

I.2 What Was the Republic of Letters?

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1 Definitions and Distinctions

When European historians describe the intellectual movements of the early modern period, they frequently refer to the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth, and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth. The first two of these terms, however, are not ‘actor’s categories’. Contemporaries did not use them to describe the intellectual enterprises which bound them together: they are terms devised centuries later by historians and retrospectively imposed on the period from outside. While *lumière* was a favourite metaphor for mid-eighteenth-century contemporaries to describe their age, it was subsequent historians who applied it retroactively as the defining characteristic of the entire century and more.

When early modern intellectuals before c. 1750 referred to the enterprise which they shared, they sometimes used the Latin phrases *respublica litteraria* or *respublica litterarum*. From the later seventeenth century onward, these terms made their way into a variety of European vernaculars, most influentially in the French term *la république des lettres*, but also in English as ‘the republic of letters’, or ‘commonwealth of learning’ and in German as *die Gelehrtenrepublik*. What precisely do these terms mean? What were the implications of thinking of the learned community of Europe as a ‘republic of letters’? Does this term describe the manner in which those who used it actually behaved, or merely a set of ideals or aspirations?

This chapter endeavours to provide preliminary answers to some of these questions by proceeding in three stages. First, we unpack the implications of these

Latin terms *res publica* (1.1) and *litteraria* (1.2) in a programmatic and theoretical fashion. Second, we consider the vexed question of how far the realities of the republic of letters deviated from these ideals (1.3) and the multiple dimensions of that deviation, including time, space, discipline and language (1.4). Finally (in section 2), we sketch out a rough framework for thinking about how these dimensions vary with time and place. Exactly what contemporaries meant by these terms is open to interpretations that vary from one scholar to the other, and much of that variety is caused by the different periods on which modern interpreters focus or the changing contexts in which early modern people employed the phrase. None of these brief discussions can have any claims to definitiveness. Instead they are offered here merely to ensure that all readers of this volume, irrespective of area of academic specialism, have access to a set of basic conceptions of what the term ‘republic of letters’ might be thought to signify.

1.1 *Res publica*

The obvious starting point is to look at the root meaning of these Latin terms. Literally, *res publica* means ‘the public thing’, something created and held in common by a large number of people. To describe the world of learning as a *res publica* in this most basic sense is to emphasize that learning is a good common to all nations, regions, and confessions and perhaps to suggest that it has been created and sustained collectively as well.

But what kind of *res* is a *res publica*? The standard answer would be that this ‘public thing’ is a political entity, a state or commonwealth.¹ To suggest that the learned community is a republic in this sense implies that it is an independent political entity, an autonomous, sovereign, self-governing authority, a law unto itself. The *respublica litteraria* therefore implicitly exists alongside the empires and monarchies and republics which exercised political authority in early modern Europe, but it is independent of these polities because it is not subject to their authority (*regnum*). Much the same might be said of the relationship between the *respublica litteraria* and ecclesiastical authority (*sacerdotium*). The term *respublica litteraria* bears some affinity to the contemporary notion of a *respublica Christiana*, but the nature of that affinity is unclear.

What the term does seem to imply, however, is that the laws of the *respublica litteraria* are not established by kings or parliaments, nor by popes, councils or churches: they derive from the citizens of the republic of letters themselves. Better

¹ A vast literature exists on ancient, early modern and contemporary notions of republicanism, and the precise meaning of the term is contested. See for instance Knud Haakonssen, ‘Republicanism’, in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. 1: *Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe*; vol. 2: *The Value of Republicanism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and, for an influential modern restatement, Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

still, many of them are laws of nature, which learned men and women have learned to recognize and to canonize from within the fabric of reality itself. Princes do not dictate the axioms of geometry or the principles of natural theology. Churches do not legislate grammar, rhetoric, logic, history, or optics. It is up to the citizens of the republic of letters to debate these rules for themselves and also to enforce them: those who refuse to obey the most fundamental of these laws lose the rights of citizenship and are ostracized if not banished from the learned republic.

If the *respublica litteraria* is not ruled by princes or parliaments, by popes or preachers, then this implies that it is a self-governing entity; and this brings us to another association of the original term. In Roman history, the republic is that phase of development during which the Roman people had freed themselves of subjection to a king and had not yet been subjected to an emperor (traditionally dated 509–27 BC), which was also the period during which Rome extended its rule throughout the Mediterranean world.² Those wealthy, landowning families who had overthrown kings and tyrants shared regal powers among themselves through election to a multiplicity of public offices – political, military, and religious. Later, both the ability to vote in these elections and to hold some of these offices was extended to the most reputable men from wealthy plebeian families, particularly those who had distinguished themselves through service to the *res publica*. In order to maintain the *res publica*, great emphasis was placed on civic virtue, active participation, and the rule of law.

In similar fashion, the *respublica litteraria* might regard itself a self-governing community, free of arbitrary rule, in which authority was shared in proportion to the individual's intellectual merit and service to the cause of learning as a whole; and foremost among these services was that of helping to overthrow unjustified intellectual tyranny and to (re)gain intellectual liberty. In the sixteenth century in particular, these republican ideals were reinforced by the tendency of many humanists to take the Roman senator Cicero as their stylistic model. The humanists implicitly reference the Roman Republic by employing its discourse, praising each other as consuls, triumvirs, and princes, or even (and not in the pejorative sense) as dictators. Those who seek to try to silence others are styled as tyrants. No great scholar was called a 'king of the republic of letters'. Indeed, although access to at least modest wealth remained a virtual precondition of citizenship and social status remained an asset, the republic of letters surpassed the Roman Republic in embracing merit and personal accomplishment rather than birth and family history as qualifications for full citizenship.

² Harriet I. Flower, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

1.2 *Litteraria*

So much, then, for the implications of the first term in the phrase. What is implied by the second term? One slightly misleading answer is suggested by the standard English translation of this term as ‘the republic of letters’. The specific understanding of the republic of letters in terms of an epistolary network is bound to be enhanced, unconsciously or not, by the fact that in the dominant languages – Latin, French, and English – the *respublica litterarum* has a felicitous second subliminal connotation that enriches the association with communality and communication: ‘letters’ meaning also ‘epistles’.³ Epistolary communication was a central, pervasive, and characteristic feature of the *respublica litteraria*. In their letters, learned men (and some women) shared information about work-in-progress and recently published books; they gossiped about colleagues and recommended students; they reflected on the politics of universities, princes, and the Church; and they reported on family matters and personal health. Letters were meant to be answered: reciprocity was a vital principle, and the letter-writers honoured the cult of communication. So to foreground correspondence in our conception of the republic of letters is not entirely unwarranted; but to define the *respublica litteraria* primarily as a republic of epistolary communication would be a grave mistake.

Fortunately, for German, Spanish, and Dutch scholars, the notion of a republic of *Briefe* or of *cartas* sounds very peculiar. For this reason, Germans in the early modern period adopted the very different translation of *respublica litteraria* as *Gelehrtenrepublik*, *Republik der Gelehrten*, or even *gelehrte Republik*, that is, the ‘republic of the learned’. Likewise in Latin, alternative designations abounded in the early modern period, including *orbis eruditorum* (‘the world of the learned’), the *sodalitas doctorum* (‘the fraternity of the learned’), *mundus litterarius* (‘the learned world’), *omnis litteratorum cohors* (‘the cohort of all men of letters’). The English designation ‘the commonwealth of learning’, seems to capture both the idea that this was a social world of learned people, as well as a wider ‘world’ that included not only people but also institutions and infrastructure. Indeed, some early modern scholars thought of the republic of letters as the assembly of learned institutions such as universities and societies.⁴

³ Constance M. Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia. Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010).

⁴ Hans Bots has recently styled the republic of letters as the ‘intellectual world of Europe’, and described it not only anthropologically as a community of people bent on the exchange of knowledge, but also as a ‘world’ that included practices such as epistolary traditions, institutions such as universities and societies, commercial stakeholders such as the book printers and traders, and a reflective discourse embodied in the medium of the journal. Hans Bots, *De republiek der letteren. De Europese intellectuele wereld 1500–1760* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018).

So if ‘letters’ does not primarily mean ‘epistles’, neither does it imply merely literary pursuits in the narrow sense of *belles-lettres*: instead, the term embraced the whole of learning, including the natural and social sciences, mathematics, history, and the learned disciplines of medicine and civil law. But here too, a number of limitations must be acknowledged.

For one, even before the Reformation, sacred letters overlapped only partially with the *litterae* defining this learned republic. The ultimate sources of authority for institutionalized, academic theology lay outside the *respublica litteraria*. The legislators in matters theological were churchmen, not mere scholars. After the Reformation, however, the European *res publica* claimed the right to dispute some theological questions framed in terms of antiquarianism, law, or philosophy. In such cases, an irenic trans-confessional exchange was possible, as is shown by the case of Leibniz’s church reunion projects,⁵ in which astronomy played an important role.

Second, as the term also implies, the ‘republic of letters’ was a commonwealth, not merely of words, but of written and later printed words. Within this commonwealth, forms of learning without a literary pedigree were marginalized. In other words, the learning which defined this learned republic was ‘liberal’ in the classical sense of embracing the liberal arts and marginalizing if not quite completely excluding the vulgar, mechanical, or manual ones. This sidelining of artisanal forms of knowledge, based on craft skill, passed down in practice-based learning from master to apprentice, and typically involving manual labour, was explicitly advocated even by many who (like Francis Bacon) acknowledged their importance and celebrated their fertility. Technology and engineering, chemistry and alchemy, the visual arts of painting and sculpture were at a disadvantage, even if these boundaries were neither static nor unbreachable. Rubens earned his citizenship on the basis of his literary accomplishments and learning, not the brilliant painting for which he is now famous. Spinoza was a citizen by virtue of his philosophical writings, not his expertise as a lens grinder. The exception proves the rule: the class of artisans most warmly welcomed within the republic of letters were the ones who dealt in letters: that is, the printers, publishers, and booksellers.

1.3 Ideal, Reality, and Practice

From the term *respublica litteraria*, therefore, can be easily extracted an implicit conception of the realm of learning as a self-governing commonwealth of learning, independent of states and churches, bound together by shared notions of intellectual virtue and mutual service to the common good, exercised by a prosperous but meritocratic elite, reasserting the liberty of thought as paramount throughout all domains of secular learning, and extending its beneficent rule over the whole world

⁵ Wenchao Li, Hans Poser, and Hartmut Rudolph, eds., *Leibniz und die Ökumene* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013).

of the arts and sciences. From this idealized self-conception, a number of questions inevitably arise. Etymology, to begin with, is an insecure foundation for an empirical discipline such as history. Did self-proclaimed citizens of the republic of letters actually think of themselves in these terms? If so, did these conceptions spring fully formed from the head of Erasmus, or did they evolve more gradually before reaching mature form midway through the early modern period? And even for those who fully embraced this shared conception, to what extent did real citizens of the republic of letters attain this ideal? If we must concede that the reality often fell short of the ideal, did the idea of the republic of letters nevertheless exercise an agency of its own, with the power to shape individual and collective behaviour at least to some extent? These are among the most interesting questions underlying historical scholarship in this field.

Given that it was bound together primarily by values, attitudes, aspirations, and practices rather than formal institutions or legal obligations, one useful starting point is to describe this world of scholars and scientists as an ‘imagined community’. To do so is to adopt and repurpose a phrase developed by Benedict Anderson to explain the formation of ‘nations’ in the nineteenth century.⁶ However intuitively apposite the phrase may be, it must be remembered that Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ of the nation, in distinction to the elite republic of letters, was solidly cemented through the use of a national language. This conception of the ‘nation’ could only arise *after* the fall of Latin as a *lingua franca*, the universal language of learning from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance and beyond, accessible to all quarters of western and central Europe on an equal basis, and the acknowledged repository of most of its learning and even more of its ongoing discourse. To a large degree, the *respublica litteraria* was also an imagined community built on a shared language, which remained its second language until the decline of the republic of letters at the end of the Ancien Régime.

To this abstract and imagined community must of course also be added the more concrete conception of the republic of letters as a social network, or perhaps better a network consisting of many different kinds of networks. In this sense, the republic of letters is understood as all those involved in the pursuit of liberal learning: professors, secretaries, courtiers, physicians, lawyers, or ‘virtuosi’ rich enough to support themselves. In such a model, the scholars are nodes, and the letters they addressed to one another constitute one species of edges, that can be qualified in terms of weight (number of letters) and direction (sender–recipient). Such an epistolary network is a proxy for a social network which can be further mapped by identifying other sorts of ties: oral communication (recorded in diaries, for instance), friendship (documented by occasional verses and inscriptions in *alba amicorum*), teacher–student relations (evidenced for example by disputations), client–

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). It is used to characterize the republic of letters in, for example, Robert Mayhew, ‘British Geography’s Republic of Letters: Mapping an Imagined Community 1600–1800’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 251–76, see <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2004.0029>.

patron relations (immortalised in dedications), and concrete social relations such as ties of kinship, profession, religion, origin, or shared identities in terms of sex and social position.

If, therefore, the republic of letters is thought of as such a social network, then it must not be regarded as an isolated or monolithic one. Scholarly and scientific networks were not self-contained; they interacted with broader parts of society, as well as with institutions of political, religious, and economic power. The disputes within these institutions were not confined to scientists and scholars arguing over a specific world view (or paradigm, if we want to use an iconic term),⁷ but very often those conflicts overlapped: Galileo's trial before the Roman inquisition, in which a scientific debate became a religious and social one,⁸ may be the most prominent example. The republic of letters was formed by several networks, overlapping with each other, that were part of a broader context of networks within early modern society.

Needless to say, the social reality of the republic of letters often departed from the abstract intellectual ideal. No ordinary political or ecclesiastical institution ever perfectly exemplifies its ideals in practice, and the republic of letters was no exception, not least because its concrete social reality was deeply intertwining with the political, confessional, and social institutions of its age. Realpolitik, confessional strife, and even social conventions obstructed the free exchange of communication, and scholars and scientists embodied ideas that followed the priorities or their own agendas, whether or not these were dictated by contexts that set limits to the circulation of knowledge.⁹ In fact, scholars often vilified each other in pamphlet wars and vicious polemics, battling against charlatanism, plagiarism, vanity, and arrogance, but sometimes in the process descending into prying, spying, mudslinging, or outright lying – ironically excused, of course, by the unimpeachable objective of defending 'the' truth. Yet scholars should beware the temptation to construct a disjuncture between the republic of letters as a discursive ideal and as a quarrelsome and unedifying reality. For the ideal was also, on a day-to-day basis, to greater or lesser extents, exercised by early modern people and hence brought into practice. Idealism and pragmatism could converge in strategic attempts to lay hands on information that was in the possession of the confessional or political

⁷ The well-known concept of 'paradigm shift' was indeed developed by Thomas S. Kuhn, a physicist looking at the history of early modern science, who wanted to understand the social dynamics behind the refusal of one explanatory system and the acceptance of another. The transformation of cosmology – from geocentric to heliocentric – plays a pivotal role in his study: Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962); id., *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁸ For the social dimension, see the famous study of Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁹ Nick Hardy has most recently warned against describing the republic of letters as striving to objectivity, irenicism, or ecumenism through reasoned debate or even self-regulating polemics. Nicholas Hardy, *Criticism and Confession. The Bible in the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Such optimistic views are espoused by Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

‘other’.¹⁰ After all, for the exchange of texts, objects, and ideas (epitomized in the expression *commercium litterarium*, often used by early modern scholars in connotation with the term *respublica litteraria*), it was more effective to seek common ground than to stress differences.¹¹ Modesty, friendliness, openness, constancy, patience, forgiveness, and industry were frequently upheld in practice as well as theory as the moral codes of the republic of letters. Early modern scholars were seldom naively fooled by high-minded protestations of mutually shared purposes, but the fact that early modern scholars usually employ the phrase ‘republic of letters’ when they praise the services of their interlocutors to some kind of common good was performative as well as discursive: for it meant not only a description of merits, but also a prescription to heed codes of conduct that were not laid down (at least not in the earlier history of its manifestations) but socially constructed and transmitted.

1.4 Dimensions: Time, Space, Discipline, and Language

If the republic of letters was not isolated from or uncontaminated by the concrete institutions of its day, neither was it undifferentiated. On the contrary, it varied with time, space, and discipline in ways that scholars trapped in narrow scholarly specialisms sometimes fail to appreciate.

Some of the confusion about the long history of the republic of letters, for instance, is due to the fact that research is carried out by different communities: early modernists tend to be separated uncomfortably into several distinct communities studying Renaissance humanism, the phenomenon of the Enlightenment, and the century in between; and it cannot even be taken for granted that historians and philologists of that specific time share the same conceptual framework. Moreover, the earlier letter-writing culture of the high Middle Ages and the later one, after the transitional period around 1800, also shares more features with the early modern republic of letters than the division in academic sub-chronologies suggests.

Another myopic affliction is the orientation of much scholarship on the republic of letters westwards. The study of the republic of letters is dominated by historians of England, the Dutch Republic, France, and increasingly Germany.¹² But all

¹⁰ Hans Bots, *Republiek der letteren. Ideaal en werkelijkheid* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1977); Lorraine Daston, ‘The Ideal and Reality of the Republic of Letters in the Enlightenment’, *Science in Context* 4 (1991): 367–86, see <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889700001010>.

¹¹ Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, eds., *Commercium litterarium. La Communication dans la république des lettres. Forms of Communications in the Republic of Letters, 1600–1750* (Amsterdam and Maarsse: APA-Holland University Press, 1994); Hans Bots, *De republiek der letteren. De Europese intellectuele wereld, 1500–1760* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018), 36–8.

¹² For instance, Hans Bots, *De republiek der letteren. De Europese intellectuele wereld, 1500–1760* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018); Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *La République des lettres* (Paris: Belin, 1997); Marc Fumaroli, *La République des lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015); Martin Mulrow, *Die unanständige Gelehrtenrepublik. Wissen, Libertinage und Kommunikation in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2007); Herbert Jaumann, *Die europäische Gelehrtenrepublik im Zeitalter des Konfessionalismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001); Conrad Wiedmann and Sebastian Neumeister, eds., *Res publica litteraria: Die Institutionen der Gelehrsamkeit in der frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987); most American authors also focus on this western European history: Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning. Conduct and*

the wonderful research into scholarly networks that is conducted today in Portugal, Spain, and even Italy, not to mention eastern European and Scandinavian territories as well as other parts of the world, needs to be integrated into a new picture.¹³ Rather than attempting to come to a universally applicable and generally acceptable definition of what the republic of letters entailed, it is wiser to acknowledge that early modern scholars themselves failed to agree, as much as modern historians do. In other words, we need to accept the multiplicity of meanings of the republic of letters and its varying reaches across time and space.

Such multiplicity should prevent us from ascribing certain programmes to a reified and idealized republic of letters, and from using those ideals as criteria for modern scholars to decide who was in and out of the republic of letters. Admittedly, there is a tendency to characterize the republic of letters as a tolerant community bent on neutrality in religious and political issues and epistemic humility when it comes to truth claims. And while the equivalence between the republic of letters and tolerant or even radical thought was promoted by some of the latter's proponents, especially in the eighteenth century, others continued to use the term in a highly generic way, and without any revolutionary or even 'enlightened' aspiration. In fact, few of those scholars ever cared to make clear what they meant by the term, in particular before the eighteenth century.

A further barrier to synthetic understanding is the disciplinary separation of this huge field into linguistic domains, with Neolatinists, Romanists, and Italianists each focusing on discrete languages in a world that itself was multilingual. Fortunately, manifestos advocating for new *longue durée* accounts, geographical inclusiveness, and translation studies have made an impact, not to mention the growing attention to the agency of female letter-writers and learned women. Although studies of the black, Muslim, Jewish, or queer republic of letters are probably far away, the study of the republic of letters has ceased to be the exclusive domain of histo-

Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); April Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life 1650–1720* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007); Carol Pal, *Republic of Women. Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹³ For instance Gábor Almási, *The Uses of Humanism: Johannes Sambucus (1531–1584), Andreas Dudith (1533–1589), and the Republic of Letters in East Central Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Maria Berbeara and Karl Enenkel, eds., *Portuguese Humanism and the Republic of Letters* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); Caroline Winterer, 'Where is America in the Republic of Letters?', *Modern Intellectual History* 9:3 (2012): 597–623, see <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244312000212>. Beyond the West: Min Chông, 1847/한중 지식인의 예공화국 [The Republic of Letters of Korean and Chinese Intellectuals in the Eighteenth Century] (Kyônggi-do Paju-si: Munhak Tongne, 2014); Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

rians of scholarship, poetry, linguistics, and religion and is attracting new sociologically minded historians.¹⁴

Indeed, what can be easily shared across disciplines is the data referring to the republic of letters. Its long history, its broad geography, its complex stratification, and its multilingual media will be amendable to systematic study once technical systems and scholarly cultures are adapted to allow the exchange of unprecedented numbers of records, texts, and associated data. This is the reason that the subject has also piqued the interest of digital humanists, as this volume demonstrates. For in order to come to a chronologically, geographically, socially, and linguistically inclusive big picture of the republic of letters, one which also reflects its broader demographic, economic, environmental, and geopolitical context, we need to pool existing knowledge about the republic of letters, identify the gaps, and set the agenda for filling these *Forschungsdesiderate*. Such an approach relies on large data sets and requires digital instruments and environments.¹⁵

Here is where academic variety poses challenges. Different disciplines use historical data in different ways. They draw on different types of primary sources and cultivate different methodological traditions. This variety is replicated in the digital world. Network analysis works with quantitative methods rooted in the social sciences. Digital philology works with automated ways of morpho-syntactic tagging and a quantitative version of stylistic analysis. On the other hand, some of the more literary or historical approaches will focus on the semantics of individual words or texts, often in a qualitative way. Not only should digital humanists be aware of their disciplinary traditions; they should also be prepared to translate them into the digital domain, and to see them transform and converge. This urgent need for standardization, transformation, and convergence is the *raison d'être* of this volume. Organized in terms of the different dimensions of that data, this volume sketches the digital conditions to make such a cooperation possible.

Before we embark on an analysis of the problems and take stock of the solutions developed so far, however, we will provide a chronological overview of the history of the republic of letters. This chronological outline, admittedly generalizing in its attempt to identify a series of intellectual turning points, introduces us to some important figures, topics, and tendencies. Together, the story provides a frame for positioning the digital work for which this volume sets the agenda.

¹⁴ Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities. The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter Burke, *What Is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

¹⁵ A rough estimate is that between 1 and 2 million scholarly letters survive from the early modern period scattered over hundreds of libraries and archives in and outside Europe; see III.1.

2 A Chronological Survey

This chronological survey is structured by means of a conventional periodization into ‘centuries’.¹⁶ Although it attributes to each century a particular label, these characterizations are by no means exclusive. Perhaps they were not even dominant in the periods described. Yet they do indicate new developments that attracted attention, while established modes of research were not abandoned.

2.1 The Fifteenth Century: Revitalizing Ancient Literature

Our first recorded use of the expression *respublica litteraria* dates from the early fifteenth century. In 1417, the Italian humanist Francesco Barbaro wrote a long letter to his colleague Poggio Bracciolini, praising him for his many discoveries of manuscripts with new texts of ancient Roman authors. The carefully crafted letter, obviously meant for a larger public than just the recipient, bestows on Poggio the early modern equivalent of a lifetime achievement award for ‘bringing to this Republic of Letters the largest number of aids and equipments’: he wanted Poggio’s ‘immortal merits to be placed in the light of Europe’.¹⁷

After that one incidental blip on the historians’ radar, the term remains hitherto unrecorded for most of the fifteenth century. But during the course of that century, Italian humanists frequently idealized learned communality by such terms as the society of the learned (*societas litteratorum*), the erudite world (*orbis eruditus*), or the fellowship of letters (*sodalitas litteraria*).¹⁸ Other equivalents were the ‘learned world’ and ‘world of the learned’ (*orbis litterarius*, *orbis litteratorum*). The rector of the Sorbonne in 1470 used the term ‘coetus doctorum hominum’.¹⁹ In book titles we come across ‘the learned state’ (c. 1462: ‘politia literaria’).²⁰ The Frisian scholar Rudolph Agricola, writing from Heidelberg, speaks in a letter from 1584 to Reuchlin about serving the ‘litteraria respublica patriae nostrae’.²¹ Harking back to Christine de Pisan’s *Cité des dames* of 1405, the Italian humanist Laura Cereta in 1488 described the historical record of learned women as a ‘muliebris respublica’.²² A

¹⁶ Parts of the following text have been published in: Dirk van Miert, ‘What Was the Republic of Letters? A Brief Introduction to a Long History (1417–2008)’, *Groniek* 205:4 (2014): 69–87, see <https://ugp.rug.nl/groniek/article/view/27601/25014>.

¹⁷ Marc Fumaroli, ‘The Republic of Letters’, *Diogenes* 143 (1988): 129–54, see <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219218803614307>. [Francesco Barbaro], *Fr. Barbari et aliorum ad ipsum epistolae* (Brescia: Rizzardi, 1743), 5.

¹⁸ Fritz Schalk, ‘Von Erasmus’ *Res publica literaria* zur Gelehrtenrepublik der Aufklärung’, in Fritz Schalk, *Studien zur französischen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 143–63.

¹⁹ Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *La repubblica delle lettere* (Bologna: Mulino, 2005), 19.

²⁰ Angelo Camillo Decembrio, *De politia litteraria*, c. 1462. (Augsburg: Steyner, 1540; Basle: Hervagius, 1562).

²¹ Agricola (Heidelberg) to Johann Reuchlin, 9 November 1584: Rudolph Agricola, *Letters*, ed. and tr. with notes by Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2002), 230, line 3 (letter no. 41).

²² Laura Cereta, *Epistolae iam primum e MS in lucem productae*, ed. Jacobus Philippus Tommasinus (Padua: Sebastianus Sardus, 1640), 195. The notion was taken up by Carol Pal as a label for the female

year later, in 1489, the expression *respublica litteraria* appears for the first time in a book title.²³ In 1491, an editor of Bonaventura's work (Nuremberg: Koburger) speaks of people who never contribute to the *litteraria respublica*. The humanist Conrad Celtis mentioned the expression in an oration of 1492, and in 1498 the cartographer Johannes Stabius called Ingolstadt a 'litteraria respublica'.²⁴

A particular popular ideal in the fifteenth century was the learned conversation between a handful of friends gathered round a dinner table in some villa in the countryside – a setting reminiscent of the ancient Greek philosophical symposium.²⁵ If friends could not meet, the letter acted as a medium for long-distance communication. Already in Antiquity, correspondence was conceptualized as a dialogue between absent friends.²⁶ The expression 'republic of letters' reappeared in 1494, in a seminal work by Desiderius Erasmus against ignorance of intellectual culture, the *Anti-barbari*, but the book was only published in 1520.²⁷ The restless traveller Erasmus, who lived by the motto 'I wish to be a citizen of the world', was the exemplary spider in a pan-European epistolary web of learning,²⁸ and his contemporaries frequently employed the terms *respublica litteraria* and *respublica litterarum*.²⁹

After Martin Luther's break with Rome in the decades after 1517, the term took on renewed significance, because it could act as an alternative to the idea of the pan-European *respublica Christiana*, which now lay in tatters. Latin remained as the *lingua franca* of this somewhat stripped-down ideal of unified *secular* learning in Europe, although Italian was often employed in the Italian peninsula, and similarly French in the kingdom of France and Spanish on the Iberian peninsula. In the

community within the seventeenth-century republic of letters: Carol Pal, *The Republic of Women. Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²³ [Aelius Donatus], *Aelii Donati Grammatici, Pro impetrando ad rempub. litterariam aditu: novitijs adolescentibus grammatices rudimenta quam aptissime dedicate* (Venice: per Theodorum de Ragazonibus, tercio kalendas mensis decembris (29 November) 1489 – no original copy located, but according to WorldCat, Wrocław University Library holds a Xerox copy); also: Geneva: per Johannem de Stalle Allemannum, 15 May 1493 (University Library Basle, UBH DE VI 24:5). Bots and Waquet, *La repubblica delle lettere*, 12–3, refer only to an edition of Venice 1491, but give no bibliographical details.

²⁴ Bots and Waquet, *La repubblica delle lettere*, 13.

²⁵ Schalk, 'Von Erasmus' *Res publica literaria* zur Gelehrtenrepublik der Aufklärung'.

²⁶ For a brief overview of the theory of letter writing, see Dirk van Miert, 'Letters, and Epistolography', in Anthony Grafton, Glenn Most, and Salvatore Settis, eds., *The Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 520–3.

²⁷ *Antibarbarorum liber unus* (Basle: J. Frobenius, 1520), 41: 'Alii enim literariam Remp[ublicam] tanquam funditus deletam cupiunt; alii imperium non quidem prorsus extinguere, sed arctioribus finibus includere moluntur. Postremi ita Remp[ublicam] salvam esse volunt, ut afflictissimam velint, quippe in qua ipsi tyrannidem occupent.'

²⁸ Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also the work of Christoph Kudella (e.g. 'The Correspondence Network of Erasmus of Rotterdam. A Data-driven Exploration', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University College Cork, 2017).

²⁹ Constance M. Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia. Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010).

fifteenth century, sociable Italian humanists formed local or regional pockets with a European outreach. They largely engaged with classical philology and ancient history, with Greek as the new fashion, in particular after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. This event led to the appearance in Italy of Greek scholars who brought knowledge and manuscripts. When the Italian Renaissance started to spread beyond the Alps in the second half of the century, the learned networks became wider and more interconnected.

2.2 The Sixteenth Century: The Turn to Christian History

In the sixteenth century the citizens of the republic of letters turned to the Bible and the important Christian authors of late Antiquity, known as the Church Fathers (Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, among others). In their study of the interplay of Greek, Roman, and Christian Antiquity, humanists relied not only on texts, but increasingly on material culture: the remnants of Antiquity which might anachronistically be called archaeological objects: coins, statues, and monuments, often showing images and inscriptions. The study of religious practice in historical and cultural perspectives also started to pave the way for a view that saw Christianity in its relation to other religions, and thus as one religion among others.

However, the exchange of knowledge was not limited to such traditional themes and objects. Increasingly, scholars communicated about the results of medical experiments and sent each other recipes. While some turned to the skies to see if what they observed confirmed what ancient authors had written about the stars, planets, and comets, others bowed their noses to the ground in search of plants and flowers, in an attempt to match them with the herbs described by Greek and Roman authors. It was through intense cooperation and exchange of letters, in and beyond Europe, that it dawned upon the citizens of the republic of letters that the ancients had not been omniscient. Apart from letters, the speed of information exchange and the comparison of data was significantly accelerated by the development of the printing press. In 1439, Johannes Gutenberg had first used movable types in Mainz, and after 1500 the printing press started to conquer Europe.

Also due to the increasing amount of information circulating,³⁰ from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, specialized networks started to develop, focusing, for example, on astronomy or botany, antiquarianism or theology. Most of the erudites were both scholar and scientist, theologian and philosopher, but many felt they had to take a more special interest in one of these subjects.

The wars of religion, which scourged France, the Low Countries, and the Holy Roman Empire (i.e. 'Germany') in the half-centuries before and after 1600, sparked off endemic controversies over the history of the early Church, the authority of the Church Fathers, and the good and the bad parts of ancient philoso-

³⁰ Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know. Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

phies, new confessions and future politics: the more or less distant past became a yardstick for the present. This intense bickering created a buzz, which drew ever more people into the realm of the republic of letters and made them participate in both the cult of communication and the practice of polemic. Wars were not only fought on the battlefields, but also in the public and semi-public fora of intellectual exchange: letters, pamphlets, book, speeches, and other kinds of academic texts that would allow scholars to take stances, or create polemical distance. Not only knowledge in the fields of polemical theology or historical jurisprudence was required; also the boundaries between the sciences, the arts, and the technical disciplines were blurred: Leonardo da Vinci offering his services as a military engineer to Ludovico il Moro, duke of Milan, is an example for this.

However, political and religious difference brought scholars and scientists into conflict not only with one other but also with legal and ecclesiastical authorities. While in the late Middle Ages heresy was still considered to be a theological matter, the growing complexity and interconnection of fields of knowledge in the sixteenth century led to an extension of censorial measures far into the spheres of natural philosophy and history. The ‘index of forbidden books’, established by the Roman curia in 1559, is perhaps the most prominent example, but should not disguise the fact that censorship was also exercised by secular authorities, and not only in Catholic parts of the world.

While, thus, on the one hand scholars with unorthodox ideas had to fear persecution, and possibly also face the stake (like the philosopher Giordano Bruno, executed in Rome in 1600), on the other hand the pan-European dimension of the republic of letters was not forgotten: scholars still communicated across religious, political, and ideological boundaries. In order to gain access to much coveted information, it was wise to ignore such hot-button issues and pretend that all learned people were working towards the same goal of universal peace and justice – and by so doing, many in fact advanced precisely that ideal.³¹

2.3 The Seventeenth Century: The Rise of Natural Science

Significant portions of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries saw Europe engaged in brutal wars with religious underpinnings. Among the most important episodes we may evoke the Edict of Nantes (1598), granting rights to the French Calvinists (Huguenots) after several decades of ferocious civil war, before being revoked in 1685, which forced Huguenots into exile again; the Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648), during which the mainly Protestant Netherlands successfully fought for their independence from the Catholic Spanish crown; and the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), leading to a confessionally divided Holy Roman Empire

³¹ Jeanine De Landtsheer and Henk Nellen, eds., *Between Scylla and Charybdis. Learned Letter Writers Navigating the Reefs of Religious and Political Controversy in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

and, in the mid-term, to a French supremacy in Europe (especially after the end of the war with Spain in 1659). In the Baltic region, Sweden, Russia, and Prussia emerged, while the previous Ottoman expansion in the Balkans came to a stop, yielding to a Counter-Reformation conquest of large parts of Hungary. Overseas empires were held by Spain, Portugal, France, England, and the Netherlands, and they often drew on the infrastructure of either private enterprises (e.g. the East India Company) or religious orders (e.g. the Jesuits).

These circumstances had repercussions on the republic of letters not only in that they framed the lives, movements, and, eventually, deaths of its personnel. They are also responsible for some of the data peculiarities we will be dealing with in the following chapters: the significance of choosing one calendar system over another (ch. II.3), the political meaning of place names in different languages (ch. II.2), or the use of pseudonyms in order to evade censorship (ch. II.4).

Around the republic of letters itself, however, not only the political landscape changed, but also the framework of institutions and media, and with them changed the learned and scientific priorities. Until halfway through the seventeenth century, scholars had relied almost exclusively on letters and books for news about the world of learning. This changed after the arrival, in 1665, of the first learned journals. The journals appeared in Paris and London and were published by newly established academies. These academies (among others, the Académie des Sciences and the Royal Society of London) were loosely modelled on the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian societies of humanists and learned courtiers, but were now sponsored or supported by bearers of political power, who hoped to profit from the results of the rapidly transforming and increasing research into the natural world.

In terms of learned content, the natural sciences now emancipated themselves from the influence of Aristotelian thought, in which natural history, natural philosophy, and physics had been neatly organized into a metaphysical framework. Openly criticizing previous traditions, but in fact heavily indebted to them, Francis Bacon (d. 1626) and René Descartes (d. 1650) inspired new generations of both radicals thinkers and pious observers of God's creation to reread the Bible and the Book of Nature in the light of new philosophical and historical frameworks.³² Mathematics and the cosmos, cometology and meteorology, motion and matter, atomism and the vacuum – such themes occupied many of the greatest minds of the century. Yet other brilliant intellectuals, such as the earlier mentioned Calvinist scholar Joseph Scaliger, the Church of Ireland archbishop James Ussher, and the Catholic theologian Denis Petau, continued to deepen the insight into human and biblical history by developing comparative chronologies, while Jesuit scholars such as Athanasius Kircher studied Asian history and Egyptian antiquities (along with

³² Eric Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575–1715* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

magnetism):³³ the world deepened chronologically, expanded geographically, and grew more complicated mathematically, while becoming conceivable for the first time in Western history without the idea of the biblical God, thanks to the Jewish-Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza.

Whatever the field of knowledge may have been, however, there had always been some implicit consensus about the duty of scholars to communicate and respect the authorial rights of one's colleagues, as appears from the many polemics arising from the infringement of such codes. Yet, from the late seventeenth century onwards, the republicans of letters consciously reflected on the ideals of tolerance, and on the codes of conduct, which should structure the republic of learning.³⁴ At the same time, the medium of print periodicals (with textual genres directly inspired by correspondence) reached growing parts of the increasingly literate public, so that the overspill of learned ideals into the sphere of political theory may be one of the major reasons for the perceived intersection between the republic of letters and the Enlightenment.

2.4 The Eighteenth Century: The Philosophical Republic of Letters

After the classical turn of the fifteenth century, the ecclesiastical and biblical turn of the sixteenth century, and the natural scientific turn of the seventeenth century, the republic of letters experienced a philosophical turn in the eighteenth century, when obsessive letter-writers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716) were relieved by no less maniacal correspondents such as Voltaire (d. 1778).

For many, the French enlightened republic of letters was too dismissive of the study of the text and remnants of Antiquity to count as truly learned, but the new generation in fact built upon the accomplishments of the humanists, scholars, and scientists of the Renaissance. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert in their famous *Encyclopédie* (1751) ransacked not only recent predecessors such as the 'critical' histories of Pierre Bayle (1697) and Jacob Brucker (d. 1744), but also the seventeenth-century journals and the sixteenth-century commentaries on pagan and Christian texts from Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. However, they did not dwell on them for mere historical interest; instead, they critically assessed their thinking against the philosophical systems of their day.

Philosophers were not the only citizens of the republic of letters. Take for example the famous botanist Carl Linnaeus (d. 1778). He corresponded with about

³³ Anthony Grafton, 'A Sketch Map of a Lost Continent: The Republic of Letters', *Republics of Letters* 1:1 (2008). See <http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/sketch-map-lost-continent-republic-letters>, accessed 20/03/2019.

³⁴ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning. Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Martin Mulsow, *Die unanständige Gelehrtenrepublik. Wissen, Libertinage und Kommunikation in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2007); Sari Kivistö, *The Vices of Learning. Morality and Knowing at Early Modern Universities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

200 people within Sweden and twice as many from other countries, in Europe but also Asia and Africa. About 3,000 of the letters, which he received from 660 people, have survived. On top of that, there are about as many letters that he wrote himself and sent off.³⁵ The statesman and natural philosopher Benjamin Franklin (d. 1790) was also an avid letter-writer: a constant flow of letters from and to him crossed the Atlantic. His surviving correspondence numbers some 15,000 letters. In the letters he addressed politics and electricity, naturally, but they also show that Franklin was interested in subjects ranging from meteorology to morality. And if we look at the greatest philosopher of the century, Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), the creator of modern ethics and metaphysics, we observe that he, too, exercised the praxis typical of a citizen of the republic of letters. He kept up an extensive and lively correspondence, which was inscribed in the learned sociability characteristic of the republic of letters. He composed poems for visiting scholars and funeral poetry for deceased colleagues, and he took great pleasure in learned conversation at the dinner table. He received many students who called on him with letters of recommendation, often from scholars who merely used those students as an excuse to address Kant. However, whereas the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (d. 1814) still spoke of a *literary republic of the learned*, Kant never once mentioned the concept of the republic of letters in his writings. Is this symptomatic for the diminishing currency of the metaphor?³⁶

On the level of European politics, the apparent decline of the republic of letters may be related to the rise of political entities – states – that were in need of expert knowledge in order to legitimize their authority and to exert power on a calculable basis. All fields of knowledge were involved, and universities as well as academies now consolidated the findings of past centuries, transforming them into curricula, or applying them to the agenda of state building (e.g. by creating land registers).³⁷ These institutions were often framed in a national paradigm, and referenced a specific state: knowledge became ‘French’ or ‘English’, and no longer related to the transnational commonwealth of learning.

To be sure, national stereotypes were not new in the republic of letters, but during the eighteenth century, knowledge became one of the fuels of nation-based statehood. Latin as a *lingua franca* was abandoned definitively, and although the republic of letters after 1800 persisted in the form of a ‘republic of *belles-lettres*’ and,

³⁵ For the edition of Linnaeus’s correspondence, see <http://linnaeus.c18.net/Doc/lbio.php>, accessed 20/03/2019.

³⁶ Dirk van Miert, ‘Immanuel Kant and the Republic of Letters’, paper read at Oxford, *Annual Meeting of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 8 January 2015; Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, ‘How Germany Left the Republic of Letters’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65:3 (2004): 421–32, see <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0004>.

³⁷ William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

eventually, the ‘scientific community’ of our day, its prevailing reference became the respective academic culture of a state, a nation, or an empire.³⁸

³⁸ For the survival of the republic of letters in the modern age see Peter Burke, ‘The Republic of Letters as a Communication System’, *Media History* 18:3–4 (2012): 395–407, see <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2012.721956>.