

The Military-Political Complex of the Republic of Letters

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Abstract

This article offers a revisionist interpretation of the early modern Republic of Letters by offering a contextual analysis of explicit mentions of the term by scholars across Europe in the period. The current historiography on the Republic of Letters tends to present it as the place of friendly, solidary and democratic cooperation across national and religious boundaries. This article argues, instead, that members of the Republic of Letters conceptualised it as a battlefield of permanent warfare. Early modern scholars often compared themselves to soldiers of a hierarchically organised army or to fighters in a civil war. It is claimed that a militarised conceptualisation of the Republic of Letters offers the opportunity to re-engage with Reinhart Koselleck's influential *Kritik und Krise*. Evidence is presented from fifteenth-century Italy to early nineteenth-century Hungary.

Keywords

Republic of Letters – Erasmus of Rotterdam – history of humanities – Pierre Bayle – Reinhart Koselleck – public sphere

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Principio etiam atque etiam memineris oportet: nil aliud esse vitam mortalium: nisi perpetuam quandam militiam.

ERASMUS, 1503: sig. D.1

‘The life of mortal men is nothing but a certain perpetual exercise of war.’

ERASMUS, 1905: 42



1 Introduction

How should we define the early modern Republic of Letters?¹ For the scholars who posed this question in the middle of the twentieth century, the answer to this question depended on how one explained the tragic trajectory of 20th-century European history. In 1959, a young Reinhart Koselleck published his *Kritik und Krise*, an influential book that made direct connections between the Enlightenment Republic of Letters, the 20th-century collapse of Germany and the Cold War.² Inspired by his extensive conversations with Carl Schmitt, Koselleck damned the Republic of Letters for its utopian ignorance of *Realpolitik* in a world that was defined by the experience of religious war. The Reformation, the French wars of religion, the Thirty-Years War, and the English civil war had put Europe on the brink of catastrophe, destroying large numbers of the population. As Koselleck argued, the escape from this tragedy was the establishment of a Hobbesian state, where absolutist power determined politics and all other matters, excepting private conscience. The Leviathan of empire brought forward much-needed peace in a war-torn continent. For Koselleck, the emergence of the Republic of Letters, when scholars and intellectuals slowly began to debate, sometimes in public and sometimes in private gatherings, whether reason could become the ultimate arbiter of morals and politics, reintroduced disagreement and the spectre of civil war into European history. By replacing the supremacy of absolutism with the idealist sovereignty of Enlightened rational discourse, the Republic of Letters became a hotbed of enthusiasm and sectarianism. By ignoring the realities of early modern life, the utopian ideals of Enlightenment *critique* first brought forward the French

¹ I take this rhetorical question from van Miert, 2014.

² Koselleck, 1959; Koselleck, 1988.

Revolution, and ultimately resulted in the global catastrophe of the Cold War, when the two utopian political philosophies of communism and liberal democracy clashed, wielding nuclear arms against each other.

If Koselleck painted the consequences of the emergence of the Republic of Letters in dark tones, a more optimistic picture was provided by Jürgen Habermas, whose *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* appeared just three years after *Kritik und Krise*.³ Pace Koselleck, Habermas argued that the 18th-century public sphere was a prefiguration of an open and democratic field of communicative action where one could politely and productively debate how the state should be run.⁴ It was the society one needed to re-establish in the aftermath of Nazism, and it was the society one needed to protect in the face of the vile market forces of consumerist mass media. In this Habermasian narrative, the Republic of Letters, and the early modern institutional organisation of scholarly activity, offered one early model to understand the emergence of the public sphere, the main topic of his book. It also offered a model to understand how the scientific revolution was the result of the open, collaborative, democratic and friendly exchange of ideas that traversed the boundaries of state and religion in early modern Europe even for those historians of science who were less interested in the larger world of politics. Implicitly or explicitly, it was this Habermasian narrative that became especially prevalent amongst Anglo-American, French and Dutch historians of science and of scholarship from the 1980s onwards who either chose to neglect Koselleck's earlier work or claimed that the fall of the Berlin Wall invalidated Koselleck's Cold-War pessimism.⁵ Emphasising the positive nature of the Republic of Letters, Anthony Grafton wrote that this network of scholars aimed to cross "political, linguistic and religious borders"; Françoise Waquet claimed that it united its members in a "sentiment d'une unité et d'une solidarité"; while Peter Burke argued that its "basic ideal is an attractive one, one of scholarly cooperation in spite of political frontiers and ideological conflicts".⁶ Even when feminist historians noted

3 Habermas, 1962; Habermas, 1989.

4 For an overview of Koselleck and Habermas, see La Vopa, 1992; for the relationship of Habermas with Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as with a particular type of Renaissance humanism, see Kahn, 1990.

5 "And while, in this post-Marxist and post-Cold War world, we can purge Habermas of his Marxism without too much trouble, it is more difficult, in the end, to cleanse Koselleck of the Cold War fears that color his analysis of the Old Regime." Goodman, 1992: 8; see also Goodman, 1996. For a nuanced and incisive analysis of the then recent historiography of the Republic of Letters, with a nod to Koselleck, see Malcolm, 2002: 539–541.

6 Grafton, 2009a: 10, as far as I am aware, Grafton has never cited Habermas (and rarely Koselleck); see also Grafton, 2009b, and the earlier Grafton, 1980 and Grafton, 1985; as well as Waquet, 1989: 490, which engages critically with Koselleck to argue that the social world of

that the members of the Republic of Letters did not always live up to its universalist ideals, and that it tended to exclude women, foreigners, and people outside Europe, the historiography nonetheless tended to reaffirm that its norms were valuable as a promising utopia that scholars were ultimately hoping to live up to.⁷ If the utopianism of the Republic of Letters was the precise problem for Koselleck, it could be now upheld as an admirable and noble dream of overcoming strife and disagreement through maintaining networks of communication even during periods of war.⁸ It was this Habermasian narrative that Anne Goldgar productively engaged with in her pathbreaking and illuminating *Impolite Learning*, which made the important observation that the Republic of Letters was less interested in reforming society and politics at large, and more in reforming and instituting the norms of its own behaviour.⁹ And it was also this positive concept of the Republic of Letters that Carol Pal adopted when she showed with much brilliance how learned women in the mid-seventeenth century became important participants and active contributors to its discussions and debates.¹⁰ To some degree, the Habermasian optimism of the Republic of Letters continues to prevail even today as studies of the Republic of Letters take a digital turn, with an emphasis on the merits of a “self-governing commonwealth of learning”.¹¹

Yet, as Lorraine Daston noted some twenty years ago, the Republic of Letters’ norms were not just about friendship, solidarity and unity, and its emphasis on the necessity of impartial judgment stood in stark contrast to these communitarian ideals.¹² Importantly, Marian Füssel has also shown how much the scholarly practices and metaphors of the Republic of Letters owed to the military culture of early modern states.¹³ Building on Daston’s and Füssel’s pathbreaking arguments, this article offers a revisionist interpretation of the discourse of the Republic of Letters by pointing out the pervasive evocations of armies and war in scholarly writings on the topic in the period. Limiting my focus to explicit mentions of the term “Republic of Letters”, I argue that its members

scholarship existed in separation from the world of politics; and Bots and Waquet, 1997; for a recent reevaluation of the Republic of Letters by Waquet, see Waquet, 2022; for the French historiography, see also Lamy, 2013; for Burke’s views, see Burke 1999: 11, for his explicit, though limited, engagement with Habermas, see Burke, 2012; for recent compilations of some of the classics in the field, see Fumaroli, 2018; Bots, 2018.

7 Iliffe, 1998–1999; Landes, 1988; Meehan, 1995; Eger et al., 2001; Norbrook, 2004.

8 Ultee, 1987.

9 Goldgar, 1995.

10 Pal, 2012.

11 Van Miert/Hotson/Wallnig, 2019: 27; see also van Miert, 2014; Hollewand/van Miert, 2022.

12 Daston, 1991; Daston, 2023.

13 Füssel, 2011; Füssel/Mulsow, 2015, see also Mulsow, 2007.

often defined themselves in opposition to other knowledge networks, severing their ties and engaging in battles with the predominant institutions of their times.¹⁴ In so far as scholars in the Republic of Letters undertook concerted and coordinated actions, these actions were modeled upon the movements of hierarchically organised military units. My methodological focus on the semantic history of this term is motivated by the prevalent historiographical emphasis on the role of ideas in explaining how the Republic of Letters functioned in the early modern world. As we have seen, historians have often acknowledged that, at the level of practice, the Republic of Letters was often characterised by petty skirmishes and bitter disagreements, which they then tend to explain as an understandable deviation from the high standards of the established norm.¹⁵ This is the reason why this article scrutinizes how militant behaviour was in fact acknowledged, accepted and even normalised at the conceptual level. In this synthetic essay, I rely primarily on a brief, non-representative sampling of well-known sources already invoked in the historiography to offer a novel, and by no means exhaustive, interpretation based on close engagement with the texts. A careful re-examination of some of the propagandistic statements and attitudes of members of the Republic of Letters reveals that its transnational territory could also be viewed as a permanent battlefield. My examples are taken from an array of genres ranging from the correspondences of scholars to university dissertations, scholarly tomes and works of satire to expose the omnipresence of militaristic conceptualisations in early modern discourse. As I hope to show, the scholars' recurrent and self-reflexive insistence on their own soldierly character and behaviour offers the opportunity to re-engage with some elements of Koselleck's original analysis of the emergent role of critique in Europe.

2 Barbaro against the Barbarians

From the moment of its coining, the term "Republic of Letters" was employed to compare humanists to the valiant heroes of the armies of Ancient Rome. Historians agree that the Venetian politician and humanist Francesco Barbaro was the first to use this term in an adulatory letter to the papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini in 1417, just two years after Barbaro had translated two chapters from Plutarch's *Lives* on the political and military careers of Aristides and Cato

14 Jaumann, 2015; Jaumann, 2001.

15 For my own perspective on these scholarly practices, see Margócsy, 2014.

the Elder (Fig. 1).¹⁶ In his letter of 1417, Barbaro congratulated Bracciolini for his discoveries of Ancient manuscripts during his travels in Germany, and for taking these works back to the land of Italy, bringing “more assistance than ever and finer ornaments to this Republic of Letters.”¹⁷ Barbaro claimed that, if he could, he would award a triumph to Bracciolini just as the ancients had “decided that a triumph should be awarded to those who had captured forts and cities and provinces.”¹⁸ As Barbaro explained, Bracciolini was the equivalent of Quintus Fulvius Flaccus and Lucius Opimius, two heroes of the Roman Republic who recaptured lost territories, just as Bracciolini recovered the lost treasure of Ancient literature from Germans, who “ought to be branded with shame for leaving celebrated men buried alive”, i.e., for torturing renowned authors by not reading them.¹⁹

In comparing Bracciolini to renowned Roman soldiers, Barbaro emphasized the analogous nature of scholarly activities and military engagements. The heroes of learning were just like the heroes of war, except that they pursued loftier goals, a point that Barbaro borrowed from the writings of the Ancients. As he claimed, the Romans already “regarded poets and military victors as worthy of the same crown.”²⁰ He also noted that Julius Caesar respected Cicero because Cicero “had achieved a greater crown than all his triumphs, because it was more important to enlarge the boundaries of the Roman mind than of empire.”²¹ These statements certainly lowered the relative value of military exploits as compared to scholarship but, at the same time, they also implied that participation in the world of letters was not completely unlike the soldierly life. Scholars and soldiers focused equally on spoliation and imperial growth, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that Barbaro himself would later

16 On Barbaro, see King, 1986.

17 Franciscus Barbarus to Poggio Bracciolini, Letter IV, reprinted in Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 197. For the first print edition, see Barbarus, 1743: 5, which writes “Quos autem orno? Eos nempe, qui huic litterariae Reip. plurima adjumenta, atque ornamenta contulerunt.” For a discussion of this quote, see Fumaroli, 1988.

18 Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 197. “Si iis, qui castella, urbes, provincias receperant, triumphum dari majores nostri censuissent, et ego dignitate, ac auctoritate, et gratia tantum possem, quantum ii, qui fuerunt amplissimi in litterario Senatu, et in aede Musarum, te triumpho dignissimum decernerem.” Barbarus, 1743: 3.

19 Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 199. “Ignominia etiam notandi sunt illi Germani, qui clarissimos Viros [...] vivos diuturno tempore sepultos tenuerunt.” Barbarus, 1743: 4.

20 Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 198. “Quid, quod majores nostri eadem corona poetas, et eos, qui triumpharent, dignos esse censuerunt?” Barbarus, 1743: 4.

21 Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 198. “Nonne Caesar dictator M. Tullium hostem quondam suum omnium triumphorum majorem lauream adeptum esse confessus est, quanto plus esset Romani ingenii, quam imperii fines ampliasset?” Barbarus, 1743: 4.



FIGURE 1 Theodor de Bry's portrait of Poggio Bracciolini, with an inscription that claims that Poggio's "hand is armed with bile" from Jean Jacques Boissard, *Icones virorum illustrium doctrina* (Frankfurt am Main: De Bry, 1597–1599) AMSTERDAM: RIJKSMUSEUM, RP-P-1909–4349, PUBLIC DOMAIN

spend several years as captain of Brescia, a city recently acquired by the growing Venetian empire.²²

Importantly, Barbaro's choice of the phrase *res publica* was probably motivated both by the immediate context of his letter and by his own political ideology as a citizen of the Venetian Republic, which mixed elements of

22 On the fate of Brescia during these years, see King, 1993.

monarchical, aristocratic and democratic rule.²³ In his letter, the mention of the *Respublica literaria* was preceded by a reference to the Roman *respublica*, just a few sentences earlier, and it would be followed, a few sentences later, by a reference to the Venetian *respublica*. Yet these republican sentiments did not translate into a fully egalitarian perspective for Barbaro's assessment of the Republic of Letters. For him, Bracciolini was a leader of this Republic, a "censor", whom Barbaro was ready to serve and obey, as long as Bracciolini continued on the path that Barbaro commended.²⁴ And, for those who would actually popularise the term *Respublica literaria*, almost a century after Barbaro's isolated instance of using it, the term would actually come to refer to a monarchy, and not a republic.

3 The Monarchs of the Republic of Letters

The humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam has long been associated with the emergence of the Republic of Letters, as a phrase and as scholarly practice.²⁵ Already during his lifetime, Erasmus was crowned the sovereign of this imaginary community, which reveals the problems with picturing the world of Renaissance scholarship as an egalitarian community. The Swiss professor Bonifacius Amerbach called Erasmus "the monarch of the Republic of Letters" in 1520, in a letter to his brother Basilius on a pamphlet war against Lutherans. This was a clear acknowledgment of the fact that the Latin phrase *respublica* could refer to any kind of political state, including both hierarchically organised kingdoms and non-monarchical republics.²⁶

Amerbach's letter was written in 1520: this was the year when Erasmus finally published his *Antibarbari*, a highly polemical and influential statement on the Republic of Letters, which he had first begun to compose some twenty-five years earlier.²⁷ Already as a young humanist, Erasmus was much

23 Gilbert, 1968.

24 Goodhart Gordan, 1974: 203; Barbarus, 1743: 8.

25 Burke, 1999; Jardine, 1993; cf. Tracy, 1997; see also the various essays in Ryle, 2014.

26 "Quid novarum rerum apud vos sit scire cupio, praecipue de Erasmo nostro, totius republicae litterariae monarcha." Bonifacius Amerbach to Basilius Amerbach, Avignon, 1520, letter printed in Burckhard-Biedermann, 1894: 142; cf. the contrast between hierarchical salons and the egalitarian republic of letters in Lilti, 2009; or the interpretation of the term "republic" in Daston, 2023: 24.

27 Erasmus, 1520. I am citing the English translation from Thompson, 1978. As Waquet noted, though, the Amerbach family's correspondence preserves several earlier mentions of the Republic of Letters, incl. Konrad Töritz' letter to Johannes Amerbach, which contains several adversarial passages against "insane and fanatical barkers (O insane et phanatie

enthused about setting out his own vision of how a society of humanist scholars should be organised, even before he became a prolific and popular writer. Soon after leaving the Augustine canonry of Steyn, he wrote up a manuscript version of his *Antibarbari*, which he circulated in manuscript form for many years.²⁸ In its published form, the *Antibarbari* was presented as a humanist dialogue between Erasmus and his friends in a lovely, secluded rural spot in Brabant, where Erasmus and his friends “take refuge from the plague”, away from the distraction of women and the duties of civic life.²⁹ At this *locus amoenus*, the conversational partners discussed “why a tragic and terrible deluge had shamefully overwhelmed all the literature of the ancients which used to be so pure”, so that “the men who are now at the summit of learning hardly seem worthy to enter the literary arena against women and children of the ancient world, and that the present generals of our army would not deserve enrolment among their common soldiers”.³⁰ For Erasmus, both in Antiquity and in the Renaissance, the literary world was not unlike the arena of gladiators, or the battlefield of hierarchically organized armies, with generals and common soldiers joining in fight together. The title page to the *Antibarbari* was an explicit reflection on this theme, featuring a woodcut by Hans Holbein with two putti armed with spears on the left and the right, as well as a battle between marine monsters at the bottom of the page (Fig. 2).

The primary aim of the *Antibarbari* was to discuss the reasons for the decline of Ancient learning. The book did so by the frequent employment of military tropes, a not unexpected choice from the author of the *Enchiridion of the Christian Knight*, which depicted the life of Christians as the site of continuous warfare against vice.³¹ In the *Antibarbari*, some interlocutors made the suggestion that the changing constellations of stars were the cause of the decay of letters, others raised the possibility of blaming Christianity, while again others asked if humankind had maybe become too old and senile to produce real talent anymore. Yet one speaker, Jacobus Batt, clearly dominated the debate throughout the work, and he made the forceful argument that humankind was

latrator, cur publice damnas, quod in occulto tam cupide legis?)”; Konrad Töriz to Johann Amerbach, Engental, 23 February 1504, letter printed in Harman, 1942: 203.

28 “... comparison with other humanist treatises of the same kin suggests that *Antibarbarorum liber* stands out by virtue of its vigorous polemic.” Tracy, 1980: 16. Significantly, Tracy shows convincingly that Erasmus’ inspiration was Lorenzo Valla’s attack on Poggio Bracciolini, that earlier *censor* of the Republic of Letters. On the *Antibarbari*, see also the excellent Ebels-Hoving, 1999; Bejczy, 1996; DeMolen, 1986.

29 Thompson, 1978: 19.

30 Thompson, 1978: 24.

31 Erasmus, 1503. Note that the word “enchiridion” means both handbook and hand-dagger.

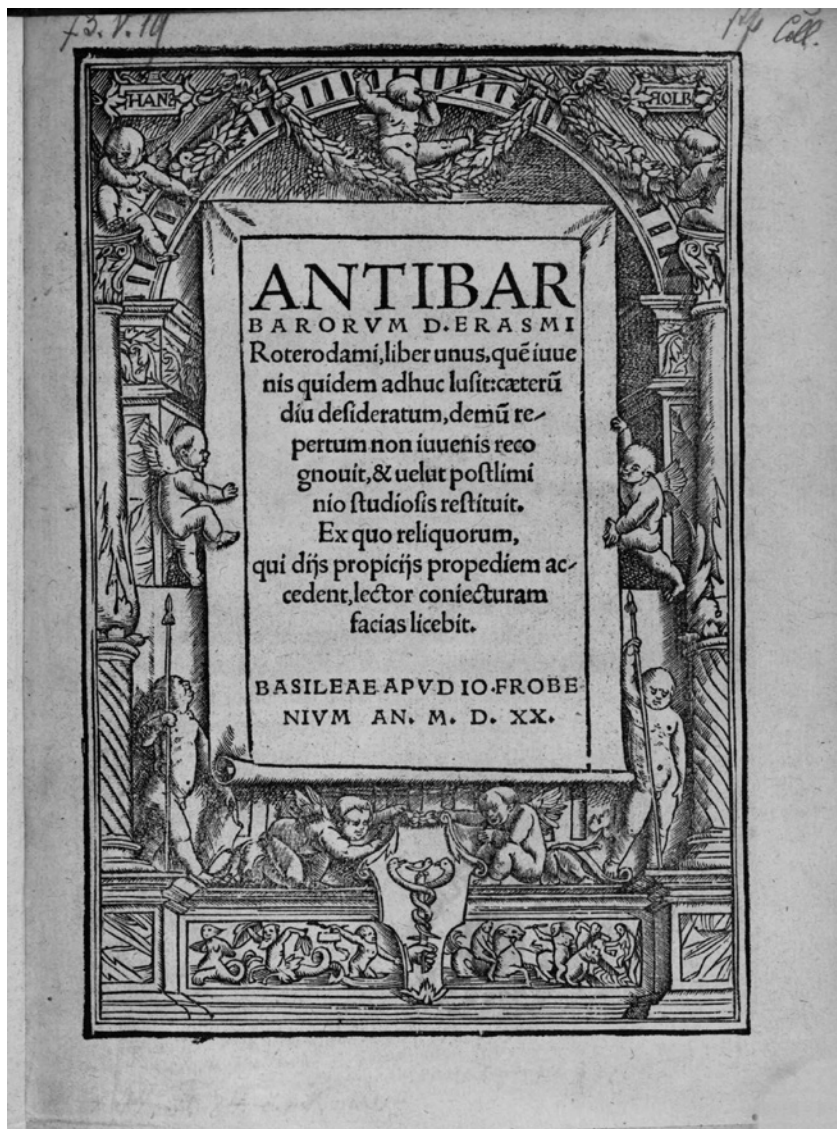


FIGURE 2 Hans Holbein's woodcut title page of Erasmus' *Antibarbarorum liber* (Basel: Frobenius, 1520)
 VIENNA: ÖSTERREICHISCHE NATIONALBIBLIOTHEK, *44.H.29 DIFF.,
 PUBLIC DOMAIN

responsible for their own vices because they did not go to war against stupidity and barbarism. Batt stated that the renewal of Antiquity in the Republic of Letters could only come into existence by beginning military action against

the current institutions of learning, away from traditional places of sociability. According to him, the Republic of Letters was under attack by three enemies who wanted it “to be destroyed root and branch”.³² Batt then launched a battle call to the enemies, asking them to “come out of your lairs, join battle with us, and these feuds shall find a conclusion in open fight, either you will be defeated and quiet, or we shall admit that the victory is yours”.³³ Who were these enemies? The *Antibarbari* was clear: Batt (and Erasmus) wanted to break with the traditions of scholastic philosophy and the precepts of the monastic orders, especially the Dominicans, to establish a new network of humanist scholarship that promoted the study of the Ancients. An important role of the Republic of Letters was to fight and annihilate other, alternative communities for the production of knowledge.

Arguably, Erasmus followed similar tactics in his own scholarly and literary practice, as well.³⁴ While scholars rightly emphasized his qualities as a learned friend, and his ability to network with like-minded scholars, it is important to note that much of his output was highly polemical. As he himself wrote in the *Catalogue of His Works*, “at first it was my whole ambition to be attacked by no one and attack no one myself, and so ply my pen with a light heart without ever drawing blood. But in this I was doubly disappointed”.³⁵ Attack upon attack came upon poor Erasmus, who therefore had to engage in scholarly duels with Maarten van Dorp, Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples, Edward Lee, Jacobus Latomus, Diego Lopez de Zúñiga, Ulrich von Hutten, a number of monks of various orders, and, of course, Martin Luther himself (and the list goes on). In Erasmus’ world, friendship was important, but so was a sharply honed pen that could always double as a knife.³⁶

The double role of the Republic of Letters in maintaining a community and in battling others was also acknowledged by Erasmus’ friends. Writing to Erasmus, for instance, the humanist priest Marcus Laurinus praised how his learned friend did “so much every day for the republic of letters”, and immediately clarified that Erasmus’ activities focused primarily on “driving

32 Thompson, 1978: 42.

33 Thompson, 1978: 46.

34 For a brief discussion of “Erasme, militante”, see Fumaroli, 2015: 47, 71–72, which nonetheless claims, in its introduction, that the Republic of Letters was “ni économique, ni militaire.” Fumaroli, 2015: 29.

35 “Primum illud erat in votis, ut nec impetitus a quoquam, nec impetens quenquam, incruento calamo luderem perpetuo. Sed hic bis infelix fui.” Erasmus to Johann von Botzheim, Basel, 30 January 1523, Letter 1341A, Mynors/Estes, 1989: 325; Allen, 1906: 21.

36 For some of these controversial writings, see Tracy/Hoffmann, 2011.

back the false and sophistical sort”.³⁷ Andrea Alciato, renowned author of the *Emblemata*, agreed. During polemical times, Alciato wrote, Erasmus had to “defend himself with the shield of St. Jerome” both against the Lutherans and those who accused Erasmus of Lutheran leanings. With such a shield, Erasmus had nothing to fear. He could “continue to support the republic of letters”, and “let the [others] bark as loud as they please”.³⁸

As Françoise Waquet pointed out several decades ago, scholars across Europe began to popularise the term *Republic of Letters* during the very years that passed between Erasmus’ first draft of the *Antibarbari* and its eventual publication. In Germany, for instance, Conrad Celtis mentioned the *respublica litteraria* in a public speech to the University of Ingolstadt already in 1492, which served equally to shower praise on humanist learning, to emphasize the importance of poetry, and to bemoan how the Germanic lands, and the scholarship contained therein, were threatened or occupied by enemies from all corners of the world.³⁹ The term remained in occasional use throughout the sixteenth century, often only cursorily evoked in the prefatory materials of learned works. In these works, the militant nature of the republic of letters remained an important undercurrent. In 1576, for instance, the Neapolitan humanist poet Giovanni Battista Rinaldi came out with a work titled *Academica in tres partes distributa in dialogis quibus literaria resp. militans adversus Idonaeum exprimitur*.⁴⁰ In his short, four-page epistle dedicatory, Rinaldi made it clear that he was not joking about the military. He referred explicitly to the army of the Republic of Letters both in the introductory and concluding paragraphs, claiming that

As much as a man can do, we have described the Republic of Letters, which vigorously fights idle life and desire, its eternal enemies; and, so that we can better present this matter to you, we had our academics establish, among themselves, those matters that were set up in the Roman Republic when waging war.⁴¹

37 Marcus Laurinus to Erasmus, Mechelen, 30 June 1524, Letter 1458, printed in Mynors/Dalzell/Estes, 1992: 288.

38 Andrea Alciato to Erasmus, Noves, 29 May 1522, Letter 1288, printed in Mynors/Estes, 1989: 102.

39 Celtis, 1492; for a modern edition and translation into German, see Gruber, 2003. On the *Panegyris*, see Robert, 2003: 105–153 105–153, on Celtis’ take on the strife between Hungary and Germany, see also Kiss, 2018.

40 Rinaldi, 1576.

41 “Descripsimus pro virili literariam Remp. adversus voluptatem, et otium aeternos hostes suos acerrime militantem, quae res ut melius ante oculos proponi posset, nostros

The rest of the work proceeded very much along these lines. The first chapter was titled “the layout of the military camp of the Republic of Letters”, and each character in the dialogue was bestowed with a Roman military title at the beginning of each chapter.

In such a bellicose republic, it was imperative to maintain a hierarchical order. This was especially true for those who used the Republic of Letters as a synonym for educational institutions, such as Nicolaus Reusner, a rector at Lauingen and the editor of several works on the Ottoman wars.⁴² Reusner explained in his *Oratio de officiis, magistratus, et subditorum in Repub. tam litteraria, quam civili* that these institutions needed to rely on the “prudence of officials and the obedient behaviour of subordinates”.⁴³ Reusner clearly divided the members of his republic into leaders and subalterns, and then he began to draw parallels between the teachers of his *gymnasium* and the Ancient kings Alexander the Great and King David, both renowned for their military prowess. At least in Reusner’s view, the same skills were needed for disciplining German pupils and for manhandling the Amalekites.

The adversarial and hierarchical conceptualisation of the Republic of Letters also made it appealing to scholarly groups not traditionally associated with Renaissance humanism. In the Spanish catholic world, for instance, the praise of Erasmus as a monarch of the Republic of Letters was replaced by the praise of the erudite and learned monarch Philip II, whom the Dominican monk Alfonso Chacón, in his book on Trajan’s Dacian wars, called a great collector and supporter of books, which the king apparently used to “fight against the enemies of our faith”, so that “the whole Republic of Letters became your most obedient servant and vassal”.⁴⁴ By the late sixteenth century, the militarised rhetoric of the republic of letters seems to have become widespread enough to be adopted even by the promoters of the inquisition. In his epistle dedicatory to Juan de Rojas’ *Tractatus de haereticis*, the Venetian legal publisher Francesco Zilletto felt it right to draw parallels between inquisitor general and cardinal Gianfrancesco Gambara’s patronage of the volume and the

academicos fecimus, quae Romanae Reip. in bellis gerendis instituta fuerint, inter se describentes.” Rinaldi, 1576, ep. ded.

42 Reusner, 1596, Reusner, 1603.

43 “Quae res in civitate duae plurimum possunt, hae non parum quoque momenti habent in scholis litterarum: prudentia magistratus, et subditorum obedientia.” Reusner, 1581: sig. Aiiii^r.

44 “... qui non solum armis religionem Christianam tueri, sed et libris, ubique terrarum et locorum conquisitis, ut propria instrumenta, quibus adversus fidei nostrae hostes pugnetur affatim et benignissime ministres: cunctasque disciplinas, et artes singulas eo modo conservare cures ...: ut omnis respublica literaria, maxime tibi sit obnoxia et addicta.” Ciacconus, 1567, ep. ded.

patronage of Giovanni Francesco Gambara, the cardinal's ancestor, to whom "the Republic of Letters owes so much" because of his support of Marius Nizolius' dictionary of Cicero's language.⁴⁵ If the Republic of Letters could be modeled as a militant army fighting against its enemies, with a clear line of command running through its organisation, then there was no reason for its use to be restricted to those who supported interconfessional dialogue across national and religious boundaries. It could also be employed by those whose job was to suppress such conversations. The concept was about solidarity among those fighting together, but not about solidarity with those on the other side of a battle field.

4 When Civil War Breaks Out

The seventeenth century saw internecine strife or civil war in the Holy Roman Empire, France and, notably, England. As a result, the militarised understanding of the Republic of Letters also underwent a subtle and partial change, with an increased emphasis on how the world of scholarship was supposed to be divided by design, with scholar fighting against scholar even within the same community. If, in the sixteenth century, the Republic of Letters referred to a particular group that battled with other peoples within the larger world of learning, in the seventeenth century, the same skirmishes could be reconceptualized as a civil war that took place within the Republic of Letters, whose meaning was now broad enough to encompass all warring factions. The iconic, late-seventeenth-century *Dictionnaire* of Pierre Bayle, émigré Huguenot writer, freethinker and founding editor of the journal *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, signals well this partial shift away from the sixteenth century.⁴⁶ Well aware of the traditions of the sixteenth century, Bayle presented in this work Alciato, Erasmus's friend, as a slightly outdated and vainglorious character who wanted "to run through the whole republic of letters in order to chase away with his presence the dark shadows of barbarousness from all the places where it was hoping to hide".⁴⁷ If Alciato was pictured as a military hero in pursuit of the barbarians, Bayle defined the Republic of Letters of his own age, in turn, as a site of duel where one hero battled another, as a site of permanent civil war.

45 "Huic sane Respublica litteraria plurimum debet." Rojas, 1583, ep. ded. On Gambara's support of Nizolius, see Breen, 1954.

46 On the production of the *Dictionnaire*, see van Lieshout, 2001.

47 "C'étoit se regarder comme une source de lumiere qui devait successivement parcourir toute la Republique des Lettres, afin de chasser par sa presence les tenebres de la barbarie de tous les endroits où elles voudraient se cantonner." Bayle, 1697: 1/176; Bayle, 1820: 1/386.

And, on occasion, he even projected back this seventeenth-century concept to the disagreements of the sixteenth-century scholarly world.⁴⁸

Every historian of early modern scholarly networks feels obliged to cite at least *en passant* the famous passage in the *Dictionnaire*'s entry about Catius on the Republic of Letters, where Bayle wrote unequivocally that it is

the Empire of Truth and Reason, under whose auspices one could wage war innocently against anyone. Friends need to guard themselves against their own friends, fathers against their children, and the fathers-in-law against their sons-in-law: it is like the Age of Iron.⁴⁹

Like the Age of Iron: in this quote, Bayle appears to equate the world of scholarship with the state of nature as presented in the work of Hobbes, an author that he much respected. As the *Dictionnaire* wrote, again in positive military terms, "Hobbes made many enemies with [De Cive], but he made the most clear-sighted people declare that no one had analysed the foundation of political theory so well before him".⁵⁰ Bayle suggested that traditional networks of friendship and kinship had to be abandoned when one entered the Republic of Letters. Personal attacks with a satirical edge were forbidden (because they counted as intellectual homicide, and homicide was the prerogative of the political sovereign) but, otherwise, no one was immune to attacks. Cosmopolitan scholars may have engaged in conversation across national and religious and national boundaries, but this was only possible by breaking with patriots, with religious zealots, and, as the quote exemplifies, with members of one's own family. Bayle explained that Joseph Justus Scaliger and Isaac Vossius both turned against their erudite parents and "did not much spare the feelings of their fathers", just as the two Bernoulli brothers were ready to spar with each

48 See, for instance, Bayle's entry on Erasmus. Bayle, 1697: 1/1058–1072 and esp. 1063–1065; Bayle, 1820: VI/215–248 and esp. 226, 229–230.

49 "On n'y reconoit que l'empire de la verité et de la raison; et sous leurs auspices on fait la guerre innocemment à qui que ce soit. Les amis ont à se garder de leurs amis, les peres de leurs enfans, les beaux-peres de leurs gendres; c'est comme au siecle de fer." Bayle, 1697: 1/809, Bayle, 1820: IV/584. Note that Bayle considered this entry important enough to include it already in Bayle, 1692. For a cogent and perceptive analysis of this passage, see Daston, 1991, and Koselleck, 1959. See also the detailed historical interpretation of the role of war in Bayle's conceptualisation of the Republic of Letters in van der Lugt, 2016: ch. 2.

50 "Hobbes se fit beaucoup d'ennemis par cet Ouvrage; mais il fit avouer aux plus clairvoyans qu'on n'avoit jamais si bien penetré les fondemens de la Politique." Bayle, 1697: 11/100; Bayle, 1820: VIII/100. See also Malcolm, 2002: 510.

other.⁵¹ The Republic of Letters thus did not promote sociability based on the model of friendship. It instead encouraged honest, or even dishonest, debate, as in the case of Julius Caesar Scaliger's attacks on Cardano, Bayle noted.⁵² It did not necessarily imply a truly egalitarian concept of scholarly society, either.⁵³ As Mara van der Lugt has pointed out, Bayle returned to the topic of the Republic of Letters in his *Suite des réflexions*, published in response to critiques of the *Dictionnaire*, where he made a clear distinction between the learned, the semi-learned and the vulgar, emphasizing that "the Republic of Letters was divided in more classes than the Roman Republic".⁵⁴ If necessary, some hierarchical ranks could be preserved even in a state of civil war, which helped make some distinctions between combating enemies.

Bayle's own life was an exemplification of the internecine strife that he associated with the Republic of Letters.⁵⁵ It is true that, in the introduction to his *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, he suggested that the journal would be received well by all and sundry, including the Roman Inquisition, and went on to say that, in so far as publishing obituaries of scholars, he was willing to publish them regardless of their religious affiliation because scholars had to consider each other as brothers, despite their differences.⁵⁶ Yet the very first issue's *Table of Contents* heavily qualified these statements and proved quite explosive, indeed. It started off with a discussion of the Mennonite minister Anton van Dale's highly controversial *Oracles*, jumped on to discourse on a book that discussed Descartes and the issue of the souls of animals, followed up with reviewing a volume on the Oratorian ban on Cartesian teachings, trashed a panegyric tome on Louis XIV, and ended with an obituary of Matthieu de Larroque, a French scholar whose works on the Eucharist created quite some

51 Bayle, 1697: I/810; Bayle, 1820: IV/584. The example of the Bernoulli brothers is not yet present in the version of the entry in the *Projet* or in the 1697 edition, it first appears in Bayle, 1702: I/859.

52 "Le motif de Scaliger n'était pas tant l'amour de la verité, que la passion de se battre contre tout ce qu'il y avait alors de plus éminent dans la Republique des Lettres." Bayle, 1697: I/767; Bayle, 1820: IV/450.

53 Note, for instance, Bayle's mention of the princes of the Republic of Letters in the same comment on Scaliger's debate with Cardano, "non tam eruendae veritatis studio, quam ut effraeni desiderio suo satisfaceret, cum illis omnibus congregiendi, quos suo tempore, litterarum, eruditionumque principes haberi cognoverat." Bayle, 1697: I/767; Bayle, 1820: IV/450.

54 "Ils devraient savoir qu'elle est divisée en plus de classes que la république romaine." Bayle, 1820, *Suite des réflexions*. See van der Lugt, 2016: 79.

55 See van der Lugt, 2016; McKenna/Paganini, 2004; as well as Vermeir, 2012; and, for a radical interpretation, Israel, 2019.

56 *Nouvelles*, 1684.

commotion in mid-seventeenth-century Paris. If Bayle wanted to create debate, and to irritate most of the Christian religious institutions, he certainly succeeded. Similarly, his other published works also failed to calm waters. Bayle's *Avis aux réfugiés*, a proposal to consolidate relations with France, got him into a pamphlet war with fellow Huguenot refugee Pierre Jurieu (a war Bayle described as *des petits coups de fouet* or *des petites hostilités*), and ultimately cost him his professorial chair at the Illustrious School of Rotterdam.⁵⁷ The *Dictionnaire* did not simply serve as an inspiration for like-minded freethinkers, either. It was banned in Catholic France and also censored by the French Reformed Church of Rotterdam. Bayle's argument for the independence of the Republic of Letters, and even his plea for religious tolerance, did not preclude him from managing to alienate himself from the rest of society.

Importantly, Bayle was only one person amongst a larger set of scholars across Europe who ultimately came to acknowledge civil war as one of the guiding organisational principles of scholarly exchanges. If Bayle focused on how Julius Caesar Scaliger attacked Cardano, others would reveal how Scaliger himself was also attacked in turn, at least in the world of fiction. According to the Spanish Diego de Saavedra y Fajardo, it was none other than the poets of Antiquity who decided to engage in fight with Scaliger, as recounted in his delightful *Respublica Literaria*, an account of a dream that transported the narrator into the imaginary world of scholarship.⁵⁸ At the very end of Saavedra's book, Ovid, Plautus, Terence and numerous other poets bring forward a criminal case against Julius Caesar Scaliger who, they charge, physically maimed these poets through his editions and censure, so that they have "Scars in their Faces; one without a Nose, another without an Eye, some with artificial Teeth and Hair, others with wooden Legs and Arms".⁵⁹ When Scaliger speaks up for his own defence, they all decide to attack him physically. The narrator runs to Scaliger's help, begins to punch the poets of Antiquity, and, as a result, finally wakes up to reality.

By 1700, one could even contemplate writing a university dissertation on the Republic of Letters, a clear sign that the concept was well-established and trite. The praeses was Johannes Georg Pritius, a member of the Leipzig philosophy faculty, while the respondent was Carl Friedrich Romanus, future law professor and witch expert in Leipzig. It is probably not an accident that it was this university dissertation, written by a youthful and relatively minor scholar or by

57 Van Lieshout, 1997: 205; for the religious context, see also Bost/McKenna, 2006.

58 On the publication and translation history of Saavedra's work, see Dowling, 1979; I used the abbreviated English translation in Saavedra, 1727.

59 Saavedra, 1727: 177.

his equally little-known professor, that first offered a systematic expression of the belief that the Republic of Letters was truly egalitarian and free and its only sovereign was God. *The Dissertatio academica de Republica litteraria* claimed that, unlike civil republics, the Republic of Letters was born from the association of people who wanted to “correct the capability of will to descend into worse matters”, and not from the banding together of men to repulse attacks from the outside. The *Dissertatio academica* thus laid out the principles for the free exchange of ideas in its opening chapters.⁶⁰ The second half of Romanus’ dissertation, however, offered a subtle deconstruction of this utopian modeling of the Republic of Letters, revealing that God’s dominion was in effect a carefully policed military state on the brink of civil war. The author spent considerable efforts to defend the Republic of Letters against charges that freedom meant putting error on equal grounds with truth, the promotion of idolatry, and the lack of punitive tribunals against criminals but, ultimately, he had to acknowledge that even this scholarly state had its limits when it came to freedom of expression. Moreover, these limitations were still not enough to defend the world of scholarship from all its foes on their own. The Republic of Letters may not have been born out of the need for protection against adversaries, but it nonetheless had to develop its own army and police because, the dissertation argued, “not even the most excellent republic could be so fortunate as to have unspoilt peace, for there are enemies against whom it has to wage wars almost perpetually”.⁶¹

The concluding chapters of Romanus’ dissertation claimed vehemently that true scholars had to fight against both external and internal enemies. The Republic of Letters’ external enemies included those fanatics who invaded the Republic under the flag of blissful ignorance, claiming that scientific curiosity was superfluous and poisonous to Christianity. Turks, Tartars, and tyrannical emperors such as Nero or Qin Shi Huangdi were just as dangerous, the author observed. Even more importantly, he also spelled out explicitly the internal enemies of the Republic of Letters who incited revolt to overthrow it from the inside. Pedantic impostors were lurking everywhere, turning the conversation of learned scholars towards trifle things of no use. Unlike Bayle’s *Dictionnaire*, the *Dissertatio academica* may have lamented that the Republic of Letters ended up resembling the Age of Iron, yet its proposed solution of incessant

60 “... tum ut volendi quoque potentiam, ad deteriora proclivior, sapientiae praeceptis emendatam.” Pritius/Romanus, 1698: 14.

61 “Tam felicibus enim non esse licet reipublicae praestantissimae, ut pacem incontaminatam habeat; quin hostes sunt, contra quos perpetua fere illi gerenda sunt bella.” Pritius/Romanus, 1698: 41.

warfare was, ultimately, the world of the Huguenot refugee. Given the number of enemies the Republic of Letters faced, our author became obsessed with the thought that the world of scholarship was in danger of extinction. While erudition once flourished in Egypt, Phoenicia and Greece, these lands had now been lost to ignorance, and the fate of Italy was also in danger. How fortunate were Romanus and Pritius to live in Germany, where there letters were still able to flourish!

Not that the dissertation's optimism about the Germanic lands was shared by other compatriots. The Königsberg professor Michael Lilienthal, for instance, was so enraged by the omnipresent chicanery of the Republic of Letters that he published a whole volume on literary Machiavellism in 1713. As Lilienthal explained in his introduction, he decided to disclose the frequent impostures of the Republic of Letters not because he approved or commended them, but "because he loathed them so much that it became necessary for him to call a spade a spade".⁶² Deception and dissimulation in the world of letters necessitated constant vigilance and an awareness that even those who came in the name of piety and friendship may turn out to be the enemies of true learning.⁶³

The curious agreement between Bayle, Romanus and Lilienthal about the practical utility of modeling the Republic of Letters as a battlefield would have a long afterlife, well beyond the putative decline of the concept at the end of the eighteenth century.⁶⁴ For considerations of space, let me jump forward to the Hungary of the 1820s where the Republic of Letters was much debated amongst scholars who wanted to renew the language, literature and culture of the country.⁶⁵ Here, the concept was still very much alive, although, in the wake of the French Revolution, it finally acquired a truly democratic nature. Count Joseph Dessewffy, a major aristocratic patron of the arts and former military captain, claimed, for instance, that "the country of the sciences and the arts is a republic, not a monarchy, that is why the French call it *la République des lettres*. I do not like the spirit of rule in our literature, because it hampers the development of our language and our minds."⁶⁶

62 "Ita et hoc ad mei defensionem facere poterit, quod institutum meum sit, imposturas quorundam circa parandam sibi famam literarias et olim et hodiernum familiares in aprium producere, non eo consilio, ut eas approbem, multo minus ut commendem, sed ut serio detester, ubi scapham dicere scapham omnino fuit necessarium." Lilienthal, 1713: 6.

63 On this topic, and on Lilienthal, see Füssel, 2006.

64 For this period, see especially the highly convincing Eskildsen, 2004; as well as Mulsow, 2022.

65 Fenyő, 1976.

66 "A tudományok és szépmesterségek országa respublica, nem pedig monarchia, azért nevezik a francziák: la République des lettres. Én az uralkodási lelket azért nem szeretem

In such a republic, one needed to judge each individual work through the ruthless censure of public critique, Dessewffy acknowledged, which could only work, as Bayle had already told us, by pitching friends and kins against each other. This was the one point on which Dessewffy was in agreement with his enemy, the Hungarian writer and theorist József Bajza. When the combative Bajza engaged in a public debate with Dessewffy in 1830, he claimed similarly that societal “obligations and ties reach only to the borders of bourgeois circles, and where the Republic of Letters begins, where we enter the country of science, where the conventions of society end, these [obligations and ties] also break”.⁶⁷

Bajza was adamant that the spirit of impartial reason did not only do away with societal hierarchies, but also with the ties of friendship. As he wrote to his much admired colleague Ferenc Toldy in the 1820s, “whenever I have to judge your work, you are never my friend, but a stranger”.⁶⁸ In the real world, friendship and solidarity may have been important virtues. In the world of scholarship, however, they were a problem.

5 Conclusion

Over sixty years ago, Reinhart Koselleck made a powerful argument that the Republic of Letters was responsible for reintroducing strife and disagreement into the absolutist Europe of the post-Westphalian era, an argument that diverges significantly from the current scholarly consensus amongst historians. Koselleck’s book provided a detailed account of the historical development of the radicalisation of the Republic of Letters. According to him, if Bayle still remembered the violence of religious strife, the amnesia of his late eighteenth-century successors ensured they would have no compunction in reintroducing a fanatical faith in reason that would result in the French Revolution, and in the tragedies of the twentieth century.

Focusing on the conceptual history of the Republic of Letters, but over a longer time span, this more modest article aimed to provide evidence on how we can productively engage with certain elements of Koselleck’s argument,

literatúránkban, mert gátolja mind nyelvünk, mind elméink kifejtődését.” Kazinczy, 1861: 11/26.

67 “ezen tartozás, ezen kötelekek, csak a polgári kör határaiig nyúlnak, s ott, hol az írói republika kezdődik, hol a tudományok országába léptünk, hol a társalkodási konvencióknak vége, ezek is megszakadnak.” Bajza, 1959: 165.

68 “Valahányszor ítélni kell munkádról, akkor sohasem vagy nekem barátom, hanem idegen.” József Bajza to Ferenc Toldy, 20 January, 1824, letter printed in Oltványi, 1969: 94.

e.g., for connecting Bayle's revival of the concept of the Republic of Letters with the legacy of religious wars, without endorsing the political argument and historical details of his problematic grand narrative. Historians sometimes make the claim that the early modern Republic of Letters was centred on itself, and removed itself from the sphere of politics. In line with Koselleck's and Habermas' claims, this study has instead found that, at least when explicitly evoking the Republic of Letters, scholars were very much aware of the close ties between their own world and the larger world of politics. And, as *Kritik und Krise* pointed out, this world of politics was heavily inflected by the experience of war. Yet if, for Koselleck, the aim was to understand how Enlightenment critique transformed the world of politics, this article has instead focused on how members of the Republic of Letters imported militarized models of political formations into their discourses of the scholarly world. Barbaro came up with the term Republic of Letters because he lived in the Venetian Republic, Bayle pictured his scholarly world as an echo of the religious and civil wars his century had experienced, and count Dessewffy began to talk about the democratic nature of the *République des Lettres* only after the French Revolution. Arguably, it is this emphatically early nineteenth-century interpretation of the Republic of Letters that the recent historiography has projected back onto early modernity.

Significantly, this article has departed from Koselleck's argument about the uniformly utopian nature of the Republic of Letters, at least when it comes to the time period under consideration here. The scholars who evoked this term embraced a variety of political positions. They were not all idealists, and they did not all subscribe to the utopia of an egalitarian, democratic, or communitarian society of scholarship. Some of them did not fail to include the inquisition in this society, and others considered the Spanish king its sovereign. Similarly, if the recent scholarship has optimistically emphasized that the Republic of Letters operated by utopian norms that could inspire academics even today, this article has found that early modern scholars were often political realists. They did not necessarily talk about a Republic of Letters to establish ideals of scholarly conduct, from which their everyday practices would inevitably depart. Instead, they tried to offer various conceptual models, whose function could be both descriptive and normative, of the complex realities they were living in. Erasmus found it useful to establish a militarised community motivated by soldierly solidarity to fight practices of learning that he found barbarous. Bayle found it important to break down any element of community to engage in anarchistic civil war in the world of scholarship. Romanus' dissertation, in contrast, found this anarchistic world of scholarship in so much danger that he

proposed the reestablishment of both an army fighting external enemies and an internal police fighting charlatans.

It is possible to argue that these militaristic, non-utopian models of the Republic of Letters could also provide a partial explanation why women and people outside Europe were often excluded from the world of scholarship. These acts of exclusion were not the result of the inescapable differences that always emerge between everyday realities and noble ideals. Instead, they resulted from projecting the masculine world of soldiers onto the world scholarship and from evoking, ever since Barbaro's diatribes against Germans, the danger of external threat from barbarians lurking in all corners of the world. The soldierly understanding of scholarship may also explain why members of the Republic of Letters were often enamored with the establishment of hierarchical systems based on ranks within an army. Thus, when the Huguenot refugee Charles Ancillon decided to publish a number of memoirs on the celebrities of the Republic of Letters in 1709, he immediately began to compare these celebrities to officers in the Roman military. For instance, when explaining why Richelieu got all the credit for establishing the *Académie française*, instead of Valentin Conrart, Ancillon used an anecdote from Roman military history, writing that

If the lieutenant brought home a victory in the absence of a General, the Romans attributed all honors of triumph to the General ... and nothing to the valor and conduction of the person who was leading the troops in his place. And today we similarly attribute lucky successes to those who have credit and power in their hands.⁶⁹

The military organization of the Roman army, with its elaborate systems of officers and subalterns, was how Ancillon and many of his colleagues perceived the scholarly world.

The anecdotes and accounts mentioned in this article therefore matter because they trouble historical accounts that draw direct connections between early modern scholarly conceptualisations of the Republic of Letters and the possibilities of establishing utopias of academic conduct in the 21st-century world. The early modern Republic of Letters was populated by scholars from

69 "Si le Lieutenant remportoit une victoire en l'absence du Général decernoient les honneurs du triomphe au Général, on attribuoit tout aux auspices du Général, et rien à la valeur et à la conduite de celui qui commandoit en sa place. ... Et l'on n'attribuë pas moins aujourd'hui qu'alors tous les heureux succès des affaires à ceux qui ont le credit et le pouvoir entre les mains." Entry on Conrart in Ancillon, 1709: 3.

various political persuasions and they employed tactics that ranged from the establishment of a heavily armed Hobbesian monarchies to the joyful embrace of the possibility of civil war. None of them entertained, however, the idea that a community of scholarship could escape, without fight, from the violence of the world that surrounded them.

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