CRAFT SECRECY IN EUROPE IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

KAREL DAVIDS
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Craft secrecy is a quintessentially hybrid theme. Lying at the intersection of the history of ideas, the history of technology and economic and social history, it has the potential advantage of drawing attention from more than one quarter, but it also runs the risk of being ignored, because it does not, after all, lie in anyone’s domain. The growing cross-frontier traffic between historical disciplines in recent years has rescued the subject from neglect in this no-man’s land, however. Craft secrecy has turned out to be a relevant issue in various, partly related debates in medieval and early modern history, which have developed since the late 1980s. Both in the context of discussions on the origins of patents and notions of intellectual property and in the renewed debates surrounding the history of guilds and corporations and technological innovation in the pre-modern period, craft secrecy has come to be recognized as an interesting and significant phenomenon.

The scholar who has done most to highlight the importance of this theme is historian Pamela Long. Long has situated the evolution of craft secrecy in the framework of a broader history of key concepts related to the idea of “intellectual property” such as openness, secrecy, ownership and authorship, which transcend traditional boundaries between historical disciplines. None of these concepts was in the pre-modern period naturally accepted as a central value, she argued. Neither ‘openness’ nor ‘secrecy’ at this time enjoyed the status of a self-evident, general principle. The idea of a property right on knowledge only gradually took shape as a product of a contingent combination of historical circumstances and a fusion of different traditions of thinking.1 The emergence of craft secrecy, according to Long,

---

was a crucial link in the development of proprietary attitudes toward knowledge. While esoteric tendencies since late Antiquity had flourished in alchemy or Neoplatonist philosophy, evidence for intentional concealment of craft knowledge before the High Middle Ages is exceedingly sparse. It was the growth of cities and the rise of urban craft guilds that since the thirteenth century gave rise to the emergence of “proprietary attitudes towards craft knowledge.” “In the medieval urban context,” Long stated, “both knowledge of craft processes and mechanical inventions came to be considered intangible property separate from craft products and from the labor required to produce them.” Proprietary attitudes found expression in the rise of “craft secrecy to protect craft knowledge from theft” and “the development of the privilege or patent as a limited monopoly on inventions and craft processes.” The idea of ownership of knowledge, according to Long, thus originated in the world of craft production rather than in the world of book production. Patents on material objects and inventions preceded copyrights on books. Authorship of material objects and invention received legal protection at an earlier date than authorship of texts.

But the concept of openness, too, originated in the world of practical and mechanical arts, Long has claimed. ‘Openness’ is in her definition “the relative degree of freedom given to the dissemination of information or knowledge,” which implies “an accessibility or lack of restrictiveness with regard to communication.” The idea that knowledge should be transmitted openly, by recording it in written form, instead of being merely communicated orally and being screened from public view, was first consistently advocated by authors of books on mining and metallurgy, which began to appear in growing numbers since the sixteenth century. The spread of this idea was facilitated, though not determined, by the rise of printing. The idea of openness embodied in the corpus of writings on the mechanical arts in turn made an important contribution to the rise of the ideology of openness in science in the seventeenth century, Long has argued. Bacon and Boyle were much indebted to Agricola and