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## Historical criticism in early modern Europe

### **Part I: Quintus Curtius and the Gordian Knot of tradition**

In the years around 1700, a roomy but fragile imaginary mansion housed the citizens of the Republic of Letters. Scattered geographically from Edinburgh to Naples, they were connected intellectually by their shared passion for the central issues of the day: Newton's physics, Locke's politics, the chronology of ancient Egypt, and the mythology of ancient Greece. Touchy, alert, and fascinated by learned gossip, they scanned the new review journals for every reference to their own work or that of their friends and enemies. Public arguments repeatedly flared up. Many of those who dwelled in this ample new house of learning feared that it was in danger of going up in flames.<sup>1</sup> And no one tried more systematically to resolve these conflicts than Jacob Perizonius, professor of ancient history at Franeker and Leiden. Perizonius dedicated himself to putting out fires in the Republic of Letters – or at least in its philological and historical wing. In detailed essays, couched in the serpentine Latin of late humanism and larded with quotations from sources in many languages, he did his best

<sup>1</sup> For some recent perspectives see Bots and Waquet (eds.) 1994; Bots and Waquet 1997; Goldgar 1995; Miller 2000; Grafton 2001; Malcolm 2002; Malcolm 2004.

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to show that a sensible historian could rescue the early histories of Egypt, Babylon, and Rome from the attacks of historical skeptics, without making dogmatic assertions of the reliability of ancient writers.<sup>2</sup> He tried to save as much as he could of the Greek and Latin writers' *fides historica*, even as a new set of writers sharpened a new set of weapons and prepared to mount a merciless attack on the scholarly and rhetorical traditions he held dearest.<sup>3</sup>

No one agitated Perizonius more than those self-appointed avatars of modernity, the captious critics who despised the ancients. And no herald of the new banged his drum more loudly as he invaded Perizonius's favorite intellectual space than Jean Le Clerc, journal editor and prolific writer on the themes of the day.<sup>4</sup> In 1697, Le Clerc issued what he defined as a manual for a new kind of critical thinking and reading – the *Ars critica*, a massive introduction to philology and history. Le Clerc spoke a contemporary language when he claimed that he would teach the reader to test texts and traditions against the eternal principles of “right reason,” insofar as these affected philology and hermeneutics. In practice, as when Le Clerc told the critic who had to choose between two readings to assume that authorial intent more probably lay in the *difficilior lectio* – the harder reading of the two, which a scribe might have tried

<sup>2</sup> Perizonius 1685; Perizonius 1740a; Perizonius 1740b. See Erasmus 1962; Meijer 1971; and Borghero 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel 1959; Manuel 1963; Grell 1983; Sartori 1982; Sartori 1985; Raskolnikova 1992; Grell 1993; Grell 1995; Grell and Volpilhac-Auger (eds.) 1994. For the wider context see also Borghero 1983; Völkel 1987; Miller 2005; Mulsow 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Barnes 1938; Pitassi 1987.

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to emend or soften, producing the easier one – he borrowed liberally from earlier humanists like Erasmus.<sup>5</sup> But he cast his arguments in the period dialect of iconoclasm and innovation. Le Clerc took a special pleasure in choosing a classical, rather than a medieval or a modern, text as his exemplary evidence that any text, however venerable, could reveal fatal flaws when subjected to the right sort of scrutiny.

Forty-five years ago, E. H. Carr, the wartime “Red Professor of Printing-House Square,” devoted his Trevelyan lectures to the question *What is History?* Carr lived, like the actors in my story, at a moment when massive and muscular rival philosophies of history clashed, like monsters, across the world. In 1961, as in 1691, some of Europe’s most brilliant intellectuals espoused radically different views on the past and knew how to marshal dazzling arguments in their favor, and Carr’s intervention in their debates helped to make clear how significant the moment was for the development of historical thought and practice. Even before Carr wrote, however, Herbert Butterfield and Arnaldo Momigliano had shown that the new history of the post-war period represented the culmination of two centuries of debates about historical method and changes in historical practice. The point of this short book is to argue that the battles over history of the years around 1700 rivalled those of the 1950s and 1960s in seriousness as well as in sheer, wild eccentricity – and that they too were the culmination of long decades of challenge and debate.

In Part III of the *Ars critica*, Le Clerc trained the harshly brilliant lamp of his critical principles on the Roman historian

<sup>5</sup> Bentley 1978.

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Quintus Curtius Rufus – a writer of the earlier Imperial period who adapted Greek sources to tell the story of Alexander the Great.<sup>6</sup> His work, though incomplete, had won great popularity in the Renaissance, when illustrated versions of it in Italian made popular reading for princes.<sup>7</sup> Alfonso of Aragon, a connoisseur of history, staged “hours of the book” at his court in Naples. At these intellectual precursors of modern all-in wrestling, humanists like Bartolomeo Facio and Lorenzo Valla savaged one another as they debated passages in the text of Livy.<sup>8</sup> Alfonso himself read Curtius while ill and out of sorts, and recovered at once. He declared the work as effective and pleasant a remedy as anything in Hippocrates or Galen.<sup>9</sup> Numerous manuscripts and, after around 1470, many

<sup>6</sup> For recent perspectives see Bosworth and Baynham (eds.) 2000, and especially Bosworth 2000 and Atkinson 2000. On the earlier popularity of the text, in diversely interpolated and adapted forms, see Cary 1956 and Ross 1988.

<sup>7</sup> For a fascinating account of the way in which ancient historians were reconfigured to meet the tastes of courtly audiences in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Dionisotti 1997 (for Curtius see especially 540–41).

<sup>8</sup> The richest – though not always the fairest – source for what went on at the *ore del libro* is Valla 1981.

<sup>9</sup> See François Baudouin’s account, Baudouin 1561a, 160; Wolf (ed.) 1579, I, 706: “Denique cum Aeneas Sylvius ex Germania misisset Arrianum de Alexandri rebus gestis, non tam Latinum factum, quam ad Sigismundi Imperatoris captum vix Latine balbutientem, Alphonsus ne eum quidem neglexit. Adeo nihil eorum praetermittebat, quibus haec studia historiarum adiuvari eo seculo posse putaret. Denique cum aeger aliquando decumberet, et legendo Curtium, qui eam Latine scripsit historiam, quam Graece Arrianus, ita se oblectasset, ut animi et corporis languentis vires collapsas etiam recreasset, exclamavit, non esse in Hippocrate vel Galeno saniolem medicinam suaviolemque curationem.”

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printed editions made the text accessible.<sup>10</sup> Erasmus considered Curtius ideal reading for those who wished “to maintain their rhetoric in a state of high polish.” He even prepared an edition with marginal notes that called attention to some “novel turns of phrase” that could enrich the standard Latin lexicon.<sup>11</sup>

The humanists who formulated influential protocols for reading ancient history in the later decades of the sixteenth century – Justus Lipsius and his allies – preferred Tacitus and Polybius to the historians that Alfonso and his contemporaries had loved most, especially Livy.<sup>12</sup> Yet they shared their predecessors’ love of Curtius. Lipsius spared no adjectives when he praised this “Historian who is, in my opinion, as honorable and worthy of respect as any other. The felicity of his language and the charm of his way of telling stories are marvellous. He manages to be both concise and fluent, subtle and clear, precise and unpedantic. His judgements are accurate, his morals are shrewd, and his speeches show an indescribable eloquence.” Scholars as distant from one another in space – if not in

The same story appears, with further corroborating examples, in Jean Bodin’s proem to his *Methodus*, in Wolf (ed.) 1579, I, 5: “quid autem suavius quam in historia velut in proposita subjectaque tabula res intueri maiorum? quid iucundius quam eorum opes, copias, ipsasque acies inter se concurrentes cernere? quae certe voluptas est eiusmodi, ut omnibus interdum corporis et animi morbis sola medeatur. testes sunt, ut alios omittam, Alphonsus ac Ferdinandus Hispaniae et Siciliae reges, quorum alter a T. Livio, alter a Q. Curtio valetudinem amissam, quam a medicis non poterant, recuperarunt.”

<sup>10</sup> Winterbottom 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Allen *et al.* (eds.) 1906–58 ep. 704, III, 129–31.

<sup>12</sup> The fullest study is now Jan Waszink’s introduction to Lipsius 2004.

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their tastes – as Christopher Colerus, who went from teaching history at Altdorf to serving as a master of ceremonies at the Imperial court, the Rostock professor and historian David Chytraeus, and the first Camden praelector on ancient history at Oxford, Degory Wheare, who quoted all three of them on Curtius, agreed with Lipsius.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the speeches in Curtius compelled admiration, as models of rhetoric well applied to history. Nicodemus Frischlin put Curtius first among the five authors from whom he drew an anthology of Latin speeches for the use of his students in Braunschweig.<sup>14</sup> In his lectures he analyzed in detail the ways in which the Roman historian made Darius narrate events, devise arguments, and

<sup>13</sup> See Wheare 1684, 46: “Q. etiam *Curtius Rufus*, Scriptor valde bonus et argutus, sed ἀκέφαλος, vel hominum vel temporum vel utrorumque iniquitate factus. *Arrianus et Quintus Curtius, floridus uterque* (inquit Colerus) *sed nitidior Curtius, et quovis melle dulcior. Lectorem citius defatigatum, quam satiatum dimittat. Sententiae passim directae et obliquae, quibus mire illustretur vita humana. Idem de Curtio J. Lipsii iudicium. Historicus* (inquit), *me iudice, probus legitimusque, si quisquam fuit. Mira in sermone eius felicitas, in narrationibus lepos. Astrictus idem et profluens: subtilis et clarus: sine cura ulla accuratus. Verus in iudiciis, argutus in sententiis, in orationibus supra quam dixerim facundus.*” This passage begins with a sentence rewritten from David Chytraeus, who had remarked: “Inter Latinos Q. Curtius extat, argutus, elegans et nervosus scriptor, sed ἀκέφαλος”: Wolf (ed.) 1579, II, 480. The former of the two italicized quotations comes from Colerus’s letter of 31 October 1601 *De ordinando studio politico*, in Grotius *et al.* 1645, 171–98, at 188; the latter from Lipsius’s notes to his *Politica*, 1.9, in Lipsius 2004, 734. Note that Wheare omits Lipsius’s final qualification: “Quod si varium magis argumentum habuisset; fallor, aut variae Prudentiae eximum magis specimen praeuisset. Sed Alexander, quid nisi bella?” Both Colerus’s text and Lipsius’s constitute brief *artes historicae*.

<sup>14</sup> Frischlin (ed.) 1588, 1–21.

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create a feeling of loyalty and pathos among his soldiers. Frischlin made clear that he attributed these feats of rhetoric not to the Persian emperor, but to the Roman historian – especially when he noted that Hannibal used one of the same arguments that Darius did “in book 21 of Livy.”<sup>15</sup>

Le Clerc admitted that he had long shared the traditional admiration for this master of classical rhetoric. At last, though, he tested Curtius against two eternal touchstones at once: the particular rules of the art that he professed, history, and the general rules of right reason, “which hold for all human beings, whatever nation and whatever age we may live in.”<sup>16</sup> Close and repeated scrutiny revealed errors so grave that they undermined Curtius’s standing as a historian. Reason demanded that the historian learn to use geography and

<sup>15</sup> Notes on Frischlin’s lecture on Darius’s speech in Curtius 4.14.9–26 appear in a copy of Frischlin (ed.) 1588, which in turn forms part of a *Sammelbändchen* in the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel (A: 108.3 Rhet. [3]). The quotation appears *ibid.*, 4: “Annibal lib. 21 apud Livium eodem argumento utitur.”

<sup>16</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, Pars iii, 395–512, esp. 396: “Omnium Scriptorum libri expendi possunt et debent ad regulas Artis, quam privatim profitentur, legesque rectae Rationis, quibus homines omnes, sine ullo gentium ac saeculorum, quibus vivimus, discrimine tenemur. Qui utrasque per omnia observarunt, sunt per omnia laudandi, at perpauci sunt: alii omnes, quatenus tantum observarunt. Quae recta sunt laudari, sine malignitate, debent: quae minus, sine superbia, reprehendenda. Nos ergo *Curtii* opus ad Leges Historiae, quandoquidem se Historicum professus est, et ad rectam Rationem, cuius scitis ac decretis aequae ac nos tenebatur, exigemus.” This is Le Clerc’s definitive formulation, revised after Perizonius responded to his work. Originally he described his plan more briefly, but in substantively similar terms, as “ut quidquid habet exigere ad severas Historiae leges et veri immutabilem normam” (Le Clerc 1697, II, 538).

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chronology, the two eyes of history. Curtius had mastered neither discipline. He thought that the Black Sea was directly connected to the Caspian, and he did not mention the years, or the seasons, when the events in his account took place.<sup>17</sup> Reason demanded accuracy, but Curtius's account swarmed with obvious errors. When he described the scythed chariots of the Persians, he imagined that their blades projected through the spokes of their wheels, a manifest impossibility, rather than from their hubs.<sup>18</sup> Reason, finally, demanded independence from popular follies. Curtius supinely followed Greek writers when he portrayed the Persians and Indians as worshipping Greek divinities, rather than "barbarous" gods of their own, with their own names and cults. From ancient texts and contemporary travel accounts, Le Clerc wove a compelling case against the *interpretatio Graeca*, the "Greek rendering," of foreign gods.<sup>19</sup>

Le Clerc traced most of Curtius's errors to a single source: the fact that he was a rhetorician rather than a historian. Historians followed the sources they thought most accurate. Rhetoricians spread their stylistic wings without regard to whether the stories they told were credible:

Those who have composed histories from ancient sources fall into two categories . . . Some try to work out the truth, so far as that is possible, and examine everything diligently so that, when it is impossible to produce a certain account, they follow the more plausible narrative. Others take little interest in the truth, and choose instead to report the greatest possible marvels, since these are more susceptible

<sup>17</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 402–21, 457–75.

<sup>18</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 430–36.

<sup>19</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 448–57.



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of rhetorical adornment, and supply the matter for exercises in the high style.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently, Curtius belonged in the second category.<sup>21</sup> That explained why he claimed that over one hundred thousand Persians and only a few score Greeks had died at the Battle of the Issus. “For this to have happened,” Le Clerc commented with contemptuous clarity, “the Persians would have to have had wooden swords.”<sup>22</sup>

Curtius revealed the professional deformations of the rhetorician most vividly when he stuffed his narrative with supposedly eloquent speeches. No serious historian, Le Clerc argued, should include speeches in his narrative, either in direct form or even in oblique summary.<sup>23</sup> He knew, of course, that Curtius had followed normal ancient practice. But doing so

<sup>20</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 422: “Sunt autem duo genera hominum, qui ex antiquis monumentis Historias contexere . . . Alii, quantum licet, veritatem expiscari conantur, et diligenter omnia expendunt, ut verisimillimam sequantur narrationem, cum non licet res exploratas proferre. Alii vero de veritate non multum laborantes ea eligunt, quae maxime mirabilia videntur: quia facilius exornari possunt, et grandiori orationi materiam suppeditant.” (Le Clerc here rather resembles the contemporary theologians and natural historians who tried to extirpate marvels from other sectors of the encyclopedia in which they had traditionally played central roles.)

<sup>21</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 423: “In posteriorum numero fuisse *Q. Curtium* res ipsa ostendit.”

<sup>22</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 423: “Ut hoc esset, oportuisset gladios Persarum fuisse ligneos, nec ulla tela cuspidibus ferreis praefixa . . .”

<sup>23</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 488: “Ut nunc ad orationes veniamus, quas directas plurimas habet Curtius, ut vix totidem alibi occurrere in tam parvo volumine existimem; ante omnia, profiteri necesse habeo me esse in eorum sententia, qui in Historia gravi orationes omnes et directas et

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violated the historian's primary responsibility to tell the truth. Inventing a speech that the actor in question had not made was a lie, every bit as much as inventing an action that he had not carried out.

Curtius's practices, moreover, were especially ludicrous, for his speeches lacked all verisimilitude. His wildly varied cast of characters all spoke exactly the same fluid, cultivated Latin: "All the characters in Curtius declaim, and in a way that reflects the author's wit, not their own. Darius declaims, Alexander declaims, his soldiers declaim. Even the Scyths, completely ignorant of letters, make their appearance duly singed by the rhetorical curling iron. This reminds me of the family, all of whose members sang."<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, historians had made their characters say the things appropriate to the situations in which they spoke. But doing this without regard to local customs and cultures was absurd: "What more ridiculous invention could there be, than to make ignorant men or barbarians speak as eloquently as if they had spent many years studying rhetoric?"<sup>25</sup>

The voice of modernity resounds, harsh and self-confident, through Le Clerc's denunciation of Curtius. Cutting

obliquas omittendas censent; nisi exstent, aut earum sententia certissime sciri possit."

<sup>24</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 490: "Apud *Curtium* omnes sunt declamatores, qui Scriptoris ingenio sapiunt, non suo. Darius declamat, Alexander declamat, milites eius declamant: Scythae ipsi, omnium litterarum rudes, rhetorico calamistro inusti in medium prodeunt. Hoc in memoriam mihi revocat familiam illam quae tota cantabat."

<sup>25</sup> Le Clerc 1712a, 489: "Nam quid absurdius fingi potest, quam idiotas aut barbaros inducere loquentes aequae eleganter et diserte, ac si per multos annos Rhetoricae operam dedissent?"