

Renaissance and Reformation

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Preface

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Preface

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The sixteenth century saw the rise of a new breed of scholar—the profoundly learned, highly prolific, and vastly versatile polymath who could write books, translate ancient texts into contemporary vernaculars, correct their Latin or Greek (and sometimes even Hebrew), compose poetry, compile collections, proofread printers’ galleys, at times even typeset them, and generally survive by being a jack-of-all (scholarly) trades. To do so, the polymath also needed to be well connected with fellow erudites and with the masters of the new technology of his time, the printing press. At the forefront of intellectual discussions and experimentation, the polymath could also be profoundly philosophical and dangerously controversial. Not surprisingly, some of them quickly acquired a dubious reputation and fell into difficulties with the “system.”

The six articles in this special issue focus on just such men—from the highly productive and versatile translator and editor (and perhaps even plagiarist) Lodovico Domenichi in Italy to the strangely occult and multifaceted astrologer, physician, and philosopher Robert Fludd in England; from the wandering heretical theologian, physician, and astronomer Michael Servetus, fleeing for dear life from Spain and France only to be burned at the stake by Calvin in Geneva, to the staid, learned, and economically successful printer/publisher Johann Amerbach who spent most of his life as a successful entrepreneur in Basel; from the humanist, translator, and theorist Lodovico Dolce in Venice to the uneducated but brilliant clockmaker, mathematician, and astronomer Janello Torriani in the duchy of Milan. Dozens, if not hundreds more could be added to this roster of talented men who contributed in a wide variety of ways to the intellectual, scientific, scholarly, and literary explosion that was the sixteenth century (with reverberations well into the seventeenth)—men such as Jakob Wimpfeling and Konrad Peutinger in Germany, Guillaume Budé and Joseph Justus Scaliger in France, Girolamo Ruscelli and Anton Francesco Doni in Italy, John Dee and William Camden in England, Justus Lipsius and Hugo Grotius in the Netherlands, Juan Luis Vives in Spain, Nicolaus Copernicus in Poland,

and so on. Besides such well-known figures as Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti, who have become commonplaces for the “Renaissance Man,” early modern Europe was simply teeming with talented individuals whose interests and accomplishments spanned many disciplines (to use a modern term they would not have recognized) and a variety of interests.

The collection opens, perhaps *de rigueur*, with Valentina Sebastiani’s analysis of (what is perhaps) the most important factor in the explosion of scholarship in the sixteenth century: the close professional and personal relationship that linked the successful printer/publisher of Renaissance Europe with the learned men of his times; the first eager to make a profit in the fast-developing new industry, the second eager to make a living from the linguistic and scholarly skills he had acquired. Using the Basel printer Johann Amerbach as her case study, Sebastiani points out that it was not all profit on the one side and self-advancement on the other, but a close working reciprocity that saw printers become learned contributors to the advancement of learning, and scholars become expert analysts of the current (book) market economy. As she points out in her conclusion, “the *sodalitas* of learned men of letters that congregated around Johann Amerbach saw publishing as an extraordinary ally in the cultural and spiritual renewal that was their goal as humanists” (24).

In the second article in this collection, Andrea Torre focuses on Ludovico Dolce in order to examine how the ancient classics were elaborated and re-elaborated by sixteenth-century authors in light of their own contemporary “classics”—for example, how Ariosto’s epic poem *Orlando furioso* functioned as a medium for the refashioning of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or, in Torre’s words, how it “became a lens through which Ovid’s poem was to be read” (28). Torre offers us three case studies: the first, Dolce’s own *Le Trasformazioni*, an illustrated Italian translation of Ovid’s masterpiece; the second, Dolce’s refashioning of the Adonis episode from the *Metamorphoses* in his own *Stanze nella favola di Venere e Adone*; the third, the influence that Dolce’s vernacularization of Ovid’s masterpiece had on the visual apparatus that accompanied Ariosto’s subsequent *Cinque canti*. The complex process of translating, rewriting, and illustrating a classical text points not only to the fascinating new ways sixteenth-century authors adopted and adapted ancient and contemporary classics, but also to their ingenious solutions to the demands of an ever-increasing reading public.

One of this growing public’s new interests lay in the *querelle des femmes*, that is, in the (sometimes) lively debate on the “dignity” of women, their place

in society, their contribution to the world around them. Laura Prelipcean's contribution thus focuses on Lodovico Domenichi's *La nobiltà delle donne* (The nobility of women, 1549) not only to point out his contribution to a discourse in favour of greater recognition of, and greater opportunities for, women, but also as an example of dialogic structure that grants the female interlocutors far more agency than had been previously the case (for example, in Castiglione's iconic *Book of the Courtier* of 1528). In so doing, Prelipcean points not only to the direct involvement of polymaths in the "bigger" questions of their time, but also to their awareness that the growing reading public of sixteenth-century Europe consisted, by a significant proportion, of women who were very much interested in more than reading love poetry or imaginative novellas.

An interest in contemporary questions could, however, be a dangerous activity. Such is the case with the Spanish polymath and reformed theologian Michael Servetus. As Peter Hughes points out, before being burned at the stake in Geneva at Calvin's instigation for his anti-Trinitarian views, Servetus was a prolific and versatile polymath who drew from a variety of classical and contemporary sources to produce his own works and to develop his own ideas. In this article, Hughes examines Servetus's extensive borrowings from literary sources for his geographical description of Great Britain (which he never visited), and how such a compositional practice contributed not only to the development of his heretical views on the Trinity but also to his new insights on scientific matters such as the circulation of the blood through the lungs.

The scientific side of polymaths is presented by Cristiano Zanetti in his article on the clockmaker and astronomer Janello Torriani, an unlettered man whose keen observation of the firmament and natural gift for mathematics led him to become a highly celebrated maker of automata in both Italy and Spain, and *matemático mayor* at the court of King Philip II. In his article, Zanetti examines what Torriani's education in mathematics might have been and the professional contacts that linked him with polymaths such as Giorgio Fondulo, who seems to have been his tutor.

In the last article in the collection, Roseen Giles examines one of the most fascinating and eclectic polymaths England ever produced—astrologer, cosmographer, and physician Robert Fludd. Focusing on Fludd's Ficinian understanding of music, Giles points out that Fludd understood the science of music, or, more specifically, the science of "inaudible music," as the music of the universe and the human body. For Fludd (as for Ficino) music played a

fundamental role in the understanding of both the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the human body).

The antiquarian yet innovative interests clearly evident in Fludd's theories are, in many ways, reflective of the profound eclecticism of all polymaths who, while simultaneously pursuing various paths, were also able to combine the multiplicity of their interests into a single, sometimes even obsessive determination to advance the cutting edge of knowledge and understanding. As the scientific revolution got underway (traditionally, with the 1543 publication of the *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* of Nicolaus Copernicus, himself an erudite polymath), learned men across Europe were engaged in scholarship that brought together scholars, publishers, and a reading public thirsty for more. These six articles, in their own eclecticism, are themselves a small contribution to assuage our own, modern, thirst.