LITERATURE REVIEW

Meelis Friedenthal, Hanspeter Marti & Robert Seidel (eds.), *Early Modern Disputations and Dissertations in an Interdisciplinary and European Context* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021). 908 pp.

Per Pippin Aspaas, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

The doctoral defense is a ritual that commands respect. A successful defense is a source of pride for the candidate's supervisor and colleagues, as well as family and friends outside of Academia. As foundation for the ritual there is a text, a *thesis*. Nowadays this text is hardly ever in Latin; likewise, the oral defense is likely to be held in a vernacular language. Nevertheless, ages-old traditions of Latin rhetoric manifest themselves in the roles assigned to the various participants – the *opponentes* that present their criticism, the *candidatus/-a* that *respondet*, the highly respected member of faculty that *praesidet*, and so on. There are rules regarding opposition *ex auditorio*, and finally, there is the doctoral *diploma* itself, which is still printed in Latin at many universities.

The anthology under review is an ambitious effort to go to the roots of this ritual. In former times, disputations were far from exclusively associated with the doctoral degree. In addition to the *pro gradu* dissertation (for the degree of magister or doctor), there were dissertations written for disputations at gymnasiums, in monasteries, during synods, as an exercise (*pro exercitio*) for lower-grade students, and so on. In many cases, the *pro gradu* was far from obligatory in order to obtain a professorship. This goes to show that the function and status of dissertations were hardly uniform in all European countries. But how exactly did the ritual evolve in various national and regional contexts? Where did disputations take place, and at

https://doi.org/10.7557/4.5903

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

what stages in the educational process? What were the contents and uses of dissertation texts? The 32 chapters of this book are attempts to answer such questions.

The history of dissertations in francophone countries is particularly difficult to reconstruct, as thesis texts were not systematically preserved. A giant like Descartes, whose *Opera Omnia* have been edited and printed repeatedly over the centuries, in fact wrote a dissertation in jurisprudence that was not kept at a single public archive or library until 1981, when it was discovered that a printed copy of his *pro gradu* dissertation had survived, as backing for an engraving hanging on the wall of a US restaurant. Some private collectors in the eighteenth century did however collect as much as they could, enabling the historian to form an impression of the role of these largely ephemeral texts in certain disciplines such as medicine (see the chapter by Laurence Brockliss). In England, disputation rituals for younger students are well documented, witness the contributions by Tommi Alho and William M. Barton, who reconstruct the rituals at Cambridge and Oxford in great detail. The printed format of a thesis varied across regions. Some thesis broadsheets were rich in ornamentation, with artful illustrations printed alongside the text as such. Sibylle Appuhn-Radtke investigates how such illustrations were routinely cut out and reused as pieces of art at some monasteries in Catholic parts of Europe.

Axel Hörstedt, whose pioneering research on Swedish gymnasium dissertations was reviewed in last year's *1700-tal*, documents a thriving tradition of training the pupils' oral proficiency as well as their ability to argue academically in Latin. (One might label it an early example of the "flipped classroom" model, so vividly discussed in today's pedagogical literature.) Latin was, invariably, the standard language of university dissertations and their accompanying rituals. Among the rare exceptions to this rule were the Greek dissertation texts written by a limited group of hellenophile scholars in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, brought to our attention by Tua Korhonen and Janika Päll. The title pages and other peritexts demonstrate, however, that Latin was the standard – a Greek dissertation might even be accompanied with a facing Latin translation, to ensure that readers were able to follow the line of argumentation.

Sometimes translations would be the main content of dissertations, a subgenre arising towards the very end of the eighteenth century. Like in the case of Greek dissertations, such translation dissertations displayed a Latin framework, with expressions like *Suethice tradidit*, *in Suecanam conversa*, *versibus Suecanis* figuring on title pages well into the nineteenth century (Johanna Akujärvi). While Akujärvi largely focuses on translations from ancient Greco-Roman or Norse texts, Reinhold F. Glei explores translations and linguistic discussions on the language of the Koran in early eighteenth-century dissertations. Another peculiar feature of early-modern dissertations were the corollaries, short sentences that often were only loosely, sometimes even not at all, connected to the main content of the dissertation. Bo Lindberg has earlier presented a representative selection of such *corollaria* with Swedish translation in the series *Bibliotheca Neolatina Upsaliensis* (no. 13, 2019). In this contribution, he analyzes the same topic comprehensively, linking the decline of corollaries in the eighteenth century to a possible decline in the prestige of dissertations overall.

The book covers the material and non-material culture of dissertations as much as their scientific content and societal impact. The fact that dissertations were hardly considered as purely formalistic and innocent academic exercises is demonstrated in court cases that might follow in their wake. Andreas Hellerstedt recounts the turbulence experienced in Uppsala in the 1740s, when philosophical discussions on contemporary politics were presented a bit too daringly in several theses presided by Johan Ihre. Olaus Rudbeck's 4000-page *Atlantica* (4 vols, 1679–1702) is famous as the work inaugurating the era of Gothicism in Swedish intellectual circles. Bernd Roling follows the reception history of this peculiar interpretative framework, arguing that university disputations were the "decisive medium" for the propagation and expansion of Rudbeck's hermeneutic model. However, the eighteenth century was not only marked by patriotic antiquarianism. It was also permeated by utilitarian rhetoric, attributing unprecedented value to artisans, merchants and other practically minded people. Sari Kivistö unearths how this reevaluation of the practical arts was at stake in university dissertations at several German and Scandinavian universities.

In total, in addition to an illuminating introduction by the three editors, the book presents case studies by scholars from a wide range of institutional affiliations and disciplinary backgrounds. The Nordic countries are well served, especially Sweden and the Baltics, with several chapters covering aspects of early modern dissertations and disputation culture in this region. There is still more to be explored, however. For instance, Denmark-Norway remains a blank spot in this book, despite a thriving dissertation culture in Copenhagen, Sorø, Kiel, and at cathedral schools and other strongholds of learning across the monarchy. Comparative perspectives are left for the reader to form as best as (s)he can. The editors and contributors are to be congratulated with a highly readable and fascinating anthology, which brings us one step closer a truly interdisciplinary and pan-European, comparative history of early-modern dissertations and disputations.