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Early Modern Academic Culture

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ABSTRACT

This volume is the result of a conference held in Stockholm in April 2016 on Early Modern academic culture. The field is vast indeed and allows for almost anything within the field and the time period. However, a focus is discernible in that the Swedish contributors preferably deal with sources related to basic academic activities: letters of recommendation (Hörstedt), lecture notes (Lindberg) and dissertations (Sellberg), including both poetic (Fredriksson, Sjökvist) and political (Hellerstedt) aspects of that genre. Two papers deal with academic peregrination by discussing the role of dissertations defended *extra patriam* (Czaika) and the phenomenon of alumni, i.e. former students in the Diaspora (Viiding). A kind of contrast to that is represented by the *Familienuniversität*, where professors tended to be succeeded by their sons or relatives; the example analysed is Basel (Marti). The scholarly content of academic culture is treated in the contributions on specialization (Raffe), and the Aristotelian structuring of disciplines (Landgren). In a defence of the scholarly performance of English academic culture, it is argued that the research university came into existence in the humanities already in 17th century Oxford and Cambridge (Feingold). The outright, and unique, political potential of universities is illustrated by the role of the University of Leiden in the early days of Dutch independence (Waszink). Finally, a kind of academic self-image is traced in the metaphors for the quest of truth borrowed from classical authors (Helander).

Keywords: Early Modern, academic culture, *Familienuniversität*, dissertations, lectures, poetry, specialization, politics, alumni, poetry, research

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Introduction

Judging from a quick look at Google, "academic culture" today seems to be a more or less normative concept related to discussions of how to improve university teaching and research. It is associated with positive keywords like "intellectual climate", "critical thinking", "creativity", and "collegiality", and with "organizational theory" as a possible promoter of those values. "Early Modern" on the other hand has quite different associations. It is the study of behaviours, practices, and values in learning and academic life, including phenomena of hierarchy, authority, and nepotism that, at least at first glance, are the opposites of those connected with the modern vogue word academic culture. Furthermore, the early modern era is traditionally regarded as a down period in the history of universities, between their youthful prosperity in the Middle Ages and the idealistic revival in the early 19th century.

The catch phrase "academic culture" may be fairly recent, but the field is not new. Most monographs on individual universities have chapters on teaching, finance, students, and so on. Nor are those who study academic culture particularly specialized. But they endeavour to loosen themselves from the diachronic narratives of particular universities in order to go into details in neglected issues, often opening up for comparative perspectives or for questions and theories borrowed from other disciplines than the history of learning. It is a cliché to speak of integrating the history of universities in their contemporary society and culture, but that is nevertheless an aspect of what is going on.

The research field has several aspects. Natural to the cultural approach are the social issues concerning the university as an exclusive community, i.e. a guild consisting of professors and students, with a jurisdiction of their own and specific habits, language, rituals, and manners deviating from the rest of society. Lately, research has paid attention to aspects of academic culture that are less visible in the sources from official academic activity, notably everyday academic life, particularly that of the students.

Not least has the important role of students from the nobility been emphasized, including studies of exercises outside the scholarly sphere like music and fencing. Here, gender emerges as a relevant aspect, in spite of the absence of female students, if the more or less tolerated structural misbehaviour of students is regarded a function of the formation of male identity.

Sometimes, studies of social issues are caused by a wish to compare phenomena that are common to early modern and modern universities, such as the recruitment of professors, the social origin and careers of students, the financing of studies, or the response of the universities to demands of society and the expectations of the receivers of academic labour.

Another approach is the practical aspects of the scholarly activities: disputations, lectures, *collegia*, tutoring, exams, and academic migration, all of which have their counterparts in the modern university. Attached to these are questions about quality and merit in the early modern academic system: what was a student expected to master, what constituted a good academic teacher, and in what terms was that explicated? And in what terms were, in the absence of the modern concept of research, the qualities and efforts of prosperous academic work described and labelled?

A separate approach, although entangled in the others, is the medial aspect of learning. That includes publishing and the intercourse within the republic of letters and the complex relations between the spoken and the written word, between manuscript and printing. Clearly, the written word expanded at the universities as it did in connection with the growth of the early modern state and its bureaucracies. That process started already in the middle ages. Yet, the typical oral academic genres, i.e. the disputation, the lecture, and the oration, persisted throughout the early modern era. Their importance was undermined and their role had to change, however, as the printing press made it possible to become informed through reading instead of listening. Books becoming more easily available caused a crisis for the lecture as a form of teaching. Parallel to that process, but not quite for the same reason, Latin lost its position as the language of learning, opening for the maturation of the vernacular languages as media of science. That was an important medial change that tends to be forgotten among more technical innovations.

Another path into the field of early modern academic culture is to look at the relation between university and the surrounding society. That approach has several facets, such as the social recruitment of students, the careers of academically trained labour, and the influence of state and church on the disciplinary contents of academic

teaching. The latter aspect includes issues about control, censorship and religious and political orthodoxy, and cases of heterodoxy.

Finally, an approach to early modern academic culture is by way of the specific source materials produced within the universities. Academic genres are *legio*. Some of them are printed: dissertations, orations, funeral orations, programmes, and lecture catalogues. Others are hand written, such as lecture notes and minutes from the Senate. Among these genres, the dissertations are particularly interesting and have attracted due scholarly interest, usually departing from their oral origin, the *disputatio*. Dissertations, with their paratexts and *corollaria*, their unclear authorship, varying quality and humble gestures towards superiors, epitomize the peculiarities and tensions of the early modern academic university.

The academic genres are subject to strong conventions and the study of them is admittedly sometimes tedious. On the other hand, their language, with all its refined figures, elaborated metaphors, and gestures of humility as well as hyperbolic ambition, conveys an important dimension of the early modern academic mentality that analytical research questions may fail to grasp. Put into due context, these texts are worth studying, not only because they reveal aspects of academic culture but also because they are drawn out in time and allow for diachronic investigations of change.

The contributions of this volume are the fruits of a symposium held at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, 7–8 April 2016. The title was "Early modern academic culture", which is of course a hyperbolic pretension. Many fields are absent, as are Catholic universities. Uppsala University provides a disproportionate part of the cases studied, due to the strong representation of Swedish scholars at the symposium. The papers treat very different topics, ranging from top scholars at Oxford to university applicants in Swedish *gymnasia*, from scientific specialization to congratulatory poetry. Still, they fall somewhere within the entries described above, more specifically under the following headings: mobility, genres, politics, and learning.

Mobility refers to movements and transitions within the academic system, either horizontal and geographic or vertical and hierarchic. Hanspeter Marti describes the mode of recruiting professors at the University of Basel, finding an extreme example of the well-known phenomenon of *Familienuniversität*: sons succeeded their fathers, often by way of a professorship in the subordinate faculty of philosophy. Almost all professors came from Basel and were appointed by the City Council, whose relation to the university seems to have been harmonious; a sophisticated procedure of balloting was designed to prevent corruption. The system persisted well into the 19th

century and functioned fairly well; among the academic families were such as the Bernoullis.

Geographic mobility is the object of study in the contribution of Otfried Czaika, who looks into the peregrination of Swedish students and academics in Europe by following the dissertations they defended *extra patriam* at the University of Greifswald in the early 1600s. The seemingly uniform texts show interesting nuances in expected Lutheran orthodoxy. He also points at the potential of these sources for transnational big-data investigations of early modern academic contacts.

Kristi Viiding explores the concept of the *alumnus*, an early modern academic phenomenon that has experienced a revival and an increasing significance in our time. By help of the preserved correspondence of the Riga humanist David Hilchen, who had studied at German universities, the status and role of the *alumnus* can be identified. Unlike modern alumni, who are approached by their university wanting to profit on the reputation of former students, the example of Hilchen shows that the university was regarded an *alma mater* in a strong sense of the word, i.e. as protector of its former student. He could appeal for help when he stood accused or when he wanted to recommend a son or some relative to the university.

The recommendation is the topic of Axel Hörstedt's paper, which studies the transition process at the lowest level of the academic system. Hörstedt examines the letters of recommendation issued by the rectors of *gymnasia* to facilitate the transition of former pupils to the university. Instead of being examined before leaving for the university, pupils could be given a *testimonium academicum* by their headmaster confirming their skills and moral character. The actual effect of such *testimonia* is unclear – young boys were quite often admitted to the university without any preceding control – but they are interesting as rhetorical specimens designed not only to recommend the future student but also to show the level of learning on the part of the person who issued the recommendation. Thus, the *testimonia* were a genre of their own, and Hörstedt's paper could just as well be located among the contributions dealing with genres.

The printed dissertation is a conspicuous academic genre, since it was printed and surrounded by the acts that were at the centre of academic culture, i.e. the disputation and the promotion. As mentioned above, it has attracted much scholarly attention lately. In his paper, Erland Sellberg points at some unsolved problems in the fabrication of dissertations, such as the relation between the oral disputation and the written dissertation and the function of the *corollaria* that were often added after the text. He also discusses the development of more extended dissertations parallel to the nugatory formal exercises that continued throughout the early modern period: what

were the motives for being more ambitious when formally the oral disputation was the only effort that counted?

Bo Lindberg reports results from his recently published book in Swedish dealing with the less attended genre of the academic lecture. The paper restricts itself to Swedish universities in the decades around 1700, focusing on the material, medial, and social aspects of university teaching and paying some attention to its methods and contents as well.

A seemingly exclusive genre is investigated by Anna Fredriksson, who writes about the frequency of poetry in the scholarly texts of dissertations (that is, not in the paratexts). It is a long-term study in which Fredriksson follows the number of poetic quotations and references in dissertations representing the fields of politics and of medicine. The results are significant, both between the disciplines and over time. Quotations in political science peak in the decades around 1700, those in medicine in the period before 1650; after 1760, however, they disappear from both fields.

Peter Sjökvist tackles poetry in the paratexts of the dissertations, and in particular the congratulatory poems written by written by professors to the respondent. Sjökvist's examples are 25 poems by the late 17th-century professor Petrus Lagerlööf. In such poems, the relation is reversed: the voice is not that of the subordinate supplicant, so common in humanist poetry, but that of the benevolent teacher. That changes the tune, the topics, and the frame of reference of the poems.

Two papers treat the issue of university and politics. Jan Wazsink analyses the extraordinary role of the newly founded Leiden University during the Dutch liberation war around 1600. The court of William of Orange was not the only centre of the rebel movement; the university, without ecclesiastic tradition and cultivating a secular humanism, was an equally significant actor in Dutch politics, in foreign affairs as well as domestic. Negotiations with England, an unreliable ally against the Spaniards, were conducted by the university. Furthermore, the university authorities adopted a secular reason of state policy vis à vis the deleterious religious conflicts within Calvinism, imposing restrictions on religious freedom while maintaining the freedom of conscience. The result was an early form of academic freedom.

A different case, more typical of Lutheran countries, is described by Andreas Hellerstedt in his paper about the teaching of politics in Sweden on its way towards absolutism in the late 1600s. Hellerstedt focuses on professors who were recruited as teachers of the crown prince. He finds an interesting difference between the political wisdom taught to university students and the princely education in politics. The latter is more realistic, has more of reason of state, and comes closer to Machiavelli. The

texts and authorities referred to were about the same at court as in the university halls, but academic political humanism was restrained by concern for morality and religion.

The last four chapters of this volume deal with learning or science, remaining, however, on a general level that pertains to academic culture. Alistair Raffe discusses the process of specialization of academic learning at the Scottish universities. From the beginning, teachers in Scotland – the regents – taught all the disciplines of the arts faculty in the medieval manner of rotating (but unlike Lutheran universities). Specialization is usually connected with the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century, but Raffe shows that in the 16th century there was already a trend to let the regents concentrate on one discipline. This trend was stopped by the Presbyterian Covenanters in the 1630s and 1640s and specialization had to wait until the ascent of the sciences at the end of the 17th century. The disciplines were filled with new and more complex knowledge, and, not least important, they often demanded the management of instruments.

In a way, Per Landgren, too, addresses an issue concerning the division of science, but of a more theoretical nature. He studies the persisting, and even increasing, force of the Aristotelian meaning of the word 'history' in structuring early modern academic knowledge. History in Aristotle's usage is the study and collecting of singular facts. It stands for empirical, inferior, and non-scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, history became a major academic discipline in early modern learning, often in combination with another discipline. The discipline of history in its usual sense of events in chronological order may have had difficulties in establishing itself due to this lingering of the Aristotelean theory of science.

The chapter by Mordechai Feingold is polemic. He challenges the widespread opinion, phrased already in the early 1800s, that research was absent from the early modern universities. He also attacks the alleged prejudice in its modernized version of William Clark who claims that the modern research university has its roots in the bureaucratic spirit of the universities in 18th-century Germany. The counter-examples are Oxford and Cambridge from the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 18th. There were regulations of ecclesiastic nature, but they had no decisive hampering effect. The humanities – i.e. philology, biblical criticism, antiquarianism – could flourish, cultivated in excellent libraries and with methods that turned erudition into secular research.

The final paper by Hans Helander gives a linguistic aspect of scholarly and academic culture. Helander examines various metaphors for the search of truth, such as intellectual studies as a journey, the quest for knowledge compared to the bee's collecting of honey, and others. He finds them in texts by philosophers and humanist scholars, which may connect to the topic to Finegold's claim about the prosperous

humanities. But the spirit of the metaphors is not one of scientific progress in the modern sense. The metaphors of (humanist) science were not modern, perhaps not even early modern but rather premodern.