# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

# Irritating Minds

DOROTHEA BROOKE was an intelligent, strong-willed young woman who seemed to have a promising life ahead of her. And then disaster struck: she fell in love with a scholar. The Reverend Edward Casaubon was a middle-aged cleric whose "iron-grey hair" and "deep eye-sockets" made him look like the philosopher John Locke.[1] Despite the warnings of those around her, Dorothea married him, thus embarking on a short-lived, unhappy wedded life in a gloomy parsonage filled with books and silence. The learned Casaubon turns out to be a "dried-up pedant," overly intellectual, self-centered, and unable to share his feelings.[2] He shows more love for his studies into ancient religions than for his young wife. His research, moreover, is dreary and pointless. His aim of publishing a *Key to all Mythologies* is hopelessly lost in an endless process of note-taking and subsequent sorting.

Thanks to the success of George Eliot's masterly novel *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Mr Casaubon remains among the most iconic pedants in literary history. His name alludes to a world beyond the fictional character and an intellectual culture that revolved around classical erudition. Eliot borrowed it from the French classical philologist Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614). A


FIGURE 1.1A. Portrait of Isaac Casaubon. Engraving by Pieter van Gunst after Adriaen van der Werff, 1709. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Public domain.

brilliant expert in ancient Greek who published new editions of the more obscure classics such as Athenaeus, Theophrastus, and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Casaubon was a self-declared "study-holic." "My friends are the enemies of my studies," he lamented in his diary, amid other complaints about the burdens of social

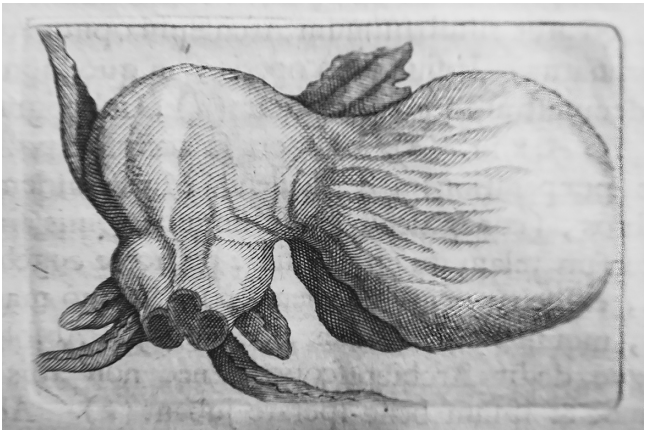

FIGURE I.1B. Engraving of Isaac Casaubon's monstrous bladder, from *Casauboni epistolae*, ed. Theodorus Janssonius van Almeloveen (Rotterdam: C. Fritsch and M. Böhm, 1709), 60. Private collection. Figure I.1a shows a conventional portrait of the French scholar Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) and Figure I.1b provides an unconventional one, in the form of his bladder. Casaubon died aged fifty-five from urological complications. In the posthumous edition of his correspondence, this engraving preceded the medical report of his deathbed by his doctor, entitled "The History of the Great Casaubon's Monstrous Bladder." To his admirers, the deformed organ epitomized the scholar's relentless diligence.

life.[3] Figure I.1 shows a conventional portrait, but also an engraved image of his deformed bladder, the cause of his death. His admirers took it as evidence of the scholar's self-sacrificing work ethos at the service of textual scholarship. Casaubon's unremitting studies had supposedly made him ignore the calls of nature. His "monstrous bladder" made him a martyr to learning.[4]

Pedantry is as old as the history of learning itself, but it is not a stable concept. It is a cultural phenomenon with symptoms that have varied over time. Eliot's dry and austere Casaubon irritated for reasons that differed from those associated with

presumptuous pedants in previous centuries, or nitpicking ones today. The language used to describe it was equally elastic. What all pedants across the ages share, however, is the tendency to arouse antipathy toward know-it-all behavior. From ancient times, intellectuals, whether professional knowledge workers or privately learned individuals, have provoked scorn, irritation, and even downright aggression for excesses or improprieties in their use or display of learning. A recurring set of key grievances includes intellectual pretension, obscure language and jargon, fault-finding and blame-giving, and a preoccupation with trivial or useless knowledge.

In today's world pedants appear mostly in the form of linguistic sticklers and faultfinders, who annoy the online community (according to their detractors) by zealously correcting grammar. The strong negative overtones of the term are clear from related expressions used to characterize the practice, such as "grammar police," or the more aggressive hyperbole "grammar Nazi." The meme used to represent the latter expression, an adapted version of the Nazi flag in which an angular capital G replaces the swastika, indicates how overbearing the practice is perceived to be, and how much hostility it can provoke. Only a few consciously embrace the term "pedant" as a self-descriptor, almost as a badge of honor. One of these is the president of The King's English Society, Dr Bernard Lamb. "If being a pedant means caring about the language and its accurate careful use," Lamb declares, "then yes, I am a pedant, certainly. We need more pedants!"[5] While linguists have often criticized such pedantic concern as the product of an overly normative, prescriptivist approach, stressing that language usage is always evolving and varied, psychologists have suggested that personality is also a factor. Extroverted people tend to assign less weight to grammatical errors or typos. Introverted personalities, conversely,

are more sensitive to such mistakes, so likely to judge more negatively those who make them.[6]

The history of pedantry is as broad as it is deep. In China, a long tradition of examinations for civil service recruitment (begun under the Tang dynasty, 618–907) produced a formidable learned elite and an equally formidable tradition of criticizing them. Passing the notoriously demanding exams required years of intensive study and memorization of the Confucian classics. Very few actually obtained the coveted posts, but the overall result of the process was a surplus of hyperspecialized scholars. The trope of the myopic "bookworm" (*shudaizi*), unable to think critically and make himself useful, shows that those around him were not always convinced of the overall social benefit of his learning.[7] Pedants also inhabited the world of early Islam. They took the guise, for instance, of specialists of *hadith*, the reports of the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed and other early Muslims. Each *hadith* included a list of transmitters (*isnad*) all the way back to its original source. Much mockery targeted *hadith* scholars for their punctilious analysis of authenticity and their criticism of other experts. It gained them a reputation as hypercritical killjoys. Another group of pedantic intellectuals were the experts in classical Arabic grammar, infamous for their linguistic fussiness. Even in ordinary situations they used archaic, bookish language. They never missed an opportunity to correct others. One anecdote reported by the twelfth-century polymath preacher and educator Ibn al-Jawzi tells of the uneasy interaction between such a grammarian and a carpenter. When the scholar asked, "What is the price that this pair of doors costeth?" he received the direct reply, "Two pieces of shitteth, oh you idioteth."[8]

These examples show how responses could range from mild irritation to stark disapproval and ridicule.[9] Critics associated a

pedant's symptoms with a lack of civility, immorality, or even crime. Parading one's learning could indicate arrogance; obscure language, deception; and clever argumentation could provoke suspicions of relativism or even atheism. The ancient philosopher Socrates, known for his sharp mind even before Plato made him the star of his dialogues, presents an intriguing case. Socrates's criticisms, mostly aimed at demonstrating the invalidity of his interlocutors' views, turned him into a public figure. To modern readers, his pursuit of truth probably seems perfectly appropriate. Yet the historical Socrates had a more mixed reputation in his own time. Ugly and irritating, with the face of a satyr and the appearance of a beggar (fig. I.2), he triggered scorn and considerable annoyance amongst his fellow Athenian citizens. Around 423 BCE the comic poet Aristophanes satirized Socrates as an odd and out-of-touch intellectual. In his comedy *The Clouds*, he depicted the philosopher as someone who revered clouds as gods and literally did not stand with both feet on the ground. Two decades later, in 399 BCE, Socrates's trial on charges of corrupting the young and introducing new gods resulted in a death sentence.[10] Some uses of knowledge, when perceived as transgressive, could ultimately have lethal consequences.

The example of Socrates highlights the fact that accusations of pedantry, as we will see repeatedly, are inherently subjective in origin. This makes it something of a slippery beast for the historian who seeks to trace its history. Like other social vices, such as arrogance or rudeness, pedantry is not a precisely codified crime, but a perceived transgression of implied norms and values, and as such, inevitably exists in the eye of the beholder. To understand the sentiments, beliefs, and agendas behind such accusations, we must reconstruct these values and contextualize the language of pedantry.

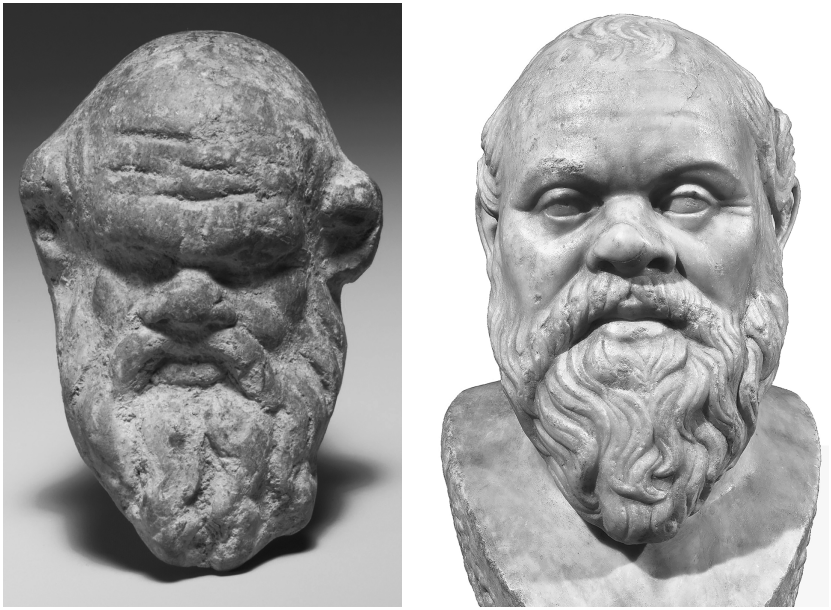

FIGURE 1.2A. Terracotta head of the satyr Silenus. Cyprus, second century BCE. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain. (B) Marble head of Socrates. Roman copy of Greek original in bronze, ca. 380 BCE. Naples, Museo archeologico nazionale, 6129. By permission of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo–Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli. Photo: Giorgio Albano
With his pug nose, bald head, and protruding lips, Socrates was said to resemble a satyr in his physical appearance. The mythological figure of the satyr typified unrestrained, insatiable behavior. Beyond his ugly, beastlike physique, however, the satyr was also considered a semi-divine creature who could possess special wisdom.

Denial and counter-narratives confirm this subjective status. Many intellectuals have, for example, explained the irritation they caused as a response to inconvenient truths. Plato, in his Dialogues, describes how Socrates was acutely aware of his negative reputation, which had built up over a long period. He turned it into a sign of virtue in the *Apology*, his account of

Socrates's defense speech at his trial. Here Socrates argues that his activities, however annoying, were a divine instrument that would keep the community alert to the truth. "I was attached to this city by the god," he explained, "as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly."[11] Known for its sharp bite, the insect became a symbol of the critical individual who, ever undaunted, speaks the truth.

Interpreting irritation and antipathy as anti-philosophical responses, Socrates argued that his opponents' aversion to his behavior was proof of his moral integrity. When found guilty, and asked to suggest his own punishment (again according to Plato), he further tested the jury's patience by proposing not a punishment, but a reward: to have free meals in the town hall, an honor typically reserved for heroes. The resulting death sentence received eighty more of the jurors' votes in favor than had his initial conviction.[12]

From a survey of history, many similar examples can be added. The twelfth-century theologian and philosopher Peter Abelard, notorious for his sharp and hypercritical mind, wrote that "logic" had made him "hated by the world."[13] Renaissance humanists such as Petrarch and Erasmus of Rotterdam famously relished the resistance to their social criticisms as if it were a badge of honor, thereby increasing their adversaries' fury against them. The twentieth-century literary critic Edward Said vividly described an ideal intellectual as "a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual" who showed an activist's commitment "to speak truth to power."[14] Socrates's gadfly buzzes in the background of many views of the intellectual's task. These arguments confirm a long-standing awareness of the irritation that intellectual activity can cause. By rationalizing it, however, they minimize the social dimension and fail

to explain the simpler, everyday grievances against people of a pedantic disposition.

This book offers a different perspective. Shifting attention away from the self-proclaimed virtues of learned individuals, it charts the history of pedantry as an intellectual vice in the West, from ancient Greece to contemporary America. Proceeding from a broad, inclusive definition of pedantry as the excessive use or display of learning, this book moves beyond the intellectual history of the term to show how the phenomenon was perceived and represented. Based on a wide range of sources (including satire, comedy, essays, sermons, and film), it reveals a lively repertoire of tropes and arguments about a wide gamut of irritating intellectuals, from devious Sophists to bossy *savantes*, from hypercritical theologians to dry-as-dust antiquarians and know-it-all professors. The definition of pedantry on which this history is based is deliberately broader than the current conception of the term. In this way we can trace both the continuity of anti-pedantic criticism and its evolution. The perception of pedantry as obnoxious over the centuries was not static, and tracing its history reveals how some norms of correct behavior for intellectuals persisted and others evolved. It also shows a range of strategies that were developed to question intellectual authority.

## Why Pedants Matter

On such an in-depth historical safari the pedant may seem an unwelcome traveling companion. And yet I believe that this trip will not just be interesting, but for several reasons especially worthwhile. In addition to presenting a lively and, hopefully, at times entertaining history of misbehaving intellectuals, it offers a new contribution to the larger history of anti-intellectualism.

An attempt to trace the history of this formidable "-ism" as a whole and across the ages would be difficult to contain. With the pedant as our guide, however, we can focus more sharply on the role of the intellectual, on perceived flaws or misconduct. This book is therefore more about human beings than about abstract concepts or general sentiments. In this way, a more precise picture emerges of how intellect can provoke irritation and distrust: with whom, in what contexts, and for which reasons. The patterns in these perceptions also indicate to us underlying norms and values about supposedly proper forms and uses of knowledge.

Anti-intellectualism, defined broadly as resistance to and resentment against intellect and intellectuals, has become such a topical issue that it may seem a distinctive characteristic of modernity. Viewing it as a sign of the times, some cultural critics have warned against the apocalyptic consequences of "twenty-first century philistinism" in books with rousing titles such as *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* In her 2008 bestseller *The Age of American Unreason* (updated in 2018 to include the start of the Trumpian era) Susan Jacoby identifies the "erosion of memory and knowledge" as "the inescapable theme of our time."[15] Journalists and social scientists typically connect anti-intellectualism to the surge in populist movements since the early 2000s. In the populist mindset, they argue, intellectuals are pitted against the true people, as representatives of a powerful, oppressive elite. Clear symptoms of this way of thinking are a mistrust of "mainstream media" and educational institutions, exemplified in the rejection of critical reporting (e.g., about conspiracy theories), or scientifically proven knowledge (e.g., about evolution or climate change). Computer scientists and intelligence analysts point to the deliberate spreading of fake news and the dominance of algorithms in our digital

information culture. The increasing reliance on social media, they warn, has fanned the flames of prejudice against scientists, academics, and public intellectuals.[16]

Modern populism has undoubtedly amplified anti-intellectual sentiment and given it renewed political legitimacy. Significantly, it was the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2017 that heralded the expression "alternative facts." This was the product of an argument over numbers: when journalists reported relatively low attendance at the public ceremony, the White House insisted that the audience had been the largest ever for an inauguration, and Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the Trump presidency, used the phrase in defense of the White House spokesperson's assertion, in the face of its proven falsity. And yet, prominent as they may be, such modern trends and new terms should not lead us to mistake symptoms for causes. There is an immense history behind anti-intellectualism.[17] Pessimistic accounts of the decline of the (public) intellectual, written by intellectuals, belong to a genre with a venerable pedigree.[18] While our own times certainly offer unprecedented technical opportunities for disseminating anti-intellectualist views, a historical perspective reveals deeper social reflexes and the persistence of long-standing tropes behind seemingly novel sentiments. In addition to anti-elitist resentment, these include a rich array of anti-rationalist and practical utilitarian perspectives. And in addition to politics, religion often played a key role.

These social reflexes deserve attention in their own right. This study seeks to present a foil to the history of learning by studying how intellectuals are cast as outsiders. The insider perspective has often controlled the picture. Historians based their accounts on sources written by the subjects themselves, or by colleagues who shared their intellectual practices, and

frequently their ideas. Formidable thinkers and authors actively promoted this bias. They invested all their creative powers in convincing their readers of their superior claim to truth. Plato exemplifies how philosophical and literary brilliance could go together with an intolerant approach to alternative perspectives. The humanists of Renaissance Italy successfully marketed their new style of education as a key to virtue and social success, yet at the cost of their scholastic colleagues, whose program they rejected as dry, dull, and utterly useless. Such rhetoric proved highly successful and subsequently came to dominate the historical picture.

Modern historians are aware of the pitfalls that surround the representation of intellectuals by intellectuals. Literary historians in particular have paid substantial attention to the image that learned men and women sought to create of themselves.[19] Such studies, however, though they have greatly illuminated conceptions of authorship and the literary production of this period, have been less instructive about the views of those residing beyond the inner circles of professional scholars and authors.

To understand resistance directed against the pedant, we will approach learning as a cultural phenomenon that could easily clash with prevailing social values. Traveling teachers who asked for money for their educational services, for example, provoked resistance in classical Athens, where advanced learning, critical judgment, and refined conversation were features of aristocratic socialization in the family or particular groups. Philosophers who insisted on frank speech could meet with swift censorship in the autocratic political culture of the Roman Empire. Latin-speaking, gown-wearing, bearded scholars raised more than an eyebrow among seventeenth-century *salonnières* who cultivated conversational *esprit*.

Of course, it is not new to study intellectual culture from a social perspective. Cultural historians have traced social, political, and religious tensions beneath a lofty language of equality and open exchange within the scholarly community.[20] Historians of science have revealed how new scientific developments themselves were shaped by cultural factors such as civility, patronage, and reputation.[21] Most of these studies regarded the impact of these forces on the scholarly world. But with pedantry, we can examine how the scholars themselves became typecast in terms of a negative "persona": a model of how not to behave as an intellectual, of how not to use knowledge.[22] Narrative techniques played a crucial part in this process and hence we will pay particular attention to the literary contexts in which pedants were portrayed. These include comedy, satirical dialogue, the scholarly treatise, the novel, and film, each allowing for different forms of storytelling, and a range of casting strategies.

By means of this approach, three key patterns emerge. First of all, it is clear that the repertoire of pedants and know-it-alls that can be traced through the ages transcended individual stories and formed a cultural script of improper intellectual conduct.[23] New generations selectively drew on this script to serve contemporary agendas, thus perpetuating ancient stereotypes and images. The script, as we will see, was never fixed, but malleable, and gradually accumulated new characteristics over the centuries. It facilitated criticism of a wide range of intellectual trends, in philosophy, theology, history, and literary studies. While some sixteenth-century humanists were ridiculed as pedants for their pretentious use of Ciceronian Latin, they in turn could accuse scholastic theologians of pedantry on account of their logical quibbling or theological hairsplitting.

Yet however flexible, the script is clearly socially marked. It reflects the relations between different groups of people and

shows which categories they used to confirm their views and values. Gender is one such prominent category. Pedants are overwhelmingly men. The male coding of the figure is evidently a product of a patriarchal system in which men have, for centuries, controlled access to the infrastructure of learning, to the exclusion of women. But there is more to it. As a male-coded phenomenon, pedantry operates as an index of masculinity that can point in opposing directions. Depending on the cultural context, it may suggest either a deficit or an excess of characteristically male behavior.

Exasperation with the practice of "mansplaining" illustrates the latter. Such annoyance registers an almost instinctive inclination in some male intellectuals to dominate and assume superior authority by correcting or patronizing women. In a tweet posted in 2021, the geologist Jessica McCarty shared a particularly remarkable experience (in typically truncated style): "At a NASA Earth meeting 10 years ago, a white male post doc interrupted me to tell me that I didn't understand human drivers of fire, that I def needed to read McCarty et al. Looked him in the eye, pulled my long hair back so he could read my name tag. '*I'm McCarty* et al.'"[24] The modern anecdote matches perfectly similar depictions of pedants in seventeenth-century French comedies, portrayed as hypermasculine bores without the social skills needed to converse with refined female company.

The opposite representation, which associates the pedant with a lack of manly vigor, also has a rich tradition. Sixteenth-century Italian comedies, for instance, typically portray pedantic characters as effeminate men, associating them with sodomy and pederasty. Similar charges of effeminacy reverberate in the 1950s rise of the term "egghead" (fig. I.3). Introduced as a derogatory label to marginalize progressive intellectuals, the term signaled masculine weakness of various kinds, including homosexuality. The novelist Louis Bromfield, in a scathing article

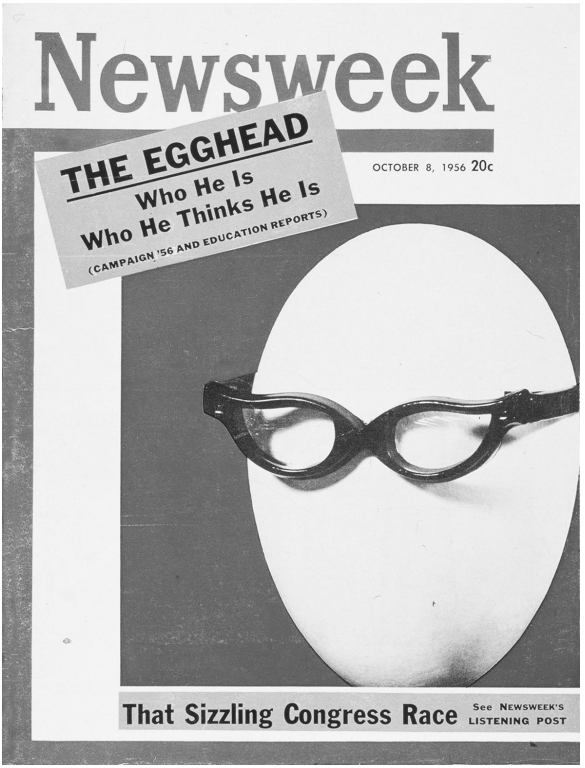


FIGURE 1.3. "The Egghead," cover of *Newsweek*, October 8, 1956. By permission of *Newsweek*.
The word "egghead" has been used as a colloquialism meaning "intellectual" in American English since the beginning of twentieth century. In the 1950s, however, it gained strong negative connotations in the context of a more polarized political climate. This cover of *Newsweek* suggests a lack of manliness in intellectuals by portraying the egghead as wearing female glasses.

from 1952, described the egghead as "a person of spurious intellectual pretensions," who was "over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem."[25] Apart from characterization either as overly masculine or as effeminate, moreover, charges of sterility and frigidity—an absence of sexual energy—form yet

another facet of the problematic masculinity of the pedant. George Eliot's nineteenth-century fictional character Edward Casaubon exemplifies such a dry scholar who is, in the words of the Victorian poet Robert Browning, "dead from the waist down."[26]

The evolution of this cultural script is closely linked to a second pattern in the history of the pedant, regarding the actors. This reveals, paradoxically, the prominent contribution of the pedants themselves. As masters of language and champions of criticism and correction they played an active role in the development and exploitation of the script. Many critical representations, we will see, originated in competition and conflict between different groups of intellectuals, such as those between ancient Sophists and philosophers, early modern "ancients" and "moderns," or modern scientists and humanists. With their writings they helped to build and develop the repertoire, for example by engaging in polemics or by producing scholarship about the ethics of scholarship.[27] In his *Essays*, in a chapter "On Pedantry," the sixteenth-century French thinker Michel de Montaigne paradoxically relied on a rich array of classical authors to criticize the humanist cult of erudition. A century later, the Frisian law professor Ulrik Huber countered Montaigne's perspective, in a long and thoroughly researched lecture in Latin, by broadening the definition of pedantry to include a much wider range of intellectual abuses.

The active involvement of the pedants highlights the social dynamic of many scholarly conflicts. Rival parties present their opponents as misfits, claiming in this way a superior judgment that extends beyond scholarly debates. Since this dynamic is a two-way street, numerous scholars have had the experience of both delivering and receiving accusations of pedantry. The same Socrates who ironically exposed a string of Sophists as

intellectual tricksters in Plato's Dialogues was presented by Aristophanes as their ringleader. The same Erasmus who ridiculed Italian humanists as neo-pagan "apes of Cicero" was excoriated by Martin Luther on identical grounds. Oscillating between being insiders and outsiders, intellectuals relied on the anti-intellectual repertoire regarding pedantry for ammunition to attack opponents and secure their own authority.

The third pattern that arises from a long-term perspective on the pedant involves the persistent importance of etiquette. Bad manners, unseemly appearance, and improper behavior have continued to mark the pedant. From arrogant philosophers in classical antiquity to today's interrupting mansplainers and grammar police, the irritation which critics express is much less about the content of ideas than about conduct. The annoyance indicates the key significance of social codes that regulate honor and shame, authority and distrust. This explains why it is that pedants could be presented as overly feminine, excessively masculine, boorish, or insufferably boring. Through this moral lens we see how the charge of pedantry has served as a weapon in struggles over social status or political authority, enmeshed in religious tensions and culture wars.

Things become more complicated, however, when ideas coincide with conduct. The philosophical ideal of ridding oneself of shame to live an unbounded life incited Cynic philosophers to behave in consciously shameless ways. To masturbate or defecate in public was thus to make a philosophical point. Their demeanor earned them the epithet "dog-like" (in Greek *kunikos*: hence "cynical"). In a similar way, the physical appearance of intellectuals may represent political ideas. For male academics in the late 1960s and 1970s, the aesthetic of long hair and corduroy suits (traditionally a laborer's fabric) was an expression of anti-authoritarian views and solidarity with the working class.

In blockbuster films, however, it was used to reinforce an image of academics as shabby and airy-fairy.

The suggestion of improper conduct can thus operate both as a conservative and as a progressive impulse, either to defend or to reject existing views and tastes in the face of new alternatives. In scholarly conflicts, the accusation of pedantry repeatedly accompanies shifting intellectual perspectives. In the culture wars of the Enlightenment, to give just one example, the protectors of the classical tradition cast their opponents, the moderns (who preferred the vernacular and critical judgment to ancient authority), as pedants, on account of their insolence and arrogance. They same accusation was thrown back at them on account of their supposed immorality and lack of decorum. On either side we see resistance against ideas, whether new or old, underlying the charges of improper conduct.

## The Intellectual and the Pedant

The term "intellectual" has many connotations, reflecting an eventful past. According to the American President Eisenhower (speaking in 1954) it referred to "a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows."[28] The pedantic protagonists of this book present, at first sight, a diverse set of people. Many are known by different names referring to professional identities: Sophists, grammarians, philosophers, masters, humanists, or professors. Other, chic-sounding labels, such as *pepaideumenoi*, *literati*, *salonnières*, *savantes*, and *philosophes* provide social pointers to elite educational backgrounds or refined cultural institutions. Each of these terms conveys a sense of particular roles and types of expertise, reflecting varied historical contexts. The Sophists in ancient Greece provoked resistance for reasons different from those that apply to the scholastic

theologians in twelfth-century Paris, or English-speaking professors at a twentieth-century American university. What all these protagonists share, however, is an interest in learning, and it is with this scope that I will use the term "intellectual", as a descriptive historical category. It aims to cover the full spectrum of people who pursue learning and cultivate the mind, ranging from experts in specific fields of academic learning to individual men and women with broader cultural and scholarly interests.

Used in this generic sense, the term differs from its more specifically political use to refer to a social critic, as in "public intellectual."[29] This latter meaning, conceived in terms of social responsibility in the face of power, has a polemical origin as a derogatory term in the context of the Dreyfus Affair in late nineteenth-century France. Starting in October 1894 with the arrest and subsequent wrongful conviction of Alfred Dreyfus, a French army officer of Jewish descent, on charges of espionage, this *cause célèbre* would develop over the course of more than twelve years into a heated public debate about injustice, antisemitism, and the responsibility of individual citizens to stand up for justice. In 1898 the novelist Émile Zola famously took a stance, defending Dreyfus by publishing his essay "J'accuse!" in the newspaper *L'Aurore*.[30] Critics of Zola and of other Dreyfusards labeled them "intellectuals" to discredit the authority of these writers to intervene, characterizing them as over-smart, quixotic, and out of their depth (fig. I.4). Following Zola's blistering attack, the literary critic Ferdinand Brunetière, for example, published a "response to several intellectuals," questioning their capacity to make a useful contribution. "The intervention of a novelist," he wrote, "even a famous one, in a matter of military justice seems to me as out of place as the intervention, in a question concerning the origins of Romanticism, of a colonel in the police force."[31]


FIGURE 1.4A. Anonymous "image populaire" *Les remparts d'Israël, ou Les douze apôtres de Dreyfus*, published by Léon Hayard, 1899, during the Dreyfus affair. Rennes, Collection Musée de Bretagne, 980.45.27. By permission of Le Musée de Bretagne.

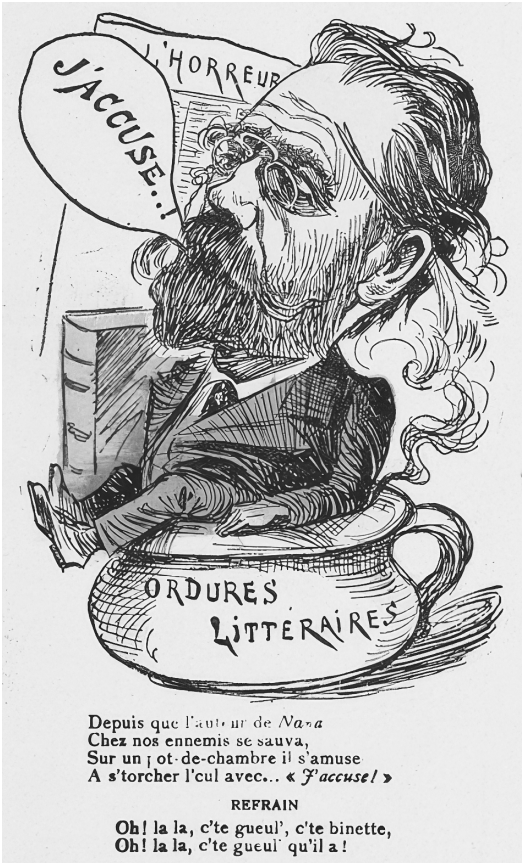


FIGURE 1.4B. Caricature of Émile Zola (detail from *Les remparts d'Israël*).
This cheap broadside print attacked, among others, the novelist Émile Zola for his defense of Alfred Dreyfus, the military officer of Jewish descent who was falsely accused of spying for the Germans. Apart from employing virulently anti-Semitic imagery, the visual rhetoric denigrates Zola as an intellectual, showing the distinctly negative connotation of the term in this context.

Our other key term, "pedant," finds its origin in Italian *pedante*. It first emerged in the middle of the fifteenth century to refer in particular to a professional teacher of Latin grammar, literature, and rhetoric. Such a teacher could be privately hired by an affluent family or be employed by a city at a local school.[32] The etymology of the word is uncertain. It may derive from Latin *pes* (foot) to denote the action of accompanying a pupil to school, or from the Greek *pais*, as in *paidagogos*, the classical Greek term signifying the slave who took children to school or took care of their instruction.[33] As a professional category the term was more or less synonymous with *maestro di grammatica* and *grammatista*, indicative of a type of secondary education. In Renaissance Italy, grammar was taught after children had learned to spell, read, and write, and was complemented by instruction in textual composition. Latin was the language used at all these stages of schooling.[34]

Since teaching children in this cultural context was a profession of relatively low social status, the word *pedante* soon gained a negative meaning, connoting the defects and vices of teachers more broadly.[35] The earliest attested uses of the word already confirm this trend. In one of his sonnets the Florentine poet Burchiello (1404–1449) criticizes a circle of fellow poets as "a band of ignorant pedants" engaged in literary studies.[36] Another sonnet disparages a pretentious poet as a pedant "who with his speech puffs himself up like a barrel."[37] In a prose treatise *On Ostentation*, written around 1500, the poet and critic Calmeta satirizes pedants who are keen to flaunt their erudition by speaking Latin to ladies and ordinary people.[38]

The word became much more generally familiar in the sixteenth century, when the pedant became a stock character in scripted Italian comedy, produced and performed in the elite urban settings of the court and the academy. These comic pedants are typically presented as pretentious fools. They speak an

incomprehensible mixture of Latin and Italian, are prone to endless speeches, tiresome hairsplitting, or blunt criticism. Despite their ostentatious display of erudition, they frequently prove to be unreliable. They are unkempt in appearance, scruffy and clad in dirty, worn clothes. As teachers, they are harsh and unreasonable.

The currency of the term *pedante* in early modern Italy is key to the history of pedantry, but is not in itself the essence of the matter. Smart alecks had triggered similar annoyance long before the term existed, and would continue to do so long after it became associated primarily with snooty schoolteachers. In the centuries that followed, as we shall see, it was to gain a wider significance, representing by the eighteenth century all sorts of intellectual arrogance. From the later nineteenth century on, however, its meaning and use gradually became more circumscribed. Today's online grammar sticklers or academic mansplainers embody the more specific, modern usage. A rough estimate of the frequency of the term "pedant" in printed works confirms this development. An analysis of digitized books from 1500 to 2019 in Google's Ngram viewer shows a first peak in the late sixteenth century and a marked rise during the eighteenth. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its frequency gradually declined, reaching its lowest point in 1992. Since then, a slight increase can be observed.

## Organization

The seven chapters of this book cover a period of twenty-five centuries. Rather than a comprehensive survey, they offer a set of chronologically arranged windows. Instead of suggesting a linear development, they seek to trace patterns in the representation of pedantry, paying particular attention to the cultural

contexts in which both accuser and accused should be seen, and to their respective agendas and strategies. Part I covers the period before the word "pedant" was coined. It starts with the contested rise of the Sophists in classical Athens, then examines animosity toward philosophers in the multicultural melting pot of the Roman Empire, moving on to the controversial reputation of scholastic masters in the Christian context of the high Middle Ages. In each environment intellectuals met with new and specific forms of hostility, whether for supposed sophistic trickery, pseudo-intellectual posing, or theological arrogance and irrelevant knowledge. Yet what unites these different episodes is a shared pattern of annoyance generated by competition between opposing groups of intellectuals and by disputes over boundaries of intellectual competence.

Part II explores the fortunes of the historical term "pedant" in early modern Europe. In this period intellectuals confidently cultivated a shared identity as members of a prestigious class, an intellectual aristocracy, as it were, that formed a supranational community, a "Republic of Letters." This Republic was not as lofty and pacific as it looked on paper. Furthermore, it evolved and gradually changed its language and laws. The intellectual ideals of Renaissance humanism were founded on studious discipline, perseverance, even drudgery. Such practices clashed in many respects with wider social values such as civility and good manners. The tension is reflected in the caricature of the pedant on the sixteenth-century stage. Hypercritical and cantankerous, parading obscure and useless knowledge, humanist pedants became stock figures of intellectual excess.

In the culture wars that surrounded the emerging Enlightenment, moreover, the charge of pedantry proved to be a highly flexible weapon to fight the wrong kinds of learning. A novel taste for sociability promoted by elite women in France, who

cultivated the playful deployment of wit and gallantry, made representatives of classical learning look rude and overly masculine. Yet the zealous pursuit of elegance in turn occasioned merciless ridicule of the intellectual affectations of the *salonnières*. Parallel to this development, tensions flared within the scholarly world: defenders of traditional learning and promoters of new, empirical approaches furiously opposed each other, leading to aggressive clashes between "ancients" and "moderns." The profusion of accusations of pedantry in these cultural settings shows how this vice was no longer perceived to be a professional deformation exclusively afflicting the scholarly world; it was now regarded as a liability of men and women with intellectual leanings *tout court*.

Part III, finally, probes the aversion to pedantry in the modern era, focusing on the rise of democracy and popular culture. The example of nineteenth-century America shows how radical political, social, and economic transformations created a pronounced and widespread allergy to displays of traditional learning. In the political arena, promoters of the new democratic order lambasted colleagues who showed signs of a liberal education as elitist, "aristocratic," and unmanly. In religious culture, revivalist evangelicals condemned it as immoral, spiritually cold, even downright un-American. Such attacks were part of a larger effort to redefine the norms for civil conduct and reassess educational practices. And yet these irritations were not the only outcome of a new, democratic mentality. The African American civil rights leaders Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, conversely embraced the pursuit of traditional learning as a means of racial emancipation, personal improvement, and a preparation for leadership.

In popular culture the representation of university professors is shaped in important ways by modern cinema. The mass

medium of film offers a rich textual system in which professors have featured stereotypically as wicked wizards or authoritarian teachers ever since the early twentieth century. Since the 1970s the association with pedantry has gradually diminished in importance. Professors appear more often as tormented souls, who suffer from professional disillusion and personal crises, a development that reflects the changing role of universities in Western societies since the 1960s.

This journey ahead will thus take us to a variety of historical worlds, highly specific, but each populated by similarly annoying know-it-alls. It starts in the Athens of the fifth century BCE.

# INDEX

Page numbers in *italics* refer to figures.