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**Communities of Learned Experience: Epistolary Medicine in the Renaissance.**

Nancy G. Siraisi.

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 163 pp. 45.00. ISBN 978-1-4214-0749-4.

REVIEWED BY: Anja-Silvia Goeing

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Letters are key sources for investigating professional practices. The first half of the sixteenth century saw a number of Latin letter collections come onto the book market. After publishing classical collections such as Cicero's letters, printers brought out letter collections that celebrated the life and work of recently defunct *litterates*, such as the energetic humanist Franciscus Philephus (Venice, 1502). The aesthetic background, how to write a good letter, was backed up with interest in the person and in scholarly gossip. It is not surprising that the Basel book market took the lead from the 1530s in publishing medical letter collections. Not only hometown of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who opened the market with numerous letter publications, and not only university city with a strong medical center, Basel was also a center for Greek medical editions and translations, e.g., the complete works of Galen (1538). The Basel book market provided a prolific crossroads between medicine and letters, and it had a well-established clientele.

Nancy G. Siraisi's collection of three lectures given at Johns Hopkins University in 2010 starts at this crossroad by focusing on two individual letter collections of medical practitioners, of which the first was published in an early version in Basel (1554–60), the second in 1579 in Turin, with additions in 1592 and later. Siraisi covers the medical practice and advice of two people whose life circumstances could not be more different. The first writer chronologically, Johann Lange (1485–1565), had an illustrious and stable career as a practitioner at the court of the Elector Palatine in Heidelberg. The second, Orazio Augenio (1527–1603), worked at the University of Padua in Italy after twenty-eight years (by his own account) as a practitioner in small towns of the Italian Le Marche. Augenio's letters reveal his highly competitive ambitions in the academic world.

Siraisi's account begins with an extended overview that includes both introduction and first chapter. The overview sheds light on the genre of medical advice letters and focuses on the question of why sixteenth-century physicians from Italy, who were generally Catholic, might write to colleagues in Protestant parts of northern Europe, such as German-speaking lands, and vice versa, and whether they discuss matters of faith at all. As she shows through the letters of the Paduan medical professor Girolamo Mercuriale (1530–1606) in the first chapter, the number of correspondences with mainly Protestant northern countries thinned out in the second half of the sixteenth century.

In Siraisi's two case studies, religion and science did not usually mix. Both Lange and Augenio avoided religious controversies in their letters. Her in-depth analysis of letter samples shows, however, that Johann Lange had nonetheless a very subtle understanding of the complex interplay between religious rites and medical practices in his local communities and also on his travels. Johann Lange's published letters did not go to Italian addressees, such as his peers from the time of his study in Bologna and Pisa, but to later learned acquaintances from German-speaking lands that he made mainly in two professional circles, one being the learned physicians at Heidelberg University and the other being his work environment as a practitioner at court in Heidelberg. Siraisi's only long anecdote from the letters of Johann Lange is an anti-Semitic passage about Kabbalah and Christian Hebraism,



in which Lange used his travel and study sojourn in Italy, when he was a young man, and his visit to the famous humanist Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1470–1533), the nephew of Giovanni Pico (1463–94), to write about the cultural decline of Jews in the recent past into demonic magical practices, leading to ritual murders and human sacrifice. In her discussion, she reveals the ambiguous position of Lange, who, though he knew and appreciated the work of leading scholars of Christian Hebraism, such as Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) and both Picos, nevertheless believed that Jews practiced deplorable magical medicine. Siraisi attributes this ambiguity to Lange's thorough humanist education, which was infiltrated with courtly anti-Jewish politics of Lutheran anti-Semitic background.

Orazio Augenio never left Italy. His early correspondence partners were fellow medical practitioners who had asked him for advice in individual cases. Then, he searched to maintain and extend his participation via letters in academic circles at the place of his former studies in Rome and Padua. His letter partners in northern parts of Europe are only a handful, among them the Basel polymath and encyclopedist Theodor Zwinger (1533–85). Unlike Lange, Augenio did not publish many books. His letters and later edited letter collections depict his participation in the learned world of medicine. The medical practices he discussed, such as the art of bloodletting, brought him acclaim and led to his elevation from small-town physician to university professor at the prestigious university of Padua. Siraisi's examples reveal how Augenio used his letters; he solicited support from his readers for his opinion and against his adversaries. The content of his letters is quite different from those of Johann Lange, since the practical and political aspects outweigh any philosophical reasoning. Thus, the most important innovation he discussed in connection with Paracelsus was the "art of distillation," which Paracelsus "seemed to have called ... back into medical use in our time and greatly amplified it" (82).

Siraisi argues that the general term "republic of letters" tends to conceal the geography of specific correspondences. She also interprets her cases as revealing a change in medical humanism in which discussion of the classics is replaced by practical matters. Stimulating as these two case studies and three lectures may be, their format inhibits a fuller development of her arguments.



**The Altarpiece: A Novel.** Sarah Kennedy.

London: Knox Robin Publishing, 2013. 223 pp. \$27.99. ISBN 978-1-908483-47-8.

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*The Altarpiece: A Novel* by Dr. Sarah Kennedy is an imaginative response to a gaping void in our otherwise abundant knowledge of Tudor England. Set during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the English Reformation, the novel illustrates the enormous challenges faced by England's nuns.

The heroine is the intelligent, resourceful, and attractive twenty-year-old Catherine Havens who, after a failed early attempt at securing a position in the court of Catherine of Aragon, becomes a skilled physician at Mount Grace Abby in the fictional town of Havenston, Yorkshire. This world is shattered by the soldiers of Henry VIII, who mercilessly go about the business of enforcing the dissolution of England's monasteries. Mount Grace is taken over by a garrison of soldiers under the command of the heartless Richard Overton, who is to take possession of the property. The Abby's most valuable possession, an altarpiece (a Flemish *Madonna and Child*, perhaps, they suppose, by Hans Memling or Hugo van