

Helmut Puff, Christopher Wild. *Zwischen den Disziplinen?: Perspektiven der Frühneuzeitforschung.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003. 207 S. EUR 24.00 (leinen), ISBN 978-3-89244-628-6.



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Few titles and subtitles are as happily balanced, and as honestly representative, as this one. *Between the Disciplines and Perspectives from Early Modern Studies* perfectly describe the agenda and contents of this slim, but challenging and important, volume. The introduction sets the tone, laying down broad themes and offering a series of insights that contributors subsequently pursue. All (if some more forthrightly than others) emphasize the insufficiency of the existing historical narratives (or meta-narratives) and suggest that much of that inadequacy derives from a disciplinary “deafness,” that is, from the unwillingness of various disciplines to “listen” to the others. But this is not just another, and by now stale, plea for interdisciplinary cooperation. Rather Helmut Puff and Christopher Wild, in recognizing the value of each discipline and in according each the respect it deserves, also promise riches to be harvested from the interdisciplinary interstices. Following this topographical metaphor, the editors note that “between the disciplines lie their boundaries,” but that boundaries “do not only ... divide, they also unite” (p. 11). Thus, for Puff, Wild, and their collaborators, “what happens at the limits of one or another discipline also [inevitably] affects what is generally viewed as internal to each” (p. 13). In other words, the relationship between disciplines is always a active one.

Indeed the disciplines themselves first emerged “as dynamically networked structures.” Laboring in these overlapping areas poses a “special challenge” for early modern researchers, but also affords peculiarly seductive opportunities. On the one hand, the various disciplines—history, philosophy, literary and art criticism, the natural sciences—evolved into their current forms beginning in the eighteenth century. Their contours flowed and their limits were indistinct. On the other hand, because no “disciplines” (as understood, for instance, in the nineteenth century) yet existed, the study of the early modern period cannot be other than an interdisciplinary project. This perspective recognizes—indeed valorizes—the individual disciplines and that directs our attention to the dialogue each discipline conducts (or should conduct) with the others. Such a conversation was “natural” (*selbstverständlich*) when the disciplines were unformed (during the *Frühneuzeit*), but that natural state vanished in the nineteenth century. This useful re-orientation that avoids the tired bromide of “the need for more interdisciplinary research” by showing the specific historical validity of interdisciplinarity for the early modern period and by indicating the extent to which scholars of the early modern world are best placed to restore “nature” to its rightful place.

The introduction also raises issues of achronicity that

Valentin Groebner explores. In investigating how the concept of “culture” unfolded, he simultaneously advances a plan for constructing meta-narratives. Groebner notes that the traditional historical narrative (dating from the late-eighteenth century) has been a vertical one where “historical processes are presented as the quasi geological base” (p. 24) for current positions. Of course, this method characterized the nationalist histories produced in Germany in the late-nineteenth century. Yet Groebner also finds that even historians such as Natalie Davis and Carlo Ginzburg whose works, by referencing the present, have “change[d] and enrich[ed]” the past, remain “obligated to a vertical modality” (p. 27). He then evaluates newer, “horizontal,” styles of presentation and forms of argumentation based on “ties to the present” (p. 31) and on collage techniques that juxtapose past and present (or rather several pasts and presents). His method would fuse the two forms. While one follows with some fascination the possibilities such an approach could create, nonetheless the historian remains puzzled as to the role causation would play in his new model.

As befits a tightly organized and well-planned volume, the following essays elaborate particular aspects of the general programmatic aims. Yet while all the articles are informative, and even provocative, some respond more directly than others to the trumpet call of restoring the dialogue between disciplines. A few advance excellent, if methodologically less innovative, reviews of the literature produced by early modernists, particularly the current work on ritual, gender, and colonial texts. Still even these essays address the issue of generating new narratives that spontaneously arise from the fruitful confrontation of one discipline with another. Lorraine Daston, for instance, does this most explicitly in her “thoughts towards a rapprochement” between the history/historians of the scientific revolution and early modern history/historians. She depicts the relationship between the two as “vexed.” Despite the profusion of excellent studies both have produced, they have rarely had a sympathetic ear for their counterparts. Rather, they have “studiously ignored one another’s work” (p. 38). Early modern historians have overlooked the history of science because recent work in that field has “unsettle[d] all the home truths about the Scientific Revolution” and thus these iconoclasts have “deprived their colleagues in early modern history (and themselves) of a powerful narrative about how the obscure, backward, and derivative ... cultures of northwestern Europe rose to a position of economic, political, and intellectual dominance” (p.47). Like the historians of science who effectively demolished

a comfortable story of “scientific progress,” Daston, too, is better at explaining why the two disciplines have failed to converse with one another than in suggesting what a new dialogue might produce, a deficiency she freely admits. Her plea for a “wide-ranging history of experience” to anchor a new kind of narrative is intriguing but it remains unclear how that epic would sound. To be fair, such is an absolutely enormous task and one that no article, however adroitly crafted, could ever accomplish.

Still the real value of this essay and the ones that follow lies in their robust and compelling critiques of existing narratives achieved by exposing problems even the latest and most exciting research have left unresolved.

The weakness of the collection is that after razing old structures, the authors only allow us brief and unsatisfying glimpses of the new edifice they envision. Simply put, the wrecking gang has been more efficient than the construction crew. Even the criticisms of existing interpretations and narratives, if often fresh (and sometimes brilliant), are not always so. Dominik Perler, for example, in a detailed discussion of what constitutes an early modern philosophical text, builds a sound case for how some texts become canonical (Descartes’ *Meditationes*, for example) while others were relegated to the dustbin of history. He is right, of course, but such a creation of norms has hardly passed unnoticed by scholars (among them, for example, Daston’s historians of science) who have long been aware that “the danger of the traditional framework” is that “it eliminates certain discourses” from discussion “before they are even considered” (p. 65).

Perler’s essay employs specific instances to highlight broader issues and advance greater theoretical and methodological positions. Other contributions follow suit. Christine GÄttler’s captivating, if perhaps overlong, article on “wax and interdisciplinarity” uses wax busts to illustrate how a scorned art form—denigrated as “little” art compared to the “great” art of full-sized sculpture—directs our attention to “a previously little noticed sensibility” (p. 147) about the corporeality of the emotions and soul. Jan-Dirk MÄller turns to a famous work—Sebastian Brant’s “*Narrenschiff*”—and its knock-off and pirated versions to document the plasticity of early modern texts. They were neither permanent nor believed to be fixed, but rather evolved in interaction with each other and with other texts entirely.

More useful, in an immediate sense, are essays like those of Susanna Burghartz and Ulinka Rublack who look at how scholars have analyzed ritual and the complex interaction of marriage, sex, and the Reformation. In each

case, the author tests various interpretations and demonstrates how previous research leaves major issues unanswered. Rublack takes on one sacred cow: that a “ritual revolution” occurred in early modern times. She argues, convincingly, that the whole idea of the disappearance of ritual or even a substantial shift in its meaning derives from a strait-jacketing, judgmental “developmental model” (p. 164). Susanna Burghartz does similar work in demolishing the traditional story of the impact of the Reformation on sexual practices and marriage. New research has shown, she points out, that the notion of the Reformation as a watershed in the history of sexual relations and marriage is not only far too simple but actually

rests on a series of *questions mal posées*.

In the end, however, what remains most impressive about the contributions to this volume is less the methodological perspectives opened up, less the theoretical boldness heralded in the introduction, and more the exacting scholarship represented here. The authors would perhaps shudder to hear it said, but it is the time-tested critical facility they deploy, their willingness to doubt all received wisdoms, and their ability to think rigorously about how arguments are shaped that distinguish this volume and make it valuable, even indispensable, reading for any scholar of the early modern world.

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