CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Academic Self-criticism in the Early Modern Period

Dissertations on Scholarly Vices

This book sets out to answer a seemingly simple question: What constituted scholarly vices in the late Baroque and early Enlightenment periods? The question arises from the curious fact that moral criticism of the learned was a favourite theme of academic dissertations, polemical tracts and satires written in Germany ca. 1670–1730. Vices and errors of the learned (*vitia sive errores eruditorum*) were dealt with in numerous Latin dissertations as well as in philosophical and theological treatises, which proclaimed a set of vices that often included, at the very least, *philautia* (self-love) and ambition. Works on scholarly pride, quarrelling, bad manners, plagiarism and other vices kept the presses running at the Protestant universities of Leipzig, Jena and Königsberg as well as farther north. Thus, social and moral criticism of the stereotyped image of a scholar was combined with scientific criticism.

The exact numbers of Latin dissertations on this theme are difficult to determine, but such theses were extremely popular, especially in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. Martin Gierl has suggested that there must have been several hundred academic works on vices of the learned,¹ whereas William Clark’s appendix of dissertations on scholarly peculiarities lists one hundred titles that were printed in late Baroque and early Enlightenment Germany.² Leonard Forster mentions sixty-six dissertations on charlatanry.³ The dissertations ridiculed university professors for their many sins, demonstrated through historical anecdotes, commonplace images and biographical eccentricities. As William Clark has pointed out, erudite dissertations on scholars often leave a strangely satirical impression on the reader, even though the texts are presented as serious theses and not as mock dissertations, which was a special satirical genre. Clark even suggests that “perhaps academic satire made its final flourish in the late Baroque and early Enlightenment.”⁴ But we

¹ Gierl (1997, 546).
⁴ Clark (2006, 217).
could equally well argue that there is something universal and lasting in the satirical criticism of these vices, owing to our human and scholarly nature.

The tradition of the textual dissertation flourished in later seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Germany, the period which is the focus of this study.\footnote{The years from 1670 to 1730/1740 have often been called a transition period between the Baroque and the Enlightenment, or the political-gallant epoch (Grimm 1983, 426; Kühlmann 1982, 36).} Dissertations that specifically focused on the learned, their morals and their disreputable ways of acquiring power and glory make interesting documents from this period, which was, roughly speaking, characterised by an intellectual and educational shift from humanistic and theological ideals of learning and their traditional authorities to more experimental and scientific activities, which stressed the importance of independent thinking and the practical usefulness of academic disciplines.\footnote{See, e.g., Grimm (1983, 223–236); Marti (2004, 60, 71); Hammerstein (1996, 120). Israel (2001) gives an overview of the developments of philosophy in 1650–1750. Grimm (1987, also 1983, 363–375) gives a good, concise overview of the changes in Gelehrtenum in Germany during this period.} These tensions created a large body of critical and polemical literature, which ridiculed both sides of the conflict. During this period dissertations on scholarly vices appeared especially at the University of Leipzig, which was not only the centre of book trade and printing in Germany, but also has often been considered a conservative university strongly focused on orthodox modes of theological study, as opposed to such reform-minded universities as the newly-founded University of Halle, for example, and its Enlightenment movements.\footnote{However, see Marti (2004, 55–56), who argues that the view about the conservatism of Leipzig is too simple. On Leipzig, see Marti and Döring (2004); Witkowski (1994). On dissertations published in Leipzig, see also Hesse (1993). On early modern universities in general, see Ridder-Symoens (1996). Dissertations were mainly published at Protestant universities, and dissertations from Catholic universities are more scarce (see Evans 1981, 176–177). Evans (178) observes that the backbone of the dissertation literature was furnished by three universities: Leipzig, Jena and Wittenberg. Legal theses dominated the production at Jena.} The pressures and requirements faced by scholars of the time were thus more palpable in Leipzig than in other universities, and the conflicts between old and new academic orientations were frequently deliberated on in the dissertations printed there. The influential Leipzig philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) was an important critic of scholarly vices, as he steadfastly emphasised the value of sociability and ridiculed university pedants. For him, true erudition was not evinced in