CHAPTER 6

Bad Manners and Old Learning

Unfashionable Scholars

Early modern academics were at pains to develop their social skills whenever universities and civil society were looking for professionals who were not only wise, but also men of the world. The schoolmen were obliged to adapt themselves to changing fashions and update their communication skills and even their outlook, as contemporaries took note of clothing as a crucial part of proper scholarly conduct. The importance of good behaviour and the requirements for sociability emerge in the dissertation material, where impoliteness and distinctly worn clothing were discussed amongst the ridiculous vices of the previous generations. Johann Gottfried Büchner counted bad manners (mores mali) among the vices of the will,¹ and Daniel Friedrich Jahn argued that a very small amount of erudition combined with good manners was more powerful than the knowledge of all languages and disciplines.² To quote Anne Goldgar, “the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns, usually defined as an intellectual debate, was also a battle about personal style, about the nature of social interaction.”³ One character type found in the contemporary texts was the school fox (“vulpecula scholastica” or “Schul-Fuchs”), a teacher whose cheap fox-fur cloak symbolised his outdated character and whose social skills were limited. In two orations De vulpeculis scholasticis (Jena 1614, printed in 1630), the professor of ethics and politics at Jena, Wolfgang M. Heider (1558–1626), mentioned that the term which had been in use for thirty years stemmed from one particular teacher, who taught for decades in the dusty shadows of a small Trivial school. Soon after his return to Jena the students there began to mock him as a scholastic fox because of his unfashionable garments and lifestyle. His shy and reserved character aggravated the situation, as it did not meet the required social standards. Soon the nickname “fox” was used for other literate men of his kind. However, Heider’s sympathies were with the old man, who was identified as the professor of ethics and logic at Jena, M. Caspar Arnurus. Heider also studied scholars’ other supposedly vulpine characteristics,

² Jahn (1720, XLIX).
³ Goldgar (1995, 10).
such as cunning and cruelty, which emerged in the community’s reactions to this particular schoolmaster and others of his generation.

The charge that old-fashioned scholars and their bad manners were ridiculous was constantly repeated in contemporary polemics, which suggested that while concentrating on reading their manuscripts, these old bookworms never learned to dress properly. Many central humanist authorities were typically careless about their appearance. For example, Petrarch was the stock figure of a man who did not pay attention to his appearance. He wore the same filthy cloak day and night, and when a sudden thought occurred to him, he wrote it down on its cloth. Philosophers in particular were accused of neglecting their appearance and wearing ragged clothes. Notoriously sordid intellectuals were Villifrancus, an intelligent Etrurian poet, who slept in a dirty bed covered in spider webs.\(^4\) According to Erythraeus’s *Pinacotheca*, the poet was wearing clothes so filthy that they would stick to the wall like glue. Early Enlightenment rationalists, while emphasising the value of socialising, criticised the slovenliness of the learned. Some university dissertations were specifically devoted to this topic, including that of the master of theology, Matthias Georg Schröder (1695–1719), entitled *De misocosmia eruditorum* (Leipzig, 1717) and, in Finland, the later *Dissertatio academica de misokosmia* (1775) by Professor Johan Bilmark. Schröder opened his playful thesis by reminding his readers that wearing clothes resulted from the first sin and was the consequence of Adam and Eve’s pride. While the first parents became ashamed of their nudity, later generations were now often ashamed of their clothing, which symbolised the first sin. Schröder repeatedly associated clothes with deadly sins: In addition to pride, avarice and negligence were cited as common reasons for unclean clothing.\(^5\) Classical philosophers treated the beard as a sign of wisdom, but

---

\(^4\) On Petrarch and Villifrancus, see, for example, Jahn (1720, LVIII–LIX). Lilienthal (1713) gave many similar examples. Warning examples included Curtius Orator, mentioned among the eccentric learned, who used to shake his body while speaking as if he were standing in a boat. Socrates used to tear his hair while speaking, and Rudolph Agricola chewed his fingernails when absorbed in thinking. Scholars were counselled to avoid splendid clothes, but also to shun the other extreme of sordid costume. As cautionary examples, Lilienthal mentioned, Caspar Barth, Girolamo Cardano and Petrarch.

\(^5\) On pride and clothes, see Schröder (1717, §I, “Superbia in vestitu praecipue Academico rejecta”): “Superbia in hanc miseriam genus humanum traxit... In nulla re magis se exserit superbia hominum, quam in vestibus...” And later on avarice (§III): “Avarorum omnium character esse solet immundities, & multi ex eruditis sordidis in hanc miseriam lapsi sunt per avaritiam.” Cf. Bilmark on pride and clothing (1775, §II): “Qui igitur superbiae oestro sunt fascinati, nihil magis anquirunt, quam ut a caeteris in victu et amictu distinguantur.” And on avarice (1775, §III): “Praecipua autem misokosmias mater merito habetur avaritia.”