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Medicine and Humanism in Late Medieval Italy: The "Carrara Herbal" in Padua.

Sarah R. Kyle.

Medicine in the Medieval Mediterranean 8. London: Routledge, 2017. xiv + 244 pp. + 10 color pls. \$149.95.

It was 1950 when Otto Pächt's "Early Italian Nature Studies and the Early Calendar Landscape" (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 [1950]: 30–31) first drew a wider audience's attention to the unprecedented naturalism of some of the plant illustrations in the so-called *Carrara Herbal*, and, since then, research has repeatedly discussed it as the first manifestation of a new artistic attitude toward nature. Baumann's investigation, despite certain deficiencies, convincingly traced the illustrations back to previous herbal pictures, assessing them in comparison with the morphology of natural plants (Felix Baumann, *Das Erbario Carrarese und die Bildtradition des Tractatus de herbis* [1974]). Readers might, therefore, be surprised that Sarah Kyle's book does not focus on the herbal's miniatures. Instead, it provides a refined understanding of the codex as a whole, taking a cultural-historical approach and placing it firmly in its scholarly context as well as within the context of the political ambitions of the court of the Carrara dynasty in Padua, where it originated shortly before 1404. The study draws on textual and artistic sources, humanist and antique writings by men of letters (mostly Petrarch) and by physicians, providing a fine compendium of original sources for the topics discussed.

After a short synopsis of the development of *materia medica* book illustration since antiquity based on other such surveys (e.g., Minta Collins, *Medieval Herbals: The Illustrative Tradition* [2000]), the book elaborates two main lines of reasoning. One argues that Francesco Novello, the herbal's commissioner, aimed to promote a self-image as a "physician prince" (88). This is supported by convincing analysis that in Padua, "the body of the ruler [was used] as a metaphor for his territories and his citizens" (10). Ensuring the well-being of this figurative entity required medicine to maintain the ruler's and the public's health. Francesco publicly promoted the Paduan university, notably its medical schools, which led to increased production of medical books and fostered innovation in medicine. Medical writings considering the ruler's health often combined salutary advice with moral guidelines, comparable to those in *Mirrors of Princes*. As an

outstanding pharmacopeia manuscript in respect of text and paintings, the *Carrara Herbal* manifested Francesco's active involvement in advancing the science of medicine.

As a second line, Kyle construes the herbal as a key element in Francesco's strategy to strengthen his power by resuming his ancestors' tradition of collecting and commissioning prestigious books. The complete spoliation of the court bibliotheca during Padua's occupation from 1388 to 1390 had equaled a collapse of identity for the Carrara dynasty, an annihilation Francesco started to repair by reestablishing a new book collection. As part of the new library, Kyle concludes, the *Carrara Herbal* ultimately "served as an attribute for the prince, recorded for posterity an idealized aspect of his knowledge, taste and sense of familial identity" (189). Other Carraran book and fresco commissions with a political tenor credibly confirm this view, which Kyle discusses.

Some of the author's points are debatable. The iconic variation of the miniatures—similar examples may be detected in posterior illustrated herbals until Brunfels's print of 1530—should also be related to the artist's pictorial samples as well as to his available plant material and not exclusively to his intention to create a "pleasurable reading experience" (46) for an elite circle. This aspect is related to the hitherto unanswered question whether physicians, acquainted with illustrative patterns and specific user experiences, were among the herbal's readership, as the marginalia may indicate. There is in the *Carrara Herbal*, without doubt, an aesthetic transfer from a handbook to a cimelium. However, it may be inaccurate to assume that readers were solely members of the gentry. At least, it probably would have run counter to Francesco's intentions to exclude the medical-scientific community.

In summary, Kyle's study provides a novel insight into understanding the *Carrara Herbal*'s genesis from the ideologies of court culture and medicine as well as its status within them. In particular, it generates perspectives for a better understanding of similar health book commissions, to name only the *Tacuina sanitatis*, created for the rival court of the Visconti dynasty at Milan. It will therefore find readers among those interested in art history and history of the book as well as in the history of sciences and medicine.

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