

Introduction

Forms of Polemics and Defamation in Early Modern Scholarship

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Abstract

This issue of *Daphnis* will examine the use of invective between scholars in the early modern period. The introduction places the findings of the individual contributions in a broader context.

Keywords

invective – polemics – literary forms – science – early modern period

Criticising arguments and theories is a key element of the scientific process. However, debates are not always restricted to content but also target other, often unrelated aspects, such as the persona of the author or the form in which a theory is presented. The tone, in which criticism is voiced, also makes a difference. While modern scholars and scientists sometimes experience harsh attacks directed not against the content of their work but against their persona, such behaviour is generally not regarded as appropriate. Most editors and publishers do not allow for polemics or *ad personam* invectives in academic books and papers. Such vilifications can be found in certain media outlets or on social media, but they form no part of the academic discourse *per se*.

In the early modern period, however, harsh criticism, denigrations, and *ad hominem* arguments were a vital part of the *res publica litteraria*, as recent

studies have shown.¹ Invectives and other forms of reproachful speech were a widespread phenomenon not only in the political and religious spheres but also in the academic sphere. Early modern scholars followed a tradition that can be traced back to antiquity where polemical arguments could also be found in philosophical and “scientific” texts.² As Dániel Margócsy will argue in his contribution to this special issue, the so-called Republic of Letters was partly conceived as an army fighting against outsiders, but occasionally involved in “civil war” too. The militaristic nature of the *Res publica litteraria* might have played a role in shaping their polemic forms. Envy, a cardinal sin and the source of many quarrels, could even be legitimised in academic contexts, as Robert Seidel will show in his article about early modern dissertations dealing with the so-called “*invidentia licita*”.

From a modern perspective, polemics in the natural sciences seem to be a particularly odd phenomenon given that scientific literature is considered as rather dry, matter-of-fact texts presenting data and findings. While modern scientific papers hide the individual authors and their opinions through nominal style, passive constructions, the avoidance of personal pronouns such as “I” or “we”, and a lack of rhetorical embellishment, quite the opposite is true for many early modern texts.³ Humanist authors often employed the rhetorical strategies pathos, ethos, and logos inherited from the Aristotelian tradition to convince their readers.⁴ The prominent appearance of the authors in their texts surely facilitated *ad hominem* arguments, just as the emotional descriptions invited responses in the same or opposite tone.

The articles in this special issue take a closer look at forms of polemics and denigration in early modern academic texts especially but not exclusively from the natural sciences. Their results will be tentatively summarised in the following pages and some further examples added to give a broader overview of the topic.

1 See, e.g., the contributions in Laureys/Simons, 2010; Baumann/Becker/Laureys, 2015; Enenkel/Peters, 2018; Israel/Kraus/Sasso, 2021a. Helmuth, 2010 and Israel/Kraus/Sasso, 2021b offer a good overview of the role of invectives in Renaissance humanism.

2 Salas, 2020; d’Hoine/Roskam/Schorn/Verheyden, 2021.

3 The variety of early modern scientific literature in Latin was the topic of the ERC project NOSCEMUS “*Nova scientia*: Early modern scientific literature and Latin”. This special issue resulted from a workshop of this project in 2022. The NOSCEMUS database (https://wiki.uibk.ac.at/noscemus/Main_Page) and Korenjak, 2023 give an overview of the rich variety of literary genres in which scientific ideas and information could be expressed in Neo-Latin literature. The examples presented in this introduction are taken from the database.

4 Johanna Luggin currently works on this specific topic as part of the NOSCEMUS project.

1 Identifying and Attacking Opponents

The targets of polemical attacks could range from single persons to rather large, impersonal groups, such as adherents of Arabic medicine or alchemists. Often, such attacks came from colleagues who had different scientific concepts and theories. Proponents of influential theories could be vilified even after their death, as the cases of René Descartes (see the article by Johanna Luggin) and Nicolaus Copernicus (see the article by Irina Tautschnig) show. To a certain extent, criticism of the founders of a particular theory also aimed at the contemporary followers of that theory.

Sometimes the attackers shied away from openly naming their opponent and just hinted at them. Still, the relevant peer group would have easily guessed who was attacked. Sarah Lang will present the example of Michael Maier only hinting at Johann Grasse through expressions like “a gramine dictus” (“named after grass”) or the pun “grassator” (“bandit”). A similar case can be found in Tycho Brahe’s *Epistolae astronomicae* (1596). In his last letter to Christopher Rothmann, dated 14 January 1595 (pp. 284–305),⁵ Brahe attacks inter alia a certain Scot, a medical doctor following Galen and an exceedingly close adherent of the Aristotelian doctrine (“Scotus quidam natione fuit, medicinae Galenicæ doctor et Aristoteleæ philosophiæ supra modum addictus”; p. 286). This Scot, who had condemned Brahe’s interpretation regarding the comet of 1577, was probably John Craig.⁶ The *Epistolae astronomicae* contain a number of polemical attacks, but it is interesting to see that Brahe did not mention Craig’s name, while he was not afraid to do so in other cases, most notably in the case of his main opponent Nicolaus Reimers Baer, called Ursus. In a letter to Kepler from 1599, Tycho claimed that he wanted to leave out Ursus’s name in the published version as well, but his students overseeing the publication left everything as it was in the autograph.⁷ It is not very likely that this explanation is actually true.⁸

Some authors, particularly those who lacked authority or protection, hesitated to criticise others in their own name and hid behind a pseudonym or published anonymously. Sarah Lang will present the example of Michael Maier attacking the more powerful Sir William Paddy only under his pseudonym Hermes Malavici. The anonymous satirical *Dialogus Mercurii, Alchymistæ et Naturæ* (1607) constitutes another example from the same discipline. It was probably written by Michał Sędziwój and makes fun of profit-oriented

⁵ Modern edition: Dreyer, 1919, 6: 315–337.

⁶ Thoren, 1991: 363–364; Mosley, 2002: 465–466; Mosley, 2007: 188.

⁷ Modern edition: Dreyer, 1919, 8: 204–205.

⁸ Mosley, 2002: 453.

but unlearned alchemists as opposed to true philosophers. It is not directed against alchemy and the search for the philosopher's stone per se, but against those who seek it for mere profit. The anonymous author claims to have produced one of his own in the letter to the reader.

Michael Kirsten even went a step further when he ridiculed alchemists and their wondrous substances in his *Non-entia chymica* (1645).⁹ This is basically a mock lexicon, in which the author, who hides under the pseudonym Utis,¹⁰ lists alchemical non-entities together with short, often exaggerated explanations. In the preface, alchemists are compared to poets because both groups are good at inventing things. In a short *Excusatio* at the end of the lexicon (pp. 34–35), the author stresses that he did not mean to attack anyone in person. If someone feels hurt, it is his or her own fault.

Incidentally, such controversies were not only conducted for the noble reason of scientific honesty and the search for truth. Many scholars also pursued economic interests when polemicising against their opponents. Sarah Lang will show an instructive example of how Michael Maier used polemics to market his own product, potable gold. Jacob Balde's mockery of Copernicus was not driven by a deep interest in the astronomical debate about the shape of the universe, but rather by a theological motivation, as Irina Tautschnig will highlight in her contribution.

Regarding the rhetorical strategies, polemics often served to single out persons or groups.¹¹ The criticised person or group is separated from a larger group, such as humankind, Christianity, the *res publica litteraria*, or sensible men. This separation can also serve as justification for attacks because the verbal aggression is seemingly directed against an external enemy, so to say. Military metaphors are not uncommon in such discourses, as Dániel Margócsy will show in his article.

An important rhetorical strategy relevant in scientific debates consists in portraying opponents as untrustworthy and unreliable from the outset. If this characterisation of the opponents is established, the ideas and contents themselves do not need a detailed treatment anymore.

Early modern authors framed their critics as “detractores” (“disparagers”), referred to opponents as “nebulones” (“idlers”) and “scioli” (“smatters”),¹² for example, and used *verba dicendi* such as “garrire”, “hallucinari”, or “mentiri”

9 Holzmann/Bohatta, 1902–1928, 2: 215 for the identification of the author.

10 From Greek οὐτις/οὐτίς “nobody”, following Odysseus, who deceived the cyclops Polyphemus by assuming this name in *Odyssey* 9.366.

11 Enenkel, 2018: 4.

12 Enenkel, 2018: 4–5.

when quoting their opponents' words. Furthermore, they often pointed to shortcomings in Latin. This charge proved powerful because it served to exclude someone from the *res publica litteraria* whose "citizens" required a good command of Latin, that is, they had to follow Cicero's style as closely as possible.¹³

While writing in a strict Ciceronian manner and exclusively using words found in his texts soon proved unfeasible in general, the ideal was even harder to reach in the natural sciences. Most of the ancient medical and scientific texts had been written in Greek, and a specific Latin – let alone an exclusively Ciceronian – terminology was often lacking in these areas of knowledge at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In addition, new findings required new denominations. For these reasons, early modern scientists and physicians soon had to resort to unclassical words, but often justified their choice of neologisms either in a preface or right next to the respective terms. Such justifications served to anticipate possible attacks on the style and could be brought forth either in an apologetic tone or in a more aggressive way. A good example of the latter option is Johann Winter's *Epistola dedicatoria* to his commentary on Galen's anatomy (1531, fol. $\alpha 2^v$):¹⁴

Vix enim tuti erimus a rabiosulis quibusdam et male feriatis¹⁵ hominibus, qui ingenuos cuiusque conatus elevare, non meliora facere didicerunt. Quippe hi omnem orationem ut putidam respuunt et quodcumque verbum allatrant, lautioris eloquentiae institores, opinanturque ceteros quasi in Tullianorum officina non perpolitos nequiquam ad palmae speciem aspirare aut secundae aut tertiae.

'For we will hardly be safe from certain half-mad and untimely celebrating people who have learned to belittle everyone's decent attempts, but not to accomplish anything better. They despise every speech as if it were abominable. As guardians of a purer eloquence, scolding every word they choose, believing that the rest of the world seek in vain to reach the splendour of the first prize, or even just that of the second or third, because they have not been smoothed out and refined in the workshop of the Ciceronians.'

13 Enenkel, 2018: 4–5; Israel/Kraus/Sasso, 2021b: 9–10.

14 See Berrens, 2022: 16–21 and Berrens, 2024: 208–209. Further examples include: Winter, 1532: fol. Aii^v; Wotton, 1552: fol. aiii^v; Willughby/Ray, 1676: fol. a2^r; van Leeuwenhoek, 1695: fol. **v.

15 This expression is taken from Horace (*Carmina* 4.6.14). In Horace's poem, it refers to the Trojans who prematurely celebrated their victory over the Greeks.

Winter chose to lead a counterattack against possible critics from the camp of the strong adherents to Ciceronianism. Winter dismisses criticism of his language as invalid, because he characterises potential attackers as pedants who find a reason for criticism in everyone, anyway, but are unable to do it any better themselves. Possible attacks on his work would be nothing special and could, hence, hardly affect him.¹⁶

One of the strongest polemical strategies is to make fun of an opponent, as several contributions to this issue will argue. Examples of mocking and satire can be found in the literary dispute between Lorenzo Valla and Poggio Bracciolini, as presented in Ludovica Sasso's article. Johanna Luggin's contribution will discuss a satirical didactic poem mocking Cartesian cosmology. Irina Tautschnig's article will demonstrate how Jacob Balde ridiculed the astronomer Copernicus by turning him into a bad student who misunderstood a basic rule of Latin grammar.

2 Literary Forms

The importance of polemics in early modern scholarship can already be deduced from the forms of publications. In contrast to modern science, extensive books were published that were primarily directed against adherents of a certain discipline or theory.

Ludovica Sasso will portray one of the most famous examples of a literary dispute in the Italian *Quattrocento*, the quarrel between Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla on the right understanding of *latinitas* and the way of teaching it. This debate, in which other scholars also became involved, resulted in a substantial number of polemical texts from each side.¹⁷ Such literary disputes involving several authors writing book-length objections against the other party are attested throughout the early modern period in all disciplines.

Leonhart Fuchs' *Errata recentiorum medicorum* (1530) make for another famous example. In this work of some 160 quarto pages, the German physician and botanist Leonhart Fuchs criticised common mistakes of his colleagues. Fuchs was one of the fiercest opponents of Arabic medicine and regarded

16 Already Pliny claims at the end of the *praefatio* (32) of his *Naturalis historia* that he does not care for "vitiligatorum" ("brawlers", a compound of "vitium", "fault", and "litigator", "litigant", coined by Cato the Elder) because they are only looking for a quarrel. However, Pliny does not address language or style.

17 This debate has also been the focus of two recent monographs: Sasso, 2022 and Spillmann, 2023.

many of these “errata” as the result of misconceptions in the Arabic tradition.¹⁸ Since Arabic medicine still had its followers in the sixteenth century, Fuchs’s polemical treatment of those concepts evoked reactions in turn. For instance, Sébastien de Monteux answered Fuchs’s *Errata* with *Annotatiunculae* on his part in 1533, in which he briefly pointed out Fuchs’s own misunderstandings. De Monteux’s small book also included two further letters arguing in favour of Arabic medicine. De Monteux’s answer provoked Fuchs to write yet another text, the *Paradoxorum medicinae libri III*, published in 1535.

Another instructive example is Pierre Brissot and Jérémie de Dryvère’s debate on the correct side of bloodletting. Soon, other people joined this debate with their own writings, among them again Leonhart Fuchs. He defended Brissot in his *Apologia Leonardi Fuchsii* (1534). Fuchs attacked (fol. A2^v) *inter alia* de Dryvère’s use of “revulsio” and “derivatio”, words with a special meaning in the contexts of bloodletting. According to Fuchs, de Dryvère could not have used them in a wrong sense – except on purpose – if he knew proper Latin (“Accedit quod turpiter admodum in revulsionis et derivationis vocabulis hallucinetur, quorum certe genuinam vim, cum linguae Latinae probe peritus sit, ignorare non facile, nisi dedita opera, potuit”). Denying someone else’s command of Latin and using a derogatory verb such as “hallucinari” to express a rejected view was a topical form of abuse, as has already been said.

In the field of astrology, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola wrote his famous *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (1496) that were published by his nephew Gianfrancesco after the author’s death. Pico’s arguments against astrology sparked a debate, which resulted in numerous responses from both sides.¹⁹

Such book-length polemical works could come in many literary forms ranging from treatises or letters to more poetic forms like dialogues (e.g., the already mentioned *Dialogus Mercurii, Alchymistae et Naturae*)²⁰ or poems (see the articles by Luggin and Lang). Another typical place for academic dispute was early modern dissertations, which will be the topic of Robert Seidel’s article.²¹

Attacks on single persons or groups could also be mentioned *en passant*, meaning that the polemical part is not the main content of a scientific work. Still, these verbal assaults could be highlighted by placing them prominently,

18 See Hasse, 2001: 69–72 on Fuchs’s anti-Arabic stance in this work.

19 Akopyan, 2020.

20 The contributions in Baumann/Becker/Laureys, 2015 deal with polemical notions in Renaissance dialogues.

21 Early modern dissertations have received increased attention in recent years. See, e.g., Chang, 2004; Gindhart/Marti/Seidel, 2016; Marti/Sdzuj/Seidel, 2017; Friedenthal/Marti/Seidel, 2021; Chang, 2021.

for example, in prefaces and liminary poetry or in the marginalia. A good example of the latter can be found in Pietro Andrea Mattioli's work on Dioscorides, the *Commentarii in sex libros Dioscoridis* (1554).²² Mattioli can be described as quarrelsome, just like Leonhart Fuchs, from whom we have already heard. Fuchs and Mattioli particularly disliked each other. The latter hardly missed a chance at pointing out Fuchs's and other botanists' real or alleged errors in the identification of plants mentioned in ancient text. Mattioli "used his marginalia as a means of highlighting their errors, depicting them as perpetually untrustworthy",²³ as Paula Findlen has put it. More than 70 notes in the margins referring to detailed discussions of "Fuchsii errores/deceptus" reveal his contempt for Fuchs.

Many translators of and commentators on ancient Greek texts harshly criticised predecessors in prefaces and letters to the readers claiming that their colleagues' poor command of Latin and Greek as well as lack of knowledge in the respective field resulted in incomprehensible, misleading, and distorted translations. Such polemics could be a means to justify and advertise a new translation or commentary.²⁴

Some authors revised their own works after harsh criticism from their peers. David Origanus, professor of Greek, mathematics, and astronomy at the Brandenburg University of Frankfurt, issued a massive *Almanac of the Movements in the Sky from Brandenburg*, the *Novae motuum caelestium ephemerides Brandenburgicae*, in 1609. The *Novae ephemerides* describe and predict celestial movements for the years 1595 to 1654 and superseded his previous work titled *Ephemerides* from 1599. Giovanni Antonio Magini and Georg Rollenhagen had criticised or rather "barked at" ("allatrarunt") the earlier version, as Origanus points out on the title page of the *Novae ephemerides*. Origanus also took the chance for revenge in the form of an extended polemic directed at Magini and Rollenhagen in the letter to the reader of the first volume.

22 This work has a particularly rich history and saw many different vernacular and Latin versions. This edition from 1554 is the first in Latin. However, the features described above are also present in the later editions.

23 Findlen, 1999: 388.

24 E.g., Leonhart Fuchs (Galenus, 1538a: fol. A2^v) and Joachim Camerarius (Galenus, 1538b: fol. *2^{r/v}) criticised the poor quality of the earlier Aldina (Galenus, 1525) in their own editions. See also Durling, 1961: 237. Similar remarks can also be found in the letter to the reader in Francesco Barozzi's Latin translation of Proclus' commentary on Euclid's *Elements* (Barozzi, 1560: fol. **2^r).

3 Strategies of Avoidance

Early modern scientists not only attacked opponents but also employed strategies to avoid such attacks. It might sound like an oversimplification, but accurately writing down one's new findings and theories to let them circulate widely already constituted an important step in saving oneself from mal-intent distortions of one's new ideas. William Harvey's motivation for the publication of his *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (1628) makes for a famous example (p. 21):

Quae cum aliis (uti sit) placebat, aliis minus: hi convellere, calumniari et vitio vertere, quod a praeceptis et fide omnium anatomicorum discessem. Illi rem novam cum inquisitu dignam tum maxime utilem fore confirmantes, plenius sibi explicatam poscere. Tandem amicorum precibus, ut omnes meorum laborum participes fierent, partim et iam aliorum permotus invidia qui dicta mea iniquo animo accipientes et minus intelligentes me publice traducere conabantur, ut omnes de me et de re ipsa iudicium ferant, haec typis mandare publice coactus fui.

'As happens, this view was acceptable to some, to others less so. The latter tore it to pieces, misrepresented it, and found cause of offence in my departure from the rules and belief of anatomists as a whole. The former asked for a fuller explanation of the novelty, asserting that it would be worth investigating and would prove of extreme practical importance. At length I reacted to the entreaties of friends that they should all share in my labours, and also in part to the ill-will of the others who, receiving my statements with biased minds and imperfectly understanding them, kept trying to make a public laughing-stock of me. In consequence, I have been forced to publish these things in print so that all may pass judgment upon me and upon the matter in question.'²⁵

Harvey was right in assuming that his revolutionary description of the blood circulation was not only received in praise. Even decades after its publication, the book sparked debates that led Harvey (and some of his supporters) to defend the theory in forthcoming works.²⁶

The choice of a suitable literary genre could be a means to propagate an unpopular or even forbidden theory. Dialogues, for instance, offer the

²⁵ Translation: Franklin (Harvey, 1993: 18).

²⁶ Howard, 2022: 148–150.

possibility to discuss two conflicting opinions without necessarily opting for one of them. Still, the famous example of Galileo Galilei's *Dialogo* (1632) proves that this could be a risky strategy. Poetic genres such as didactic poems or dream narratives were another way to praise new theories or inventions without identifying with them too closely. These genres could serve as a "protective cover for the author".²⁷ The French Jesuit Pierre Brumoy, for example, included a mythical scene into the second book of his *De arte vitraria* (1712), in which he had the Muse Urania inform the other ancient gods about the Copernican system. He fared better than Galileo 80 years before him.²⁸

As we have already seen, polemics targeted not only the content but also other aspects, an author's style and choice of words in particular. To avoid this criticism, many authors resorted to apologies for their style, such as the one from Johann Winter quoted above.

4 Overview of the Contributions

This panorama of polemics and strategies to avoid them aimed at giving an idea of the rich literary tradition. Throughout the early modern period, polemical speech was an integral part of the scholarly discourse and could take on various forms, as the examples presented above clearly demonstrate. Early modern science was surely no terrain for the timid and anxious, but a battlefield of letters. The six articles in this issue will provide further evidence and in-depth studies on the topic.

The first contribution by **Dániel Margócsy** will challenge the common notion of the *Res publica litteraria* as a peaceful commonwealth overcoming religious and national boundaries. Drawing on sources from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Margócsy argues that the "citizens" conceptualised their Republic of Letters like an army at war, instead. **Robert Seidel** will treat an equally overarching topic: envy amongst scholars. After giving an overview of the topic, he will focus on the dissertation *De licita eruditorum invidentia* (Aepin [Praes.]/Burgmann [Resp.], 1718), which sparked a debate over whether envy could be allowed in some circumstances.

The remaining contributions will present case studies spanning several centuries and academic disciplines. **Ludovica Sasso** will study one of the

27 De Smet, 1996: 110 (with focus on Neo-Latin Menippean satire). See also Johanna Luggin's article in this issue.

28 See Tautschnig, 2023: 169–178 for this scene.

earliest and most famous scholarly debates: the dispute about the right way of learning and speaking Latin between Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla in fifteenth-century Italy. **Sarah Lang** will focus on the German chymist Michael Maier. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, he published a number of invectives to fashion himself as an expert of alchemy and to propagate his business of potable gold.

The two final articles will deal with Jesuit poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. **Irina Tautschnig** will interpret a sophisticated poem contained in Jacob Balde's *Poema de vanitate mundi* (1638), in which the author mocks Nicolaus Copernicus's theory of the moving earth. Finally, **Johanna Luggin** will discuss Pierre le Coëdic's *Mundus Cartesii*, a satirical hexametric poem that describes a subterranean world based on René Descartes's theories.

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