At a first glance a series of letters between two doctors who at best play supporting roles in the history of Renaissance medicine may seem an unlikely gateway to the late humanist world of Central Europe. But appearances are deceiving, and the very fine collection of the correspondence between Girolamo Mercuriale and Johann Crato von Krafftheim, edited and translated by Jean-Michel Agasse, is an unassuming gem. In their day both Crato and Mercuriale were figures of significant accomplishment. Crato, the son of a prominent Silesian family in Breslau (Wrocław), studied with Luther and Melanchthon in Wittenberg. He lived with Luther for six years, and the notes that he took from that time furnished Johannes Aurifaber with much of his material for his 1566 edition of Luther’s Table Talk. Crato’s own career, however, lay in a different direction. He went on to Padua where he studied medicine with Giovanni Battista da Monte whose emphasis on actual clinical work was distinctive for the period. Crato eventually returned north and ultimately became the physician of three Habsburg emperors. The younger Mercuriale, a philologist noted for his editions of Hippocrates and Galen as well as a physician, also trained in Padua. Best known for his De arte gymnastica, arguably the first manual of sports medicine, Mercuriale was a strong advocate for the inclusion of physical exercise in the education of young gentlemen. In the eighteenth century Johann Joachim Winckelmann rediscovered his work. De arte gymnastica with its rich collection of illustrations convinced him of the importance of nudity in ancient Greek culture. Crato and Mercuriale met only once. A call from the Habsburg court in 1573 brought Mercuriale north to Vienna where he attended Emperor Maximilian II. There he met Crato and a warm friendship developed between the two. For more than two decades they carried on a lively correspondence. Jean-Michel Agasse has brought these seventy letters together including both the Latin originals and corresponding French translations.

This volume is significant for a number of reasons. At its most basic level it is an excellent example of a Renaissance literary friendship. Here we see firsthand the values, attitudes, and at times prejudices that animated a relationship between the Silesian physician and
his younger Italian colleague. The ideas they exchanged along with physical objects – books, seeds, and animal skins – give detail and character to the lives of two humanist scholars. Mercuriale even sought Crato’s assistance in a scheme to transport horses from Transylvania to Padua. Agasse has written a substantial introduction to give greater context and background to the letters. Historians of science will be particularly pleased by the attention he devotes to medicine, and not surprisingly the letters are full of references to relevant themes in this area. The two refer to the work and findings of other colleagues such as the Platonist Giulio Alessandrini or the Basel physician Theodor Zwinger. In a very brief passage we see their common contempt of Paracelsus and his new approach to health that had attracted a growing following. But both the letters and the introduction do more than this. They also highlight the fascinating late humanist world of Central Europe. The letters are full of references to figures active at the courts of Maximilian II and Rudolf II. There is the Hungarian Johannes Sambucus, poet and author of one of the most famous emblem books of the sixteenth century, the Flemish botanist Rembert Dodoens, and the heterodox Italian/Croatian Andreas Dudith, who was bishop of Knin and a participant at the Council of Trent before marrying, converting to Protestantism, and then in his later years drawing closer to the teachings of the Antitrinitarians. There are also cameo appearances by Farkas Kovacsóczy, Grand Chancellor of Transylvania, and the powerful Polish Grand Hetman, Jan Zamoyski. In sum, there is little to find fault with in this marvelous collection of letters. The decision to use endnotes instead of footnotes with the letters makes for awkward reading as one is forced to page back and forth when working through them. Curiously, the long introduction employs footnotes in contrast. It would be best not to describe Crato anachronistically as Polish. Silesian is certainly better. But these are mere quibbles. We are very much in the debt of Jean-Michel Agasse for providing such a fascinating window on to this period.

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