CHAPTER FIVE

SEMI-PUBLIC TEACHING

Introduction

In the previous chapters we have discussed two types of education at the Amsterdam Athenaeum: public and private. But in addition to these were mixed types, of which the most important was that centred on the disputation. Disputations were held exercitii gratia, that is, for practice. Since at the Athenaeum there were no pro gradu or inaugural disputations by which a doctorate was obtained, the word ‘disputations’ will be used to refer to these exercises in the rest of this book. Disputing was a practical method, combining elements of private and public education in an active process. Disputations were not always open to all; in this sense they were rather private affairs, although of course more people attended them than classes at home. Normally disputations took place in a designated area owned by the institution, which made them essentially public.

This chapter will focus primarily on the disputations, since these constituted the core of the curriculum. But also a number of other types of semi-public education will be discussed: retorical delivery in the auditorium, clinical teaching in the hospital and medical teaching in the anatomical theatre.

The disputation

The didactic aspects of the disputation

In the seventeenth century, the term disputatio referred either to an oral presentation or to a printed text containing the theses from such a presentation. The word disputare, to dispute, is derived from putare, to think or consider; and indeed, a disputation is in essence the consideration of a given subject, and the drawing of conclusions therefrom. In a pedagogical context, however, the term came to have the sense of
a debate or discussion. This practice was different from a lecture or oration—it was intended to invite discussion, as a preliminary to fixing conclusions on the subject being debated. It was also different from a dialogue, which was more spontaneous and immediate in the interaction of its participants. Being tentative, the disputation was suitable as a form of argumentative exercise; but it also served as a showcase for rhetorical style—as a marriage of style and content.

Names can be misleading, as we have already seen with the many terms for an illustrious school. Other terms besides disputatio were also used for a defence of theses; these terms always include some reference to ‘research’, ‘argument’ and ‘exercise’, which are at the core of the disputation.¹ The Dutch word strijдрede (‘battle speech’) expresses even better the practice of arguing for or against a position. The one presenting theses, the respondens or defendens, had to respond to opposition from his audience; this was good practice for his inaugural disputation, with which he would ideally conclude his studies. Professor Cabeliau insisted on considerable preparation for the inaugural disputation, emphasising that students should train in logic by means of disquisitions. Students often made fools of themselves defending their inaugural disputation, suffocating in a cloud of incomprehensible objections. To avoid humiliation at home, Dutch students occasionally went instead to France to present an inaugural disputation.²

Even before students joined the community of an athenaeum or university, they were familiarised with the disputation method. The Dutch School Order of 1625 decreed that Latin Schools were to hold disquisitions on Wednesdays and Saturdays. To encourage competition, students were assigned a new rank based on their performance each week, but we do not know to what extent these sessions actually took place.³

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¹ For example assertiones (statements), axiomata (principles), conclusiones (conclusions), enuntiata (statements), positiones (theses (in rhetoric)), propositiones (themes, theses), quaestiones (investigations, questions), repetitio (repetition, recapitulation), theoremata (problems, theses in need of proof; in Greek θεώρημα also means ‘presentation, display’, from θεώρειν, ‘to see, consider, judge, think through’), theses, disquisitio (examination), exercitatio (exercise) and tractatio (treatment, practice). See Ahsmann, Collegia en colleges, 296.
² Cabeliau, De praeparamentis, 23.
³ Spoelder, Prijsboeken, 127–128.