

BOOK REVIEW

## Martin Korenjak, *Latin Scientific Literature, 1450–1850*

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*Latin Scientific Literature, 1450–1850* is a sure-footed guide to the vast and rather forbidding territory of early modern scientific literature in Latin. There are many ways Korenjak could have cut this cake, but rather than by great books, disciplines, institutions, regions or periods, he has adopted a version of prototype theory to identify a variety of ‘ideal’ scientific genres. Representative specimens are then ranged across the chapters of the second, most substantial, part of the volume (‘Texts’), according to communicative function. This seems a sensible way to organize and showcase a large number of examples, although some, inevitably, resist easy categorization.

In the shorter first part, ‘Contexts’, Korenjak caters deftly to different audiences in four brisk chapters on ‘Science’, ‘Latin’, ‘Literature’ and ‘Print’. Korenjak stresses that modern conceptions of ‘literature’ do not map neatly onto premodern concepts. The relative rhetoricality of early modern scientific literature, under the influence of Renaissance humanism, is evident in many of the texts encountered in Part 2. Although Korenjak is right to note that ‘fictionality’ was not essential to the early modern understanding of ‘literature’ (*litterae*), it was, arguably, to the highest forms of poetry. This put scientific didactic poetry – of which there exists a vast quantity by Renaissance humanists, learned physicians and, above all, Jesuit priests – in an interesting position. Sixteenth-century philosophers lined up with or demurred from Aristotle on the question whether verse or the imitation of *human* actions (*not* the workings of nature) constituted real poetry. Renaissance physician Fracastoro tried to satisfy both criteria in his famous Latin poem on syphilis. Korenjak treats didactic poems in his final chapter, ‘Publicizing science’, but we should bear in mind that their rationale is frequently more ‘literary’ (in the modern sense) and/or religious.

In ‘Making sources accessible’, Korenjak discusses translations, commentaries, bibliographies and reviews. The first translations into print were often medieval and, notwithstanding humanistic scruples about ‘barbaric’ Latin, continued to be printed. Humble vernacular works by apothecaries and village doctors were also translated into Latin for the benefit of learned physicians. The *Commentarii de rebus in scientia naturali et medicina gestis* (Leipzig, 1752–1806) was a learned journal almost entirely dedicated to reviews of the latest scientific publications. The policy statement printed in the first volume sounds almost modern, making claims for the impartiality and incorruptibility of the editors, for clarity over elegance of style – yet ‘atmospheric and ethical issues’ remain central, catering to a large medical readership (p. 159).

In ‘Presenting facts’, Korenjak explores the scientific journal article per se, as well as letters, reports, ‘histories’ (which he restricts to descriptions of the natural world,

shelving medical case histories with ‘reports’) and table works. Scientific correspondence has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, fuelled, no doubt, by scholarship on the ‘Republic of Letters’ and by advances in the digital humanities. A table, generated from the *Early Modern Letters Online* database, shows relative numbers of Latin versus vernacular letters by men of science. Notwithstanding the curious absence of Linnaeus, who is discussed in the text, we observe a clear trend towards the vernacular (at least, French and English). Leonhard Euler is an outlier in still producing almost as many Latin letters as French in the later eighteenth century. From the second half of the seventeenth century, correspondence seems to have waned in relative importance vis-à-vis the scientific journal. Here Korenjak offers a robust challenge to received opinion about Latin’s precipitous decline, as if the ‘progressivity of the medium must have expressed itself also in the language’ (p. 206). Periodicals continued to be printed almost exclusively in Latin throughout the period and Latin articles were not excluded from primarily vernacular journals.

The early modern scientific genre most analysed, not to say fetishized, by historians of the new science is surely the ‘report’: a detailed narrative account of a personal ‘experience’. Its fortunes are linked to the rising epistemological star of observation and its function famously described by Robert Boyle (as the ‘essay’). Korenjak notes, however, that the Royal Society’s obsession with the presentation of facts over theory ‘was an English variety of a pan-European – and, one can add, largely Latin – trend’ (p. 191). Moreover, not all reports are particularly detailed; in some cases the detail offered is extraneous to the science, and, most significantly, ‘convincing readers by means of detail is not Boyle’s invention. In fact, he simply makes good use of the techniques subsumed under the heading “descriptio” in classical rhetoric’ (p. 198).

In ‘Arguing’, dialogues, university disputations/dissertations and monographs are explored. The philosophical dialogue has an ancient pedigree but was adapted for dramatizing discussions about the natural world. Galileo’s vehemently anti-Aristotelian *De motu* (1590) foreshadows his vernacular *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* – itself later translated into Latin in 1635 for an international audience. Korenjak’s case study of Proserpino Alpino’s *De balsamo* (1591) demonstrates the usefulness of the dialogue form for establishing scientific authority. In the sixteenth century the ‘monograph’ (though not described as such until the eighteenth) became a popular vehicle for scientific publication in almost every discipline; Kepler’s crystallographical *De nive sexangula* (1611) defies disciplinary pigeonholing in its discussion of honeycombs, flowers and cannonball stacking. Korenjak finds a common thread in monograph authors’ ‘striving for clarity’ (p. 305).

‘Summarizing knowledge’ covers pandects, compendia, aphorisms and textbooks, genres that respond to the opportunities and anxieties of an early modern information explosion. Pandects are encyclopedic, but not yet alphabetized/lemmatized, works that aim to present a totality of knowledge. Expensive pandects on the natural world were much printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although it is not altogether clear who bought them and why. Korenjak notes a difference between authors who assumed the state of knowledge to be fixed, albeit updatable, and those who, like Conrad Gessner, believed themselves to be engaged in a process of generating new knowledge. Finally, Korenjak cuts through considerable scholarly unclarity on the meaning of ‘text-book’, which he defines as a ‘self-contained work (as opposed to a commentary) designed to be used *in connection with* formal teaching’ (p. 355).

The book is furnished with a good bibliography and indices and will be an invaluable vademecum for students of early modern Latin and science.