

*In Search of the Truth: A History of Disputation Techniques from Antiquity to Early Modern Times.* Olga Weijers.

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Olga Weijers has devoted a lifetime of scholarship to the study of medieval Scholastic terminology and practices, with a special focus on the procedures of disputation (*disputatio*) that were used in the faculty of arts at the University of Paris during the High Middle Ages. She is in many ways the ideal person to undertake a broad synthesis of the history of disputation techniques from classical to early modern times. On the whole, she is successful. This handy volume, issued by Brepols in a pocketbook format, provides a very useful introduction to the subject matter by a leading authority in the field.

The book is divided into ten relatively compact sections, plus an introduction and conclusion. Some of the sections provide broad coverage of major periods, such as “Antiquity” (section 1) or “Renaissance Disputation” (section 7), while others dig deeper into the aspects of disputation about which Weijers has more to say, such as the “Origins of the Medieval Disputation” (3) or “Disputation in the Medieval Universities: Some Examples” (6). The tenth section offers a comparative view of disputation in other cultures (notably Judaism and Islam, but touching on the more distant civilizations of Asia as well). All of the sections are solidly grounded in a close reading of primary sources, which, as she resolutely declares, “are essential to understand the past in a way that is not deformed by earlier interpretations” (15). A few images of Scholastic disputations or allegorical debates in the early modern period are also included, although they are minimally discussed.

The title of the book adequately sums up Weijers’s driving message that disputation is above all a technique in the service of the search for truth. She returns time and again to the basic outline of intellectual debates and the forms that they have taken in different periods of history in order to show how the disputational search passed from one period to the next and across several different genres of writing, ultimately finding its fullest expression in the structured and institutionalized world of the medieval university. While Weijers is expertly sensitive to issues of vocabulary and definition, she is no less attuned to the polemical and performative dimensions of disputation, topics that are

likewise addressed in my own book (*The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance* [2013]), which appeared the same year and agrees in substance with the findings of this book. The sections dealing with Renaissance and early modern disputations stress both continuity and change with their medieval antecedents, a topic that certainly deserves further study.

Weijers's authority on this topic notwithstanding, the book does pose a few challenges to readers coming to the topic for first time. On a stylistic level, the author has been underserved by her English-language editors (Weijers publishes mostly in French). Many sentences are confusing and self-referential and there is a distracting overabundance of the royal "we." Her explanations of the nature of premodern documents are at times overly simplistic or excessively positivistic, even while trying to convey their complexity. Lengthy quotations of primary (and sometimes secondary) sources are privileged over against a deeper analysis of the texts from which they are taken, thus giving the book a catalogue-like feel that may be useful to specialists but will frustrate those looking for greater contextual explanations. In some sense, Weijers seems to have internalized the very Scholastic patterns of presentation and argumentation. She is often preoccupied (overly so in this reviewer's opinion) with making hairsplitting distinctions, such as categorizing the many different forms of dialogue literature or establishing firm distinctions among eristic, juridical, and Scholastic disputations. Differing scholarly interpretations are presented, pro and contra, and then resolved by Weijers in a quasi-Scholastic *determinatio* that is often less conclusive than she would have it. Lastly, footnotes have been eschewed in favor of the Harvard referencing style, which has the advantage of keeping the scholarly apparatus to a minimum but the disadvantage of distancing the reader from the sources themselves, not least because a number of the primary sources are cited (rather inexplicably) from secondary works. Anyone interested in the history of medieval and early modern disputation will nevertheless find this book a welcome guide to the subject.

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