

BOOK REVIEWS



Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, *Letters to her Sons (1447-1470)*. Ed. and trans. Judith Bryce. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 46. Toronto: Iter Academic Press and Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016. Pp. xv + 294; plates. ISBN: 9780866985482.

THIS VOLUME from *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series of translations features the seventy-three letters of the fifteenth-century Florentine, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, composed to her sons, Filippo, Lorenzo, and Matteo. Well-known to Italian-speaking scholars of the medieval and early modern periods, Strozzi's letters, translated by Judith Bryce, enable English speakers to appreciate her words and perspectives on life in fifteenth-century Florence. This translation illuminates the many issues that Alessandra Strozzi and her sons faced as she lived as a widow in Florence and the sons lived in exile—both formal and voluntary, as Bryce notes—from their native city. Bryce's copious notes assist the reader with the historical and political context and the identification of family members and friends known to the Strozzi.

Although Heather Gregory published a translation of some of Strozzi's letters in 1997, Bryce's edition is the first time that all of the letters have appeared in an English translation. Bryce retains the order of the letters according to Cesare Guasti's well-known 1877 edition of seventy-two of the Italian letters and includes a translation of one more letter that was found in the Florentine archives soon after Guasti's edition was published. The seventy-third letter (which Bryce numbers as letter 2a) was published by Isodoro del Lungo in 1890 and later appeared in a 1972 reprint of Guasti's edition. Because of the complexity of relations between families and the repetition of given names in fifteenth-century Florence, Bryce includes a genealogical table and notes that explain Alessandra's various relations. An image of one of Strozzi's letters, a map of fifteenth-century Florence, and appendices on weights and measures, currency, time, an excellent bibliography, and a thorough index round out some

of the useful information that Bryce provides. Bryce's notes are also valuable to readers who may not be familiar with the literature yet many refer to Guasti's Italian edition and to other Italian-language resources that an English reader may not be able to access.

Bryce outlines Strozzi's life and places her within the context of mid- to later fifteenth-century Florence, a city that faced the rise and leadership of the Medici. Alessandra Macinghi married into a very large and well-known family, the Strozzi, which formed part of the mercantile elite and was one of many households that bore that family name. These are personal letters from a mother to her sons so they offer glimpses into their private world yet they also offer insight into the vicissitudes of Florence's political and economic life in which Strozzi played an important and highly gendered role as a mother and widow. Only her letters to her sons have survived and not any correspondence between her and her daughters; we learn about them through references Strozzi makes to her sons.

Bryce translates the letters very well, keeping the familiar, often tender, and sometimes reprimanding tone that Strozzi uses with her sons who were so far away from her and her motherly influence. To preserve her tone in English, Bryce uses contracted verb forms to retain the oral nature of her prose and employs informal terms, such as "a good lad," which appears when a family friend spoke of Strozzi's son, Lorenzo (35). Bryce's thoughtful translations capture Strozzi's emotions, particularly the grief and sorrow she felt when her young son, Matteo, took ill and died in 1459. Strozzi writes to one of her other sons, Filippo, noting her "great grief to lose such a son," and that "besides the loss of a son's love, it seems to me his death has cost me dear" (82-83). She took some comfort in her faith, saying "I praise and thank our Lord, whose will be done, because I am certain he saw that now was the right moment for the salvation of Matteo's soul" (83). She displays her concern for Filippo, who was with Matteo in Naples when he died and gave him "an honorable burial"; something that was done in "Naples, because here in Florence it is not customary to do anything at all for those in exile like you" (84). The letters to Filippo that discuss her son's death are perhaps the most moving, and Bryce's translations retain their poignancy.

Maintaining her marital family's status, Strozzi appears as a strong, spirited woman, capable of handling business affairs and keeping her family intact and informed through her active pen. She makes reference to her writing in a letter to Filippo, saying he should "ignore my beautiful handwriting. If I were with you, I wouldn't be writing these wretched letters" (126). She shares valuable information about political and economic developments, noting changes in

the Signoria, the Medici, taxation, and the status of the dowry fund. With her remaining sons unmarried, Strozzi expresses her desire to see them make good matches, and she often advises them to marry soon. Her letters discuss other issues such as plague, slaves, sales of property, marriages, births, and deaths of family members, constant requests for items such as flax or almonds, and the delivery of packages of cheese and fennel to her sons. She frequently refers to her own health problems saying that “the end is not too far off,” yet she lives until 1471, when she died around the age of 65 (96).

For scholars and students of women and gender, these letters provide a wealth of information about one woman’s life, work, and relationship with her sons. The translations highlight her epistolary style and rhetorical practice of using the position of mother to act on behalf of her sons. She is savvy, intelligent, and highly aware of her position. Through her we see how the role of mother functions and how she perceives gender and gender relations. Strozzi appears as the center of activity; she is the linchpin between her sons, their other family members, and Florence. This is a wonderful and much-needed addition to the Other Voices series and will serve both students and scholars very well.

Lynn A. Blanchfield
State University of New York, Oswego