

Politics, the “Public Sphere”, and the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters

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Modern accounts of the seventeenth-century Republic of Letters have tended to regard it as an implicitly or potentially political phenomenon – implicitly because of what seems to be suggested by the term ‘Republic’, and potentially because it has been seen as the forerunner of the eighteenth-century ‘public sphere’. However, too much significance has been read into the term ‘Republic’ (a word with a much broader semantic field in this period); and while links can certainly be made between the worlds of seventeenth-century *érudits* and eighteenth-century publicists (notably via Bayle), the differences are greater than the similarities. A sphere of public political debate did exist in the seventeenth century – a debate conducted mostly in pamphlet publications, not in the nascent periodical press. But the Republic of Letters stood some way apart from it, and when members of the Republic entered that debate, they tended to do so as clients of political patrons, not as independent critics. This tells us something about what might be called the larger political bargain to which the Republic of Letters was a party.