



Elizabeth I's Italian Letters

Carlo M. Bajetta (ed.)

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Review by: Aidan Norrie

Elizabeth I's Italian Letters. Edited and Translated by Carlo M. Bajetta. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-1-13744232-1. lxxvii + 285 pp. €89,99.

The epistolary and literary output of Elizabeth I of England is well known. Pre- and post-accession, Elizabeth demonstrated her strong humanist education by producing a variety of media in not only English, but also in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian. To date, however, limited scholarly attention has been paid to Elizabeth's extant epistolary outputs in the various Romance languages. It is this curious scholarly lacuna that Carlo Bajetta's splendid edition of Elizabeth's Italian correspondence seeks to fill.

Much of the scholarly focus on Elizabeth's Romance language outputs is on those in French. In terms of Elizabeth's Italian letters, only her Italian letter to Katherine Parr appears in *Elizabeth I: Autograph Compositions and Foreign Language Originals* (2003), edited by Janel Mueller and Leah S. Marcus; this letter, and a letter between Elizabeth and the Duke of Parma, appears in G. B. Harrison's *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth* (1935). Indeed, previous to this volume under review, the most comprehensive study of Elizabeth's Italian was a section in *Elizabeth I's Foreign Correspondence: Letters, Rhetoric, and Politics* (2014), edited by Bajetta, Guillaume Coatalen, and Jonathan Gibson. Thus, in producing this volume, Bajetta had the unenviable task of locating, transcribing, translating, and commenting on this cache largely from scratch.

Elizabeth I's Italian Letters includes translations and commentary on thirty Italian letters. Each letter is transcribed from the original, translated into English, and is accompanied by an introduction that explains the letter's content, context, and any known details of the transmission history. The introductions to the letters are excellent—explaining the important and relevant details, without turning into essays in political history. All of the introductions are extensively endnoted, so any reader searching for such essays can easily locate them. While the sheer number of abbreviations and acronyms employed can at times be daunting, the issue recedes as familiarity with the book improves. Each of the letters contains textual annotations, arranged by line number. Bajetta has done a commendable job of providing insightful annotations without cluttering the page—a fine balance that some recent scholarly editions have failed to achieve.

The volume begins with an unassuming Introduction. The thirty-five pages, in addition to the twenty pages of endnotes, are an incredible scholarly achievement in and of themselves. Bajetta aims to demonstrate to his readers that “Italian was extraordinarily popular in this period: it was read by courtiers and scholars ... and spoken, for show or political necessity, by fashionable parvenus and powerful statesmen alike” (xxii). Bajetta begins by tracing Elizabeth's history with the language, noting that the queen was “certainly proud of her fluency in Italian” (xxiii). He then moves on to discuss the difficult issue for determining the circumstances surrounding the production of the Italian letters, as “during Elizabeth's reign no secretary for the Italian tongue was ever appointed” (xxxvi). Only about one-third of the letters in this volume are holograph, so Bajetta is clear

in his attempt to “distinguish between what ‘the Queen wrote’ and what her ministers asked her to sign” (xxx). Nevertheless, Bajetta argues that it is more than likely that “Elizabeth read what she signed—and her elaborate signature gave her time to ponder over the contents of what she was signing” (liii). What Bajetta has successfully demonstrated, both with his introduction and his commentary on the letters themselves, is that “Elizabeth cared about her Italian correspondence, and on a number of occasions chose this language when writing to non-Italians as if it represented a neutral territory on which to meet a foreign ruler” (liv).

Letters one to twenty-nine are arranged chronologically. In the case of multiple letters to the same recipient in a relatively short timespan—such as Elizabeth’s correspondence with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II in 1566 and 1567, and with Ferdinando I of Tuscany in 1595 and 1596—they are grouped together with a larger introduction. Although this reviewer does not claim to have the fluency of a native Italian-speaker, the translations are certainly precise, clear, and logical, while balancing the need for readability and the need to convey the meaning behind the letters. Significantly, Bajetta has also included various surviving notes and/or drafts of the sent letters, such as letter sixteen to Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, in July 1586. The chapter on letter sixteen contains 16a, an “Earlier Draft” (124); 16b, a “Second Draft” (125); and 16c, a “Copy of the Sent Version” (127): including these drafts allows readers to see the changes and developments in the process, which is invaluable.

The volume’s appendix discusses letter thirty. As the letter was a translation of an English letter written on Elizabeth’s behalf, it is technically outside the volume’s scope, but its inclusion is certainly justified. Letter thirty is a translation and commentary of the Italian component of letters carried from Elizabeth to Wanli, Emperor of China, by the navigator George Weymouth on his unsuccessful voyage to the East via the fabled North–West passage. The English letter—penned on ornate vellum—was accompanied by translations in Italian, Latin, and Portuguese. William Segar, the Norroy King of Arms, undertook the translation of the letter; and both the literalness and roughness of the translation indicates that Segar had limited knowledge of Italian. Remarkably, in what appears to be an acknowledgement of the importance of the Romance languages in diplomacy, Elizabeth signed herself as “Elizabetta R” at the end of the English letter (253). The inclusion of this letter is of particular scholarly value: Bajetta has done a commendable amount of research to ascertain the letter’s context and scrivener, and “the Italian letter to Wanli is further evidence of the importance which this language had in Elizabethan international diplomatic correspondence” (253).

Only seven of the volume’s thirty letters are accompanied by photographic copies; and most of the images are really illustrations, rather than useable reproductions of the letters. Indeed, Bajetta laments, “it is a pity that copyright reasons have prevented the reproduction” of more (252). However, the detail of the transcriptions and translations mean that the reader is not disadvantaged by the lacking reproductions.

Bajetta notes that he has approached the transcription, translation, and commentary of the letters with “a case-by-case approach” (xx). This approach has paid dividends: not only has it meant that the volume is eminently accessible, but it has also captured the substance of the Elizabethan epistolary process. The successful visit of a foreign dignitary required the work and co-operation of many people. But, as Bajetta reminds us, “in the end, though, it was the Queen one met. Something quite similar happened with her letters” (liv).

The remarkable achievement of this book cannot be overstated. Bajetta has produced a volume that must surely become the gold standard when compiling scholarly editions of letters—whether in translation, or in their original language. Not only is the book a stunning example of how foreign correspondence should be presented in English, but the book is also an invaluable contribution to the scholarship on the foreign relations of Elizabeth I, and Elizabethan England generally. In her endorsement quote on the book’s back cover, Elizabeth Goldring writes: “*Elizabeth I's Italian Letters* should be required reading for anyone interested in the history of Elizabethan England.” Goldring has potentially understated the value of the book: Bajetta—along with the editors of the *Queenship and Power* series, and indeed the publisher, Palgrave Macmillan—should be congratulated for the publication of this outstanding contribution to the scholarship.

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