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Scholarly Critique in the Early Modern Period

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Critique in some form has no doubt played a role in intellectual activity since before we have written sources to document it. Exchange is at the heart of intellectual creativity. But the circumstances, media, and norms for successful critique have varied considerably by historical context and within the same context among different kinds of authors, fields and genres of work, and target audiences. In antiquity, for example, authors like Virgil read or recited their work to audiences of friends and family to gather feedback before making a written version on a papyrus roll available for copying and distribution, i.e. publication. In medieval universities the disputation was the centerpiece of the scholastic method. Today (thanks to the polemical representations of the humanists) we mostly associate the term with a sterile pedagogical exercise that perdured into the eighteenth century and an opportunity for professors to display their prowess by arguing against one another on abstruse topics. But at their origins the disputations were “a form of collective research with colleagues about real and much discussed problems for which nobody had a ready answer”¹—in other words, an opportunity for constructive critique. In each of these contexts critique no doubt took other forms as well, but the evidence we have is often limited. It is especially difficult to reconstruct the conventions of critique in a given context because these have rarely been discussed explicitly, even today—hence the special interest of this unique Forum. Happily I have found a good number of thoughtful recent discussions of the nature and norms of various kinds of critical interactions in early modern Europe. New ideals of moderation in scholarly discussions clashed with new opportunities (afforded by various printed genres in particular) to bring disputes to the attention of a wider public, generating many different patterns of behavior.

The term itself cannot serve as an adequate guide through the topic, although cognate terms date back to antiquity and to medieval French. The Greek *κρίνειν* (to decide, judge) yielded the medical notion of “critical days” which defined the course of an illness. That medical term was used in Greek and Latin and in French as early as the fourteenth century. But classical Latin also included the meaning for “criticus” as “critic/critical” that is familiar to us. The two main modern senses of “critic” as someone who judges severely or who judges skillfully appeared ca. 1600 in English and are first recorded in

I am grateful to Anthony Grafton, Nick Popper, and David Kammerling Smith for very helpful references and comments and to Marcia Colish for expert advice on medieval critique.

¹ Olga Weijers, *In search of the truth. A history of disputation techniques from antiquity early modern times* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 131; and Françoise Waquet, “La longue vie de la dispute: contribution à l’histoire d’un genre universitaire,” in *République des lettres, République des arts*, eds. Christian Mouchel and Colette Nativel (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 135- 47.

French dictionaries in the late seventeenth century; the OED dates “critique” as the act of criticizing only to the eighteenth century; the term was also used to describe the multi-faceted judgment applied in textual criticism.² The emergence of the non-medical use of the term in the early modern period is no doubt a clue to a new awareness at that time of criticism as a feature of intellectual life. Indeed criticism was practiced in a number of new settings in the seventeenth century, such as salons, academies, periodicals, and book reviews. But many other terms were also in use, some of long standing, to refer to a complex range of critical interactions, including *polémique*, *querelle*, *controverse*, *discussion*, *débat*, *conflit*, and *dispute*.³ Today we may wish to make some distinctions between these terms; for example one historian uses “discussion” for debates which reached a resolution agreed on by the disputing parties, “dispute” for those which never could be resolved for lack of sufficient common ground, and “controverse” for the shifting debates which lay in the large zone between those two poles.⁴ But during the early modern period the various terms designating controversies were used with so much overlap as to be indistinguishable from one another.⁵

The early modern period was rich in critique in controversies carried out in different styles for different target audiences.⁶ Humanists were famous for their critiques of scholasticism but also their biting attacks on one another. These disputes took place in Latin for an international but narrow audience of scholars with plentiful invective imitated from ancient models and a vocabulary of insults that was not taught in

² I have relied on *OED* and, in the absence of an equivalent historical dictionary for French, on the collection of early dictionaries in ARTFL; the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694) is the earliest dictionary in that collection to contain an entry for “critique.” On the use of “critique” in philology, which is not mentioned in *OED*, Benedetto Bravo, “Critique in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the rise of the notion of historical criticism,” *History of scholarship : a selection of papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship held annually at the Warburg Institute*, ed. C.R. Ligota and J.-L. Quantin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 135-95.

³ Valérie Robert, “Polémiques entre intellectuels: pratiques et fonctions,” in *Intellectuels et polémiques dans l'espace germanophone*, ed. Valérie Robert (Paris: Publications de l'Institut allemand, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003), 11-59, at 11; and Antoine Lilti, “Querelles et controverses. Les formes du désaccord intellectuel à l'époque moderne,” *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 25 (1/2007), 13-28, accessed August 11, 2015. www.cairn.info/revue-mil-neuf-cent-2007-1-page-13.htm.

⁴ Marcelo Dascal, “Controverses et polémiques,” in *La science classique XVIe-XVIIIe. Dictionnaire critique*, ed. Michel Blay and Robert Halleux (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 26-35, at 30. Lilti proposes “controverse dialogique” and “controverse antagoniste” to make a similar distinction; Lilti, “Querelles et controverses,” paragraph 19.

⁵ Françoise Waquet, *Respublica academica: Rituels universitaires et genres du savoir, XVIIe-XXIe siècles* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010), 43-52 (chapter on “Les polémiques et leurs usages dans la République des lettres”).

⁶ I have decided to omit political controversies which were legion, erupting especially at times of monarchical weakness. Religious disputes, of course, had clear political dimensions and, occasionally, other kinds of polemics were perceived to also, so the boundaries are never clear cut.

classrooms.⁷ Religion was a constant source of polemics between and within confessions as the Reformers broke from the traditional Church and then hoped to stem further splintering: Luther's foundational dispute with Erasmus on free will in the 1520s was followed by many internal disputes (e.g. Gnesio-lutherans vs Philippists, orthodox vs pietists, or, among Calvinists, Arminians vs Remonstrants). French Catholicism in particular wrestled with Huguenots of course, but also with Jansenism, Quietism, and endless conflicts between Gallicanism and Ultramontanism, mostly in French and thus in view of a broader public. Religious polemic often took the form of point-by-point refutation, in which an opponent's positions and citations of authority were readily distorted in order to mock them better, and name-calling was traded back and forth.⁸ But religion was dangerous terrain for a public show of disagreement, so at various points ecclesiastical and/or secular authorities would shut down disputes which they considered threatening to social harmony or religious authority, applying censorship and appealing to the widely accepted principle of religious conformity.

By contrast the ideal of the Republic of Letters, which originated in the world of Latin learning and was adopted by French elites in the seventeenth century, advanced the principles of freedom to philosophize and to debate. That ideal helped fuel controversies that drew vigorous participation from an educated public in France on questions of literature (e.g. the Querelles du Cid of 1637 or des Anciens et des Modernes triggered in 1687) and of philosophy/natural philosophy, e.g. in the successive waves of debate about Cartesianism, Newtonianism, the shape of the earth, vitalism, or the nature of electricity. By generally steering clear of religious and political topics, participants in the Republic of Letters created a space that was relatively free of intervention from church or state, in which they could experiment with new mechanisms for critique and the resolution of disputes. These experiments included innovations of the late seventeenth century which are still with us today, such as learned societies, periodicals, and book reviews, but which operated differently, notably without systematic peer review. Less visible developments which I will emphasize involved new ideals for scholarly exchange that would be free from prior social or intellectual allegiances, but also moderate rather than passionate; and the careful use of print and manuscript to minimize risks to honor and reputation.

Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), a French Huguenot living in exile in the Low Countries, played a crucial role in both practicing and discussing critique for readers of French. From 1684 to 1687 he served as founding editor and principal author of the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, a monthly periodical devoted to book reviews—a new genre

⁷ For a glossary of humanist terms of abuse see this guide to Joseph Scaliger's invective, accessed August 11, 2015. <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research/projects/scaliger/scaligers-abusive-language/>

⁸ On the polemics of the wars of religion, see Geneviève Guilleminot, "La polémique en 1561: les règles du jeu," in *Le pamphlet en France au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Ecole Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles, 1983), 47-58, at 53; Olivier Christin, "Je montrerai la chose au doigt: l'exigence critique dans la controverse religieuse du XVIe siècle," in *De l'autorité à la référence*, ed. Isabelle Diu and Raphaële Mouren (Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2014), 99-113; Malcolm Walsby, "L'auteur et l'imprimé polémique et éphémère français au seizième siècle," in *Auteur, collaborateur, traducteur, imprimeur... qui écrit?* ed. Martine Furno and Raphaële Mouren (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), 35-55. For a valuable French glossary of terms of invective from the period see Claude Postel, *Traité des invectives au temps de la Réforme* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004), 461-98.

that offered summaries, often with extracts, and some assessment of recent books. Then as now reviews could both guide readers in choosing what to read and substitute for reading the books themselves. But book reviews were not the location of Bayle's most pointed judgments. He reserved those for the innards of his massive *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* [sic] which appeared in two folio volumes in 1697 and proved a great success. It was regularly reprinted in augmented editions for over fifty years and appeared as the single most owned item in a study of private Parisian libraries between 1750 and 1780.⁹ Bayle had initially envisioned writing a dictionary of errors, especially focused on the faults in the *Grand dictionnaire historique* published by Louis Moréri in 1674. But Bayle explained in his preface how his plan shifted with the realization that "the discovery of errors [of fact] is not important or useful to the prosperity of the State or of private persons." Instead he composed his own dictionary of proper names of biblical and ancient figures, in which the articles were outweighed by the commentary in the notes. There Bayle spared neither contemporaries nor long canonized figures like David king of the Hebrews in critiquing examples of immoral conduct, illogical thinking, or unclear writing.

Bayle also advocated for intellectual freedom as the hallmark of the Republic of Letters, notably in a passage in the *Dictionnaire* characteristically buried in a long note to a short and obscure article on Catus, an Epicurean philosopher named by Cicero. Bayle's mention of a scholarly dispute on Catus pitting one man against his son-in-law served as the opportunity for his reflection:

Cette république est un état extrêmement libre. On n'y reconnaît que l'empire de la vérité et de la raison. ... Les amis s'y doivent tenir en garde contre leurs amis, les pères contre leurs enfans, les beaux-pères contre leur gendres. ... Chacun y est tout ensemble souverain et justiciable de chacun. ... Tous les particuliers ont à cet égard [par rapport à l'erreur et à l'ignorance] le droit du glaive et le peuvent exercer sans en demander la permission à ceux qui gouvernent. ... Si on [fait connaître les fautes qui sont dans un livre] en soutenant le parti de la raison, et par le seul intérêt de la vérité, et d'une manière honnête, personne n'y doit trouver à redire.¹⁰

Bayle considered each individual as a sovereign agent in the Republic of Letters, released from ties of friendship and family, from control by the state—free to find fault with anyone's work. He might have added also freedom from a school or an ancient authority. That sentiment especially was echoed in contemporary use of the dictum (by Charleton and Newton among others): "amicus Plato, amicus Aristoteles, magis amica veritas"—Plato is my friend, Aristotle is my friend, but truth is a greater friend.¹¹ Bayle and other

⁹ Daniel Mornet, "Les enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750-1780)," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (1910), 449-96, at 460.

¹⁰ Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1697), article "Catus," note D. For citation and discussion of this passage, see Waquet, *Respublica academica*, 43.

¹¹ Henry Guerlac, "Amicus Plato and other friends," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39:4 (1978), 627-33.

“moderns” (including the many inspired by Francis Bacon) proudly proclaimed their ability to shake off traditional allegiances in free debate and the search for truth. The only requirements for the proper exercise of that freedom, according to Bayle, were honesty and a rejection of any motivation other than truth-seeking. Of course those constraints could prove hard to respect in practice.¹²

Controversy continued to be recognized as an inevitable and productive part of intellectual life, but early modern period scholars articulated new concerns about maintaining decorum and seeking moderation in intellectual disputes. Books of academic advice—a new field of writing that culminated in the academic discipline of “*historia litteraria*” in Germany universities 1670-1730—included treatises and dissertations on proper methods of study and warnings against the “vices of learning” designed to improve the morality and civility of the scholarly community. Among the vices “*logomachia*” or the waging of battles through words was condemned as a consequence of self-love, ambition, or greed. Just as humanists of the fifteenth century had mocked scholastics for their excessively polemical and silly disputations, so too these academics of the late seventeenth century lambasted humanists of the sixteenth century as pedants who were quarrelsome and lacked self-control. They cited, for example, the dispute between the humanist printer Paulus Manutius (1512-74) and French scholar Denis Lambin (1520-72) over whether the Latin “*consum(p)tum*” should be spelled with or without a “p.” The argument became physical when Manutius reportedly threw a stone (featuring an ancient inscription with the spelling he favored, with a “p”) at Lambin’s face, breaking his nose.¹³ (To the historian, this seems a likely case of a “*hypo-polemic*” in which the underlying sources of the conflict were left unstated.¹⁴)

Already in 1584 advice books explained that in practicing disputations boys should maintain self-control and shun not only physical violence, but also shouting or pandering to audience applause.¹⁵ In his *Dissertatio de logomachiis eruditorum* (1702) Samuel Werenfels offered detailed advice on how to avoid such excesses: scholars should rid themselves of prejudice, express themselves clearly and concisely (he recommended that all scholars use a single normative dictionary to agree on the meanings of words), and should be careful not to argue about words, only about “things.”¹⁶ Other authors in this vein complained of the “warlike disposition” of those who hunted for small mistakes and deliberately twisted and falsified an opponent’s argument. They also warned against self-love, ambition, and avarice, since proper scholarly interchange was vitiated by those who

¹² On the Republic of Letters, its ideals, and its practices, see Anne Goldgar, *Impolite learning: conduct and community in the Republic of Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹³ This episode is recounted in multiple sources studied by Sari Kivistö, *The Vices of Learning: Morality and Knowledge at Early Modern Universities* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 147; and also in English in *The History of the Works of the Learned* (London: Jacob Robinson, 1741), 324 (issue of November 1741, article 20).

¹⁴ On “*hypo-polemic*,” see Robert, 32-33.

¹⁵ Johannes Fungerus, *De puerorum disciplina et recta educatione* (1584), as discussed in Kivistö, 148.

¹⁶ Kivistö, 169-70.

shunned hard work and only argued vapidly instead, by those who could not tolerate anyone disagreeing with them, and by greedy men whose intellectual positions were driven by financial self-interest. For example, they might spare their patrons due criticism or on the contrary inappropriately attack new ideas out of concern for their income (as some anti-Cartesians did, according to Werenfels). These calls for scholarship beholden only to honest truth-seeking spread beyond the German academic context, through translation (e.g. Werenfels, *A Discourse of Logomachys*, 1711) and discussion in journals such as the *Acta eruditorum*.¹⁷

The emphasis on moderation and dispassion might also be viewed as an aspect of Norbert Elias's "civilizing process" in which self-control increasingly defined the norms of good behavior in a variety of areas of life starting in the Renaissance.¹⁸ Certainly by the late seventeenth century the stakes of intellectual missteps were also reduced from earlier periods of persecution of heretics to the death. The execution of the Scottish student Thomas Aikenhead for blasphemy in 1697 was an outlier event in its context and is considered the last execution in Western Europe for a crime that was only intellectual (i.e. without related charges of sedition).¹⁹ Even in religious circles where passionate attacks on enemies were long valued as a sign of proper religiosity, the ideal of modesty and self-control gradually came to outweigh competing virtues. For example in Dutch Calvinism public disputes were increasingly discouraged starting in the late seventeenth century and theologians were enjoined to be modest and restrained (but without being timid or "soft"). By the late eighteenth century religious disputatiousness was no longer acceptable in the Netherlands; it was perceived to bring discredit to the Church and to strengthen the arguments of the irreligious.²⁰

Despite the rise of ideals of moderation, early modern scholars certainly engaged in plenty of polemics. It would be hard to gauge whether early modern European intellectuals were more or less polemical than their counterparts in other historical contexts, and I do not propose to try. Nevertheless one distinctive feature of intellectual life after the mid-fifteenth century clearly raised the stakes of contemporary polemics and massively enlarged the record we have of them: printing, and the potential it offered for bringing a controversy to an audience far beyond its community of origin. A controversy carried out in print was inevitably more than a dispassionate search for truth; it was an opportunity for the players in contention to gain (or lose) reputation on a much larger scale than the here-and-now and an opportunity for printers to profit directly, and others indirectly, from the considerable commercial success of polemical imprints (especially in

¹⁷ Kivistö, 173-47, 187-89, 170.

¹⁸ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. The History of Manners*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urzen Books, 1978), e.g. ch. 10 ("On changes in aggressiveness").

¹⁹ Michael Graham, *The blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: boundaries of belief on the eve of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Joris van Eijnatten, "From modesty to mediocrity: regulating public dispute, 1670-1840: the case of Dutch divines," *Common Knowledge* 8:2 (2002): 310-332.

the form of cheap pamphlets). Given these stakes, the exchange of critique in print almost never respected the rules articulated by Werenfels or Bayle.

When a controversy occurred in print, the antagonists tended to dig into their positions, lashing out with insults (among philosophers a favorite was the recently coined accusation of “atheism”) and shifting the grounds of the issue in search of an advantage (for example, declaring the adversary unqualified to enter the debate). As one historian has pointed out, print nonetheless also made it possible to confront a falsified quotation or claim, so that recklessly false claims and misquotations could backfire and were curtailed in the more sophisticated religious polemics. Calvin, for example, displayed the precision of his juridical training in quoting verbatim from his opponents to show how they misquoted him, and then used those errors to argue against them.²¹ Getting into print ahead of one’s opponent was another long-running principle of early modern controversialists. For example Luther timed his attack on Erasmus on free will (*De libero arbitrio*, 1526) so close to the Frankfurt book fair that he assumed that Erasmus could not possibly respond in time; but a friend leaked the text to Erasmus twelve days before the fair and with fiendish speed Erasmus read Luther’s 300-page treatise, composed his reply, and thanks to the full support of Froben’s printshop, his 156-page counterargument was available for sale alongside Luther’s attack at the fair.²²

Once a work was printed, someone’s honor was at stake and was typically perceived to be damaged by printed criticism of any kind. While a handful of early modern scholars seemed undeterred by vehement criticism—one thinks of the remarkable Jean Hardouin who concluded that almost all ancient texts were humanist forgeries—most were extremely sensitive to the potential for loss of honor.²³ The calculus about how and when to respond to criticism in print was complex because, according to the hierarchies tacitly operating within the Republic of Letters, it was generally considered degrading to reply to someone who was considered inferior based on social standing (including gender) and on scholarly reputation (*pace* Bayle’s celebration of freedom from social constraints).²⁴ When attacked by someone they considered their inferior, scholars often declined to respond and remained silent. Or if they could not resist the itch to publish, they would do so with subterfuge in an anonymous or pseudonymous work. When Jean Bodin’s massive work of political philosophy, *Six livres de la République* (1576), triggered printed critiques from both ends of the political spectrum and from an astrologer who disagreed with Bodin’s own numerological predictions and for whom Bodin had the utmost scorn, Bodin replied but not in his own name. Instead the 1583 edition of the *République* ended with an *Apologie* by one René Herpin in which each of Bodin’s critics found his

²¹ Christin, 107-8.

²² Alexandre Vanautgaerden, *Erasme typographe* (Geneva: Droz, 2012), 494 concerning Erasmus’s *Hyperaspistes* (1526).

²³ Anthony Grafton, “The Antiquary as Pariah,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999): 241-67, at 249-50.

²⁴ Isabelle Pantin, “La querelle savante dans l’Europe de la Renaissance Éthique et étiquette,” *Enquête* 5 (1997): <http://enquete.revues.org/1093>

comeuppance. Herpin explained that he was a friend of Bodin, who took up Bodin's defense because the latter refused to. Herpin quoted from a letter in which Bodin explained (in Latin while the rest of the work was in French) that the "contentious type of writing is hardly praiseworthy and is often abused" and that he intended instead to show the "patience and modesty that accompany true honor" and to "bear patiently the just reprehension of friends or foes." Bodin's immediate contemporaries showed no sign of seeing through the subterfuge, which was first made explicit in a 1708 dictionary of pseudonyms.²⁵ Whereas Bodin invented the person he used as a pseudonym, others published under the name of an actual person—typically a student or assistant who could bear responsibility for the publication and if necessary could be denounced as having no association with the actual author.²⁶ The urge to settle scores in print was powerful, but equally powerful in these cases was the desire to maintain a persona of scholarly dispassion, characterized by "patience" and "modesty" in the face of attack—in other words, that self-control also advocated by Pierre Bayle and the German advice manuals.

The learned academies in France were founded in the seventeenth century as institutions capable of (among other tasks) resolving disputes on topics relevant to their expertise; interestingly, they were also expected to foster disputes considered beneficial to the state, notably by setting questions to be answered in writing competitions open to the public.²⁷ But from the beginning, despite royal funding and episodes of more or less direct royal intervention, the academies never carried as much weight as public reputation. Pierre Corneille was among the first to appeal explicitly to the "public" to support his play (*Le Cid*) in response to the condemnation issued by the recently founded Académie française on the grounds that he had violated Aristotelian principles of unity (of time, place, and action). Corneille pointed out that the public loved his play and thumbed his nose at the institution. Similarly, in his first attempt to build support for his ideas Descartes chose French for his *Discourse on Method* (1637) and flattered every reader with his opening observation that "le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée"—since no one complains of not having enough of it. Cartesianism first spread in France not through the support of specialists in the universities or academies, but through the enthusiasm of salon-going elites and readers for the evening lectures of Jacques Rohault in the 1650s and publications like his *Traité de Physique* (1671) and Fontenelle's best-selling *Discourse on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686). The Académie des Sciences played its designated role in intervening in the debates over Newtonianism in the 1730s and funding expeditions to the North Pole and the Equator to measure the curvature of the earth. When Maupertuis returned from the North-bound of these two expeditions, the Académie also pronounced a conclusion to the argument: Maupertuis' measurements supported Newton's rather than Descartes' physics. But Maupertuis was not content with this result.

²⁵ Ann Blair, "Authorial Strategies in Jean Bodin," in *The Reception of Bodin*, ed. Howell A. Lloyd (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 137-56, esp. 142-44.

²⁶ Robert calls such players "hypo-actors"; see Robert, 32-33. For a contemporary report of such a case, see Nicolas de Nancel, *Petri Rami Vita* (1599), available in Peter Sharratt ed. and tr., "Nicolaus Nancelius, *Petri Rami Vita*," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 24 (1975): 161-277, at 221.

²⁷ Jeremy Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in practice : academic prize contests and intellectual culture in France, 1670-1794* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

He wanted to build a reputation with the public at the expense of his adversary, the astronomer Jacques Cassini. Among various maneuvers to aggrandize himself, Maupertuis published an anonymous tract which subtly satirized Cassini, and then he “actively encouraged speculation about its authorship,” including lying to close friends. The buzz around the tract triggered a second edition (with associated revenue), and when Maupertuis’ authorship became known, Cassini and his partisans “looked especially foolish.”²⁸ Printed controversies give historians rich source material to study but also display early modern critique at its most self-consciously strategic and rhetorical, as both sides sought to enlist the “public” to their cause.

As a result of the risks associated with printed critique, many examples of intellectually significant critique were carefully withheld from print. When they could not do so in person, scholars in all fields carried out their most delicate intellectual interactions by letter. Letters were not always private—they could be shared with others with or without the sender’s consent—but one’s reputation within the scholarly community depended on respecting the status of the letter as a space for discussion that would not be printed without the author’s consent. Communication by letter facilitated exchange across confessional and political boundaries that had to be respected in the public eye. Catholics could not cite Lutheran sources in print, but a Jesuit and a Lutheran could carry on a correspondence about the timing of the Star of Bethlehem and its relation to an astronomical conjunction. For example, Johannes Kepler exchanged letters with the Jesuit Johannes Decker in the early 1600s on this topic, and they also discussed what they would each publish and not publish. In one letter Decker asked Kepler to return a polemical text he had sent him; Kepler did so, and when Kepler published these parts of his correspondence he omitted, unbidden, that and other sensitive passages out of deference to Decker’s trust in him.²⁹ In bringing manuscript letters to print early modern scholars showed close attention to any passage that could cause embarrassment or be perceived as a slight; as a result most printed collections of letters involved silent modifications of various kinds.³⁰

But the privacy and freedom of manuscript could also be combined with the broad reach of printing to gather valuable critique. The Zurich naturalist Conrad Gessner (1516-65) for example used the front matter in many of his 60-odd publications to communicate with readers and dedicatees, inviting them to contribute to his ongoing collections of natural historical information with new materials as well as corrections. In his *De piscibus* of 1556, for example, Gessner addressed a man he had never met but about whom he had heard good things and whose publications he had seen, Burchard

²⁸ Mary Terrall, *The Man Who Flattened the Earth. Maupertuis and the Sciences in the Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 156-60.

²⁹ Anthony Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words. Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 114-36 (“Chronology, Controversy and Community in the Republic of Letters”), at 129.

³⁰ For some discussion of this process see Léon-Ernest Halkin, *Erasmus ex Erasmo: Erasme, éditeur de sa correspondance* (Aubel, Belgium: P. M. Gason, 1983); and Anthony Grafton, *The Culture of Correction in Renaissance Europe* (London: British Library, 2011), 196-200.

Mythobius (Mithoff) in distant Northern Germany: “I have decided I should make you my patron and most learned censor.” Gessner thus invited Mythobius to offer an expert critique of the work and specifically expressed the hope that he would send him images of fish from the Baltic Sea. In his history of fish published two years later Gessner thanked 25 learned men for their contributions of materials, though Mythobius was not among them. I am not aware of any instance where Gessner made a correction to his work as a result of the response by a reader or dedicatee, but of course authors are not eager to call attention to an error by noting its correction, so the absence of explicit evidence need not preclude such an occurrence. In any case Gessner clearly envisioned his published appeals as a means of expanding the geographical range of his materials, since he travelled only minimally himself and yet sought to report on species from all over Europe. Similarly in occasional cases we know that learned contemporaries annotated copies of printed books with the intention of sending them back to the author with valuable feedback written in the margins. Even though we lack confirmation that these particular copies served their intended purpose, the intention itself suggests that such feedback could sometimes reach its destination.³¹

The precirculation of a manuscript meant for publication was another means of gathering critique. Given the limited success of his *Discourse* in winning the minds of his contemporaries, Descartes adopted a different strategy for his longer presentation of his system in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641). Before publishing his work Descartes circulated the manuscript in order to gather objections. He solicited these directly from a few friends and indirectly through the intermediary of his friend and abundant letter-writer Marin Mersenne, whom he tasked with eliciting from theologians and philosophers the strongest objections that could be raised. Descartes published the objections and his responses to them alongside the work itself in an attempt to forestall similar criticism. Descartes was probably less interested in modifying his thinking based on the feedback, though he tried to call attention to a handful of small corrections and revised his thinking on one point in a later work; nevertheless he pioneered a form of author-initiated peer review.³² In other cases, an information broker in the Republic of Letters could play the role of intermediary to elicit feedback on new work without putting the scholars in direct contact and potentially unleashing a controversy.³³ Henry Oldenburg as secretary of the Royal Society played this role regularly, seeking to foster communication while avoiding quarrels. Oldenburg managed delicate relationships among natural philosophers in other ways too, by serving as confidential repositor of

³¹ For the case of John Dee’s annotations in his copy of Josias Simler’s *Bibliotheca instituta et collecta* (1574) see Frederic Clark, “Dividing time: the making of historical periodization in early modern Europe” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014), 55-56; and R.J. Roberts, “Notable Accessions,” *Bodleian Library Record* 14 (1994): 529-3 concerning Bodleian Library Arch.H.c.7.

³² See Roger Ariew and Donald Cress, eds., *René Descartes. Meditations, Objections, and Replies* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2006), xiv (Descartes requested that the corrections be noted in brackets, but the printer did not do so), xviii-xix (Descartes clarified his discussion of the distinction between body and soul in his *Principia philosophiae* of 1644 as a result of an objection to his *Meditations*).

³³ Marin Mersenne more than once forced the hand of scholars reluctant to print by fostering a dispute according to Adrien Baillet, *Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691), as discussed in Waquet, *Respublica academica*, 48.

letters that could document someone's results on a topic in case a controversy broke out later and by helping to resolve disputes outside the glare of print. Oldenburg also experimented with peer review by asking members of the Royal Society to serve as referees. But conscious of the risks such a task also posed to themselves, many of them demurred or opted for "Solomon-like judgments." And in some cases, despite his efforts, Oldenburg could only watch as a controversy which had first unfolded "in a relatively moderate form within a private exchange of letters" exploded "in full rage and in public."³⁴

Early modern authors wrestled with the impact of print on controversies, which were carefully seeded by some, dreaded by many, and which easily spiraled out of anyone's control. So too today we navigate a stormy ocean of new challenges and opportunities posed by digital media. New forms of communication and interaction stir up multiple, sometimes opposite effects. The cover (or supposed cover) of anonymity has let loose flame wars and trolling but also heartfelt sharing. The subcommunities that gather on the web can be criticized as narrow-minded echo chambers or praised as uniquely supportive interest groups. Free on-line publication has the potential to reach almost anyone across vast expanses of space and time (since it is unclear what can or will be "erased" from the web), and the mind-boggling expanse of the internet becomes apparent occasionally when something unpredictably "goes viral" and blazes across it like a shooting star. Today as in the past essential forms of critique are also carried out privately rather than in printed or electronic publication. These forms are less visible to contemporaries--and even less so to those trying to write a history of critique. What has come down to us most clearly is the ideal of communication developed by scholars in the early modern Republic of Letters: the notion that communication should be free from constraints of government, family obligation or social hierarchy, but also free from *logomachia* thanks to the exercise of moderation and self-control. An awareness of the power of print likely encouraged the formation of that ideal of dispassionate and moderate scholarly debate. Today as we engage with even more powerful technologies, I hope we strive to implement that ideal, even though the example of our early modern counterparts reminds us that it is not easy to do so.

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³⁴ Jordan Avramov, "Letter writing and the management of scientific controversy: The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg (1661-1677)," in *Self-Presentation and Social Identification: The Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times*, ed. Toon Van Houdt et al. (Leuven, 2002), 337-363, esp. at 349-50, 352, 354.

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