably generated reams of scholarly and literary communication, so the next question is whether and how conflict created knowledge. Is conflict a normal element of the disciplines? Does conflict only contribute to knowledge if consensus emerges after the dust has settled? Is polemic necessarily different from real scholarly exposition? If two adversaries hold fundamentally incompatible views of their discipline, can their debate involve real argument? The case studies throughout both volumes reach largely optimistic conclusions about the seriousness and significance of controversy.

The 2011 volume is remarkable for examining both humanistic and scientific conflicts, a comparative approach that is typical of this research group's work at large. One might single out the entirely scientific *Scharlatan!* (2013), devoted to accusations of quackery and fraud.<sup>20</sup> The cases of humanistic controversy in the 2011 volume, mostly German, move from bitter debate inside the universities to assaults on university disciplines from outside to duels by professors in the public press. It becomes apparent, incidentally, that professors did not discover aesthetic and moral values for the first time in the seventeenth century. In the first essay, Klara Vanek investigates professors of Hebrew beginning in the sixteenth century who defended their field against humanist charges that Hebrew was barbaric, obscure, and inelegant compared with Greek and Latin. Above all, they universally asserted that Hebrew was useful. In another moral argument, some derided the humanists as vain and infatuated with appearances; others turned the tables to insist that Hebrew was the more beautiful and pleasing. Vanek develops a portrait of the Hebraists' "argument *ad personam*" against the classical scholar, their ideal type of the hedonist unbeliever who was, of course, their immediate colleague; she argues that the Hebraists ended by opposing the entire humanist ideal of education.

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19. On its activities, see <http://www.literatur.hu-berlin.de/de/gelehrte-polemik>, and *Gelehrte Polemik* (2015), 5 n. 12.

20. Tina Asmussen and Hole Rössler, *Scharlatan! Eine Figur der Relegation in der frühneuzeitlichen Gelehrtenkultur* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2013).

Johann Mattheson's audacious reform of the discipline of music in the early eighteenth century is discussed by Karsten Mackensen and Dirk Rose. Effectively, Mattheson aimed to turn music from a mathematical subject into an elegant branch of the humanities. He had two publics. His first book was quarrelsome and addressed to the new type of the *galant homme*: the element of polemic disqualifies this episode from Habermas's public sphere, the authors argue, while Mattheson substituted a polite audience for the academic mathematicians who were his actual opponents. Two decades later, Mattheson did address an academic audience in a Latin dissertation, again avoiding mathematics but enforcing his point about music's high and spiritual character by pointing to its place in Lutheran theology. Having finally developed a positive way of addressing his critics, he moved from a genteel public to an audience of experts, a kind of antivernacularization.

Alexander Nebrig takes up an especially provocative moment in the Zürcher Literaturstreit, the debate over literary criticism in the 1740s and 1750s between the Leipzig professor J. C. Gottsched and the Swiss scholars J. J. Breitinger and J. J. Bodmer. The comic epic called the *Battle of the Poets* imported French debates into the German-speaking lands in a highly readable form; Nebrig argues that in the gap between the real controversy over principles and this fiction about dueling poets, we should detect a degree of self-awareness in the participants about the novelty and importance of their discussion. Nebrig emphasizes that this remained a debate between scholars who treated poetry as a learned subject, even as it appeared in the popular form of the journal. Taking up the theme of the middle class, he also suggests that the authors of any comic epic have relinquished any claim to the appearance of courtliness.

The 2015 *Gelehrte Polemik* volume concerns the eighteenth century, and from one point of view it centers on a figure whose name in Germany is synonymous with the Enlightenment itself: G. E. Lessing. Nearly all the contributions address theology or poetry—Lessing's primary fields—and the editors' introduction stresses that Lessing has received protracted attention as a polemicist but that the wider sphere of controversy in his time remains to be investigated. To that end, excellent essays address Socinianism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the quarrel between Casanova and Winckelmann, the Zürcher Literaturstreit, the German Romantic sonnet, and the establishment of the Napoleonic Code in early nineteenth-century Germany.

Meanwhile, four fine contributions on Lessing make it hard in different ways to view his controversies as simple installments in a story of Enlightenment triumphant. His relationship to the humanist past is the first discovery. Lutz Danneberg scrupulously shows that the explosive questions over the authority of the Bible raised by H. S. Reimarus and published by Lessing, leading to the Fragmentenstreit, were already well known to Protestant theologians in the seventeenth century, who had explained

in their rules of interpretation how to address inconsistencies and historical doubts. At most, Danneberg finds, Reimarus developed more explicit theoretical language for the same kind of searching reading that was already possible a century before his fragments saw print. Similarly, in the case of literary criticism, Friedrich Vollhardt emphasizes Lessing's habit of writing book reviews and entire books that "rescued" authors from their modern critics, ostensibly an antipedantic strategy but also one that relied on word-by-word commentary as its own method. In fact, Vollhardt finds a resemblance to the exuberant *Dictionnaire* of Pierre Bayle (1697), which similarly indulged in the vast accumulation of historical facts without taking them altogether seriously and allowed for willful digression and commentary.

Michael Multhammer and Wilfried Barner concentrate on the fierce polemics of others in Lessing's world. In Multhammer's case, the unlikely object of examination is a religious drama by J. G. Pfranger written as a sequel and vociferous rebuke to Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*. Had Reimarus doubted the Resurrection? In Pfranger's play, a character killed off in *Nathan the Wise* turns out to be alive after all, indeed the star of the story. But earnest theological polemic in the plot of a drama is not the only revelation. Multhammer has also discovered an unknown earlier pamphlet by Pfranger promoting theological arguments for the Resurrection in a private, courtly context: it was addressed to Pfranger's employer, the duke of Sachsen-Meiningen, following the death of the duke's sixteen-year-old daughter. In other words, Pfranger was not only already on the record in the Fragmentenstreit, he could operate in the public and courtly realms almost simultaneously. Underscoring the uncertainty and upheavals in the world of publishing at this time, Barner traces a complex and evolving discussion in which Lessing took part over unauthorized reprints and intellectual property. It is a salutary reminder that a public sphere of free exchange did not spring into life overnight and that intellectuals in our period faced real financial, legal, and material barriers to publication.

Sari Kivisto's delicious examination of academic complaint and insult, *The Vices of Learning*, takes up an apparently eternal subject, delivering both intensive research into an unexplored continent of poisonous pamphlets and a strong argument about university culture. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century universities of Germany and Scandinavia, the denunciation of academic malfeasance became a runaway fad in live ceremonial performances and printed dissertations. Debaters and authors took up endlessly varied questions such as *On the Disease of Pedantry*, *On Insane Curiosity in Theology*, *On the Misogyny of the Learned*, *Literary Machiavellianism*, and the most infamous of them all, J. B. Mencken's *On the Charlatanry of the Learned* (1715).<sup>21</sup> Sometimes they seem clearly intended to be funny; sometimes it is wiser not to guess.

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21. All titles are drawn from Kivisto's bibliography of primary sources.

The panoramic scope of Kivisto's material will reshape a discussion that has too often focused on Mencken's *Charlatanry* alone. She examines specifically the philosophical and moral language of the accusations, which produces a novel historical argument: that these professors looked backward for their values, to classical, patristic, and Renaissance moral philosophy, applying old terms to describe and denounce the new working methods of the humanities. Each chapter is devoted to an encompassing "vice," such as pride or self-love, drawing on the dissertations to explain many scholarly faults as instances of it. For example, chapter 3 addresses the vice of ambition for fame, an accusation that Kivisto argues was the common moral ground behind excessive publication, withholding one's alleged works from publication, ostentatious book collecting, and plagiarism. Chapter 4 takes on the more elaborate challenge of identifying a vice inciting pointless hostility and unreasonable tenacity in disputations: it proves to be *logomachia*, or fighting over words, discussed by a series of authors including in two entire books. *Logomachia* is then explained as a vice of the intellect.

Kivisto is unquestionably persuasive in pointing out that the authors of the dissertations appealed to universal standards of conduct, like telling the truth, not acting maliciously, and having a realistic rather than extravagant opinion of oneself. In other words, the dissertations may not have articulated social norms unique to scholarship or the scholarly community—a conclusion that would confirm the absence of a sharp divide between professors and the broader society in our period. Kivisto has also placed her finger skillfully on an element of humanist culture that we may or may not like to think about. We have heard much about the "policing" of the Republic of Letters, a word from urbane France. To learn that some humanists really believed in "vices" sets them irremediably in seventeenth-century Helmstedt and Augsburg.

The reader who picks up some of these dissertations is struck by how different their authors' aims were. Some more indication of this might have given even more force to Kivisto's discussion of their similarities. Samuel Ribov urged a scientific-mathematical approach to all learning, including the humanities; Michael Lilienthal taught his reader how to distinguish true from fake knowledge; Gottlieb Spitzel spoke in thundering tones of God and the devil. Why did the form of the Latin dissertation, and specifically the Latin dissertation complaining about one's colleagues, appeal to each of these men? One hopes that the conversation will continue.<sup>22</sup>

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