
Call for papers

International Conference on *Ironic Encomia and Paradoxical Humour* in the Early Modern Period at Frankfurt am Main, September 2025

Comedy, satire, Lucianism – whenever one of these keywords is used in connection with Early Modern literature, it also brings to mind the genre of the mock, or ironic encomium (also known as parodic / satirical eulogy; in German: *ironisches / paradoxes Enkomion*, or *Scherzenkomion*; in French: *éloge paradoxal*): that is, the laudatory description of an unworthy object. This concise definition aptly characterizes a type of text that could already be found in Greek and Roman Antiquity (e.g. the *Praise of Helen* by the Sophist Gorgias, 5th century BC, Lucian's *Praise of the Fly*, 2nd century AD, or Apuleius' *Laus Paupertatis* in his *Apology*, 2nd century AD). In the age of humanism, the genre spread in both the Latin and the vernacular literature of Europe. As far as Latin is concerned, this literary fashion undoubtedly reached its climax in the sixteenth century, with Erasmus' *Laus stultitiae* (1511) as the most famous example, and Girolamo Cardano's *Encomium Neronis* (1562), an important contribution to the debate on the reliability of historiography. Hence, it is scarcely surprising that the first half of the seventeenth century saw the appearance of numerous compendia which assembled the 'sum' of the relevant output, the largest and most widespread being Caspar Dornavius' *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Socraticae Joco-Seriae* (1619). In Italy, France, and England, more than in Germany, ironic praises and mock encomia were often also written in the vernacular, even by quite prominent authors like Francesco Berni (*I capitoli*, 1537), François Rabelais (*Tiers livre*, 1546), Joachim Du Bellay (*Hymne de la Surdit e*, 1558), or Thomas Nashe (*Praise of the Red Herring*, 1598).

A more detailed definition of the genre in question could include the following aspects: A mock encomium is a text in verse or in prose which, in a positive manner, pays tribute to an object – animate or inanimate, concrete or abstract –, although this object is, in the commonly prevalent view, ludicrous or harmful. This positive appraisal is ironic to the extent that it should be partially, even if often not entirely, understood in the contrary sense. Following textual-linguistic or rhetorical criteria, the praise can be bestowed in different ways, albeit less in the narrative or dramatic mode. In various settings, the speakers might either argue on their own account or with regard to an object.

The general definition of the genre should omit any allocation of function because the purposes for which these texts were composed are exceptionally varied, and this also applies to the authors' poetological self-testimonies. To give just one example, John Donne made a particularly provocative statement on his *Paradoxes* (1633): "If they make you to find better reasons against them, they do their office." Annette H. Tomarken, one of the specialists in this field, describes the range of the genre with the greatest possible objectivity (1990): "The mock encomium is marked by a degree of praise variable in intensity, and by a degree of satire or irony that can vary from the merely playful to the overtly satirical." At any rate, mock encomia are considerably more than exercises in rhetorical style, a play with intertextual references, or witty popular fiction. Rather, most texts are closely linked to the social, political, confessional, philosophical, or cultural discourses of the age in which they were created. Due to their particular formal structures and communicative strategies, they are in a position both to

influence and to depict the *Zeitgeist* of the Early Modern period. For this very reason, it is extremely important to analyze not only the linguistic and stylistic aspects, but also the context and the possible intentions behind the writing of such texts.

The majority of Early Modern mock encomia are about diseases (e.g. plague, podagra, blindness), human vices (drunkenness, debts; also wicked men and women, like Nero or Julian the Apostate) or insignificant or harmful animals (fleas, lice, flies and the like). The spectrum of genres in which ironic praise manifests itself ranges from the panegyric speech or treatise to the anti-Petrarchist sonnet, the French contre-blason or the ironical capitolo of the Italian tradition. Special forms are mock epitaphs or witty funeral speeches, even on animals (e.g. Ortensio Lando's *Sermoni funebri nella morte de diversi animali*, 1548), ironic defence speeches (e.g. Willibald Pirckheimer's *Apologia seu Podagrae Laus*, 1522) or logical paradoxes such as the numerous writings on 'Nobody' (e.g. Ulrich von Hutten, 1518) and 'Nothing' (e.g. Jean Passerat, 1582).

Until now, only a few of these texts that often fascinate with their originality and humour have been examined more closely – despite the fact that the source material is very extensive nowadays thanks to the digitisation of even the least known texts. We would like to encourage researchers from different countries and disciplinary backgrounds to identify and analyze such little-known texts. Of course, we also welcome studies that refer to famous examples of mock encomia, especially if they discuss or continue previous research. We invite papers that address individual texts or offer comparative analyses as well as papers that approach the genre of the mock encomium from a more theoretical perspective. We would further like to encourage you to present texts written by women or to examine aspects of ironic praise and intermediality in the visual arts (e.g. in Giuseppe Arcimboldo's still lifes).

Mock encomia in the strict sense of the word – Latin and vernacular – will be at the centre of the conference. Under the heading of 'paradoxical humour', however, we encourage you to deal with texts that formally belong to a different genre – for instance, Menippean satires – but partly show structural analogies to the mock encomium. Questions that could be asked are: How do these texts turn established ideas upside down in a perverted and/or parodic form to create a moment of wonder and to elicit critical reflection on the readers' part by disappointing their expectations? How do they further challenge or contest the prevailing opinion and which serio-comic strategies do they apply to envision an alternative? Well-known examples of this type would be the *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* (1515/17), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) or Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580). Likewise, mock encomia integrated into larger texts can be treated, such as the eulogies on various vices in Molière's *Dom Juan* (1682) or the praise of debt in Rabelais' *Tiers livre* (1546). Moreover, academic culture brought its own highly interesting forms to the genre, such as mock dissertations and *quodlibet* discussions (e.g. Caspar Diepelius's *Quaestio an ridere liceat*, 1582, or Erycius Puteanus's *Democritus sive de Risu dissertatio saturnalis*, 1612). Contributions that do not deal with 'real' mock encomia should always refer to the genre model in one way or another. Together, we hope to reevaluate, challenge and expand existing genre definitions, while examining a variety of texts by Neo-Latin and vernacular authors.

The conference will take place at the beginning of September 2025 at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. The exact date cannot yet be finalized as it has to be coordinated with the

schedule of the trade fairs in Frankfurt. The planned date is 4th to 7th September, but a deviation of a few days is still possible. The conference will be held in English. The revised papers will be published in the *Intersections* series (Brill: Leiden).

We are confident that the conference will be funded by external donors (travel expenses, accommodation). We are, however, unable to cover the costs of flights from overseas and ask participants from these countries to apply for appropriate funding.

We kindly ask you to submit a title and a short synopsis of your current ideas on the topic (150–250 words) by 31st May 2024. If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

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