

Camilla Erculiani. Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts. Edited by Eleonora Carinci. Translated by Hannah Marcus. Foreword by Paula Findlen

Patrizia Bettella

Volume 43, Number 3, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105474ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i3.41360>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bettella, P. (2022). Review of [Camilla Erculiani. Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts. Edited by Eleonora Carinci. Translated by Hannah Marcus. Foreword by Paula Findlen]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 43(3), 151–153.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i3.41360>

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Camilla Erculiani. *Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts*. Edited by Eleonora Carinci. Translated by Hannah Marcus. Foreword by Paula Findlen. New York, Toronto: Iter Press, 2021. Pp. 201. ISBN 9781649590022.

Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist edited by Eleonora Carinci, translated by Hannah Marcus, with a “Foreword” by Paula Findlen, brings to readers the first English translation of the *Lettere di philosophia naturale* (Krakow, 1584), by Paduan apothecary (*speziala*) Camilla Erculiani, and other related texts. This book comes on the heels of previous publications such as Meredith Ray’s chapter on Erculiani, Sarrocchi and women in scientific circles (*Daughters of Alchemy*, 2015) and Carinci’s Italian edition of Erculiani’s *Lettere di philosophia naturale* (*Corrispondenze scientifiche tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, 2016). The “Foreword” by Paula Findlen and the “Introduction” by Eleonora Carinci place Erculiani’s work in the cultural and scientific context of the time, tying Erculiani to the international scientific community in Padua. Despite the repressive climate of the Counter-Reformation in late sixteenth-century Italy we see increased support for women’s scientific education and activities, including the dedication of scientific works to women, vernacular translations of classic philosophy, and philosophical discussions within the general topic of the *querelle des femmes*. Erculiani’s *Letters* constitute a unique contribution by a late Renaissance female author on natural philosophy, a field traditionally reserved for male writers in Latin. With her publication Erculiani crossed many boundaries: being a low-class woman, daughter of a spice seller and widow of a pharmacist, self-taught, and unfamiliar with Latin. In the *Letters*, Erculiani presents her theory on the natural causes of the Biblical Flood, the temperament of men and the formation of the rainbow. The essay, in the form of letter exchange, combines Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, Galenic medical knowledge and astrology, along with her personal experience as an apothecary at the Tre Stelle pharmacy in Padua. Padua, the site of the only university in the Venetian Republic, a destination for many international students and the home of the first botanical gardens in Europe, was the perfect venue for the circulation of old and new philosophical and scientific ideas. Erculiani’s publication, printed in Poland and touching upon potentially subversive subjects, caught the attention of the Inquisition which accused her of heresy. While she was eventually acquitted, her *Lettere* remained unknown for centuries.

Given the large number of printing houses in Venice, it was unusual for the *Lettere* to be published in Poland and dedicated to the Queen of Poland (Anna Jagiellon). However, as Paula Findlen observes, Polish students who graduated at the Paduan Studium, once back home, continued to keep strong ties with Padua and that may have facilitated Erculiani's printing project in Krakow. In the dedication to Anna Jagiellon, Erculiani asserts women's dignity and knowledge at par with men: "Not finding myself capable of showing how much we women are worth, I wanted through my studies, to let the world know that we, like men, are capable in all areas of knowledge" (110). This declaration challenges the general view of women's inferiority and inability to achieve knowledge. However, during Erculiani's Inquisition trial, her defender, jurist Giovanni Menochio, had to contradict her by stating that women are completely incapable of comprehension, a common line of defence for women accused of heresy. In Menochio's defence of Erculiani, it was not the double-truth defence (theological vs philosophical) that granted her acquittal, but rather the argument of her *imbecillitas*, which deprived her of the authority that she claimed for her words. Although Erculiani presented herself as an intellectual on equal footing with men and with philosophical-scientific ideas normally in the male domain, she was not considered a major interlocutor in the intellectual world she tried to enter. Erculiani's book received a certain recognition only because it was suspected of heresy by the Inquisition. As Carinci observes: "Erculiani's story constitutes an explicit case of a woman capable of confronting authorities and inserting herself into discussions about Holy Scripture and the role of women in the cultural system" (106).

After the "Introduction" the *Letters on Natural Philosophy* opens with a rich paratextual apparatus: an anonymous encomiastic poem, a dedication to the Queen of Poland, a dedication to the Readers, and a "Song of Praise," originally in Latin, by Andreas Schonaeus. The *Letters* are a sort of treatise, presented in the form of epistolary exchange between Erculiani and Georges Guarnier, dated between August and November 1577, and another letter by Erculiani to Martin Berzeviczy, Transylvanian chancellor of King Stephen of Poland, dated April 1581. Although Guarnier was a medical student in Padua, sponsored by Erculiani's second husband, it is not clear if he actually penned the response letter to Erculiani, or if she was the author of all the missives. Perhaps she used the epistolary genre as an alternative to the dialogue and Guarnier as a foil that enabled her to better shape her argument. Guarnier's contact with Erculiani's husband, shows that apothecaries were places of interaction and debate between scientists

and physicians, crucial in assisting young doctors with their medical practice. Camilla and her husband had a successful marriage and business partnership and oddly it was the wife, not the husband, who published a book. To contextualize Erculiani's role in scientific-philosophical culture of late sixteenth-century Padua, Carinci's edition also includes two letters to Erculiani from Sebastiano Erizzo, Venetian philosopher and translator of Plato into Italian. He defines her book a "very learned work of philosophy" and acknowledges her as the best woman philosopher of her times. Erizzo's letters show Erculiani's connections with contemporary thinkers, who recognized her knowledge. This edition also provides the texts from the *Consilium* 766, which Menochio used to defend Erculiani during the Inquisition's trial.

Despite the brevity of Erculiani's treatise in letter form, with their concerted work, Carinci, Findlen and Marcus, in *Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts*, provide a valuable contribution to the history of science, to the study of women as scientists and philosophers, to the field of women and gender in early modern Italy.

PATRIZIA BETTELLA
University of Alberta