

Letters to Francesco Datini, by Margherita Datini. Edited and translated by Carolyn James and Antonio Pagliaro. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 16. Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012. Pp. 431. ISBN: 9780772721167.

The University of Toronto series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* has provided wider access to works by early modern women by translating and publishing works that had been available only in languages other than English. This volume of letters by the fourteenth-century Italian Margherita Datini, translated and edited by Carolyn James and Antonio Pagliaro, is a welcome addition to this series. These 251 letters from Margherita Datini to her husband, Francesco di Marco Datini, the fourteenth-century “merchant of Prato,” provide English-speaking students and scholars with a wealth of information on life in fourteenth-century northern Italy and complement the letters by Francesco di Marco Datini, whose life and letters to his wife, friends, family members, and business associates are so well known to scholars of late medieval Italy.¹ James and Pagliaro have done an excellent job of translating these letters into English, making them highly accessible and readable to an English-speaking audience while retaining Margherita Datini’s wit, intelligence, and voice. Placing the precise historical details of each letter in footnotes, James and Pagliaro provide highly accessible and readable translations that retain the tone and intimacy of each letter. Margherita appears as an astute, savvy, and often sarcastic woman who keeps track of all of the intricate details of a thriving merchant household.

James and Pagliaro offer a detailed introduction, which outlines Margherita’s life, letters, and epistolary style and explains that the marriage of Margherita and Francesco was, in some ways, typical for this place and time period, yet also atypical. In 1376 Margherita was sixteen and married Francesco who, at forty, was already quite wealthy due to his business acumen and entrepreneurial skills. Since he had business in both Prato and Florence, they lived in both cities and were often separated for long periods of time. Margherita and Francesco were forced to communicate with each other through letters that they exchanged almost daily from around 1384 to 1410. The letters from a remarkable, semi-literate, and largely self-educated woman to her husband reflect the complexity and challenges of Margherita’s daily life as she navigates her role as wife of a wealthy merchant in medieval Tuscany.

Although these periods of separation saddened Margherita, the letters that they shared provide scholars with insight into the daily rhythm of her life in Prato such as the running of the farm, managing the servants, going to market,

and overseeing the building of their villa, Il Palco. Margherita's letters also reveal useful information on cloth and clothing, food, illnesses and medicines (the plague returned to Tuscany in 1399), books and reading, markets, religious practices, and feast days while providing details on issues such as marriage practices, childbirth, wetnursing, almsgiving, the keeping of time, nicknames, and even standards of money and measurements. We learn that Francesco fathered a child, Ginevra, with his young female slave, and Margherita took the responsibility of becoming a surrogate mother since she was unable to have any children of her own. As the letters reveal, Ginevra became a beloved daughter, nurtured by Margherita and offered in marriage by Francesco with the help of a sizeable dowry. Because Margherita wrote her letters almost every day, we are able to keep track of her many relationships with her husband, friends, family members, servants, slaves, business associates, and even governmental and church officials. We witness not only major life events but also the more mundane routines of life that often elude students of this period.

For students and scholars of women and gender, these letters bring to light the activities of a fourteenth-century northern Italian woman and how Margherita presents herself as a writer and a woman: a self-confident, capable, and intelligent person who speaks her mind and is fully aware of her complex role as wife and manager of a busy household. Because the letters are like an ongoing conversation between her and her husband, they reveal an epistolary style that shifts between business, domestic, and more personal matters, highlight her use of scribes to transcribe her letters (James and Pagliaro state that she wrote very few of her own letters), and stress her struggles to improve her writing and reading skills.

The letters also offer scholars a unique opportunity to view how one woman managed her household and her staff while her husband was away on business. Since Margherita was in Prato, she kept track of the household accounts for Il Palco and refers often to payments she received or debts she paid, providing us with a picture of how women handled the accounts for their houses. She often berates her husband for not doing as she asks or working late at night, and she often acts as an intermediary between her husband and various governmental and church officials who arrive at the house.

These excellent translations allow us to witness Margherita's views on gender and gender relations in this highly patriarchal society. While she presents herself as very capable and independent, she has some rather harsh criticism of other women and their actions and repeats some of the common, misogynistic ideas about women that circulated in late medieval society. She appears as a woman

with great strength of character while she simultaneously states that men do not reveal secrets to women because “they realize we have little strength of character” (303). This and other comments about her perception of women and gender offer scholars a unique opportunity to see how one woman understood and yet went against gender roles in her society. Margherita’s remarks on the perceived and actual roles of women reveal the differences between the ideas about and practice of gender in this society.

For scholars interested in gender issues, these letters are a goldmine, enabling us to examine how Margherita sees herself. They reveal a woman of amazing ability and intelligence who is aware of her place in this patriarchal society yet is also fully capable of speaking up about issues that concern her and her family. These translations allow her unique voice to take center stage. James and Pagliaro have done an excellent job translating these unique letters into elegant and useful English. They are a wonderful addition to this series and provide scholars with a wealth of information about medieval Italian society.

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NOTE

1. The phrase “merchant of Prato” comes from Iris Origo’s classic work on the letters and activities of Francesco di Marco Datini: Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini 1335-1410* (New York: Knopf, 1957). Francesco Datini, *La “Pratica di mercatura” datiniana (secolo XIV)* (Milan: A. Giuffrè, 1964).