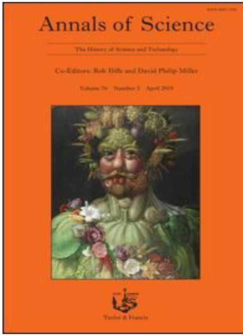

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Forbidden knowledge: medicine, science, and censorship in early modern Italy

by Hannah Marcus, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020, xi + 356 pp., 36 fig., $45.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-226-73658-7

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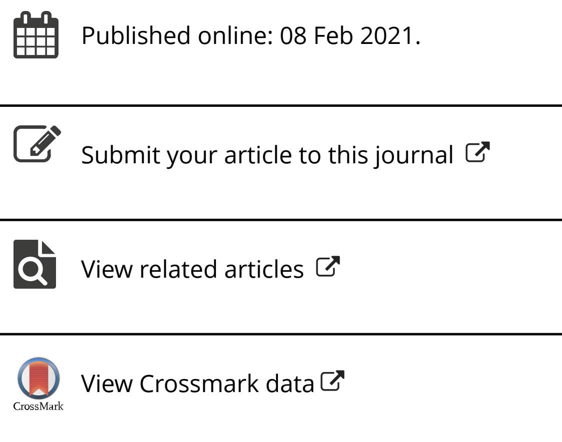
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BOOK REVIEW

Forbidden knowledge: medicine, science, and censorship in early modern Italy, by Hannah Marcus, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020, xi + 356 pp., 36 fig., $45.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-226-73658-7

Hannah Marcus expertly explores the mechanics and meaning of the censorship of medical writings in post-Tridentine Italy in this innovative and original study. Medicine is a particularly profitable subject for solving the 'paradox of censorship', as the introductory chapter is titled, because there was relatively little in medical writings that was seen as heterodox in itself – although there were a few notable exceptions – yet many medical works were placed on indexes of prohibited book because they were written by Protestants or medieval authors accused of embracing heresies. Pagan and non-Christian writers were not included on these indexes so that Galen's and Averroes' potentially unorthodox views, such as on the human soul, were countered with other means. Nevertheless, since writings composed by Leonhart Fuchs, Paracelsus, Conrad Gessner, and Arnald of Villanova among others were often perceived to be essential to medical theory and practice, the Catholic Church developed delicate procedures intended to balance its fears of heresy with the need to preserve, teach, and apply this useful knowledge.

Relying on a vast number of archival and printed sources, as well as copious material evidence taken from the pages of censored books, Marcus brings to light the perceptions of the usefulness of particular texts about medicine. The techniques ecclesiastical authorities used to expurgate these writings and the processes of evaluating the requests for the numerous licenses that were granted give great insight into reading practices, the relative interest in various authors, and the formation of libraries. Marcus convincingly shows that the Congregation of the Holy Office was unable, or did not desire, to eliminate access to the works of these authors deemed heterodox. Rather trained physicians and other elites continued to read and possess these works.

Censorship was a messy business. The establishment of the first local indexes of prohibited books and then the Pauline Index attempted to control printed material at an unprecedented scale. Their initial ambitions were tempered by practicalities. Accepting that many if not most medical works, even those written by those labelled heretics, should be corrected rather than outright banned, Church leaders sought out scholars to read and expurgate supposedly dangerous books. The first attempt, at Padua, home to many of Italy's leading medical scholars, largely failed, as those in charge were unable to obtain the books – their possessors refused to yield them – and few scholars completed the tedious task of identifying passages to be corrected. Somewhat unexpectedly, one of the few professors at Padua to sign on was the philosopher Cesare Cremonini, who himself had been accused of writing erroneous views. Although, he was likely hiding his true views (either to his Venetian overlords or to the Inquisitors) and we might never know what his true motives were, nonetheless, now there is ample evidence that he was an Inquisitorial collaborator and hardly a radical.

Subsequent attempts at expurgation fared better, as the star of the first half of the book emerges: Girolamo Rossi, a relatively unknown physician from Ravenna. His notes and marked-up books demonstrate how the processes of expurgation, which Marcus describes as 'the dark side of commonplacing', reflect the changing reading

practices of late-Renaissance Italy that were intertwined with humanistic desires to create pure and correct texts. Expurgation changed the intellectual landscape not just by eliminating passages from books or by indicating questionable authors but by creating a generation of scholars who developed the habit of identifying potentially heterodox statements as they read. In Rossi's case, the habit became so deeply ingrained that he applied the techniques on his own manuscripts. Self-censorship was not just performed through restraint of the pen and tongue but is actually evident on his defaced pages.

The censors showed concern about magic, astrology, divination, attacks on Catholic 'superstition', potentially anticlerical sentiments, and sexual topics. Beyond specific touchy themes, the expurgations took on a ritualized form as they tried to remove the confessional identity of Lutherans from books. The targets included authors, like Fuchs, translators, like Janus Cornarius, and printers, like Johannes Oporinus. Censors and expurgators erased as many references to and the names of Protestant figures as they could. Marcus tellingly explains that the origins of the phrase *damnatio memoriae* arose in the context of deleting the names from censored books as part of an effort to dishonour Protestant authors.

Many of the censored authors posed dilemmas. For example, Paracelsus never explicitly identified as Lutheran, yet his anticlericalism and attitudes about a range of subjects, including magic and demons, rendered much of his thought suspect. Nevertheless, many of his medical ideas were considered to be both acceptable and useful. The perceived usefulness of these medical writings engendered a system of licensing readers of prohibited books. While historians have been enthralled with visions of clandestine circulation of ideas, we can see from Marcus's study, that much reading went on in open sight. Undoubtedly, many owners of books failed to cough up their prized possessions to the authorities, and the licenses were largely limited to the powerful and to professionals in good standing with the Church, but there was no shortage of permissions granted for reading Paracelsus or later Paracelsians such as Andreas Libavius and Oswald Croll.

Interest in Girolamo Cardano, who was deemed dangerous for his astrological writings, which notoriously included a horoscope of Jesus among other topics, eclipsed that for Paracelsus, if we are to judge by the number of license requests. Indeed, in the chapter on licenses, Marcus reveals some surprises. Cardano and Fuchs's mostly botanical writings continued to hold the interest of the medical community well into the seventeenth century. Arnald of Villanova's recipes remained attractive as well. Perhaps less surprising but just as important is the fact that the requests for licenses indicate the seventeenth-century medical community's intellectual continuity with the previous century, as it was informed and even defined by earlier connections and polemics exemplified by the writings of Theodor Zwinger, Thomas Erastus, and Julius Caesar Scaliger.

Forbidden Knowledge succeeds on multiple levels that allow for the revision of many assumptions about post-Tridentine intellectual activity. By providing details into the practices of expurgation and licensing, the book delineates the priorities of the Catholic Church, while demystifying censorship. The contents of medical works written by Lutherans or others deemed questionable were not banned rather they were transformed, in what Marcus convincingly describes as being a form of the production of knowledge, a production that conformed to humanistic reading practices that emerged during the same decades. Additionally, she unveils the interests and priorities of the medical community in a manner that exceeds what is often found in traditional intellectual histories. The requests for licenses that outline the reasons for reading

particular works show readers' values and aspirations. Perhaps, future studies can outline how these forms of producing knowledge tied to censorship were manifested in writings on medicine composed and published during the seventeenth century. The book splendidly details the material aspects of censorship by discussing the means of altering texts (paper, razor, ink) and the formation of designated places for collecting and separating out prohibited books. Numerous photographs of censored pages illustrate the results of these methods. Most importantly, Marcus deftly explains the various contradictions that shaped the interactions between Catholic authorities and the medical and scientific communities of early modern Italy, showing how these dynamics defined the role of outside expertise in creating 'Catholic Knowledge' for centuries to come.

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