
‘Do you wish to know me or any other person? Read the letters which depict them.’ Thus wrote the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius when, in 1586, he published a selection of his correspondence. Many of the great and good in the Republic of Letters published similar editions, but Lipsius’ successor at the University of Leiden, the French Huguenot scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609), never bothered. Scaliger’s contemporaries judged him by his classical editions and works of historical chronology, not his letters.
The Scaligerana, or table-talk, provided later generations with access to his free and frank opinions. Its mixture of erudition and gossip about often inebriated colleagues still provides ready insight into Scaliger’s life and times. Yet his correspondence, printed piecemeal over the centuries, has thus far been available only in fragmented and, at times, redacted form. The present eight-volume edition of Scaliger’s complete correspondence throws a flood of light on the life of a person of unique standing in the history of scholarship, and with him, the confessional Republic of Letters of which he was part.

The letters gathered in the present volumes offer us some wonderful vignettes. We now know that Mark Pattison was not the first to describe Scaliger as a Protestant Achilles, contemporaries did so as well (1602 07 17, from P. Merlin). The correspondence provides lessons in Scaliger’s well-known scatology, whether aimed at the Jesuits in general, ‘les diables desenchainés, les monstres d’envie’ (1606 07 14, to Vertunien), or its individual members, such as the Antwerp-born Martin Delrio—‘whether he is a man, a beast, or a piece of dirt made soft by shit I do not know’ (1604 06 17, to Drusius). There are, of course, wonderful interventions in scholarly debates on, to name but one, the possible Persian origins of the German language (1606 10 03, to Pontanus). The correspondence also opens up whole vistas on issues that move beyond biography and the history of scholarship. It should be of interest to historians of the body, medicine and food. We can, for instance, follow Scaliger gradually losing his teeth across his correspondence, a lamentable condition he blamed on the Dutch climate (1597 05 06, to Casaubon). By 1606 he had only five teeth left. Scaliger’s correspondents are of interest as well. They include, for example, a Coptic Christian who complained about the poor quality of education in early modern Egypt (1608 09 25, from Barbatus). The planned addition of the project’s metadata to EMLO (Early Modern Letters Online) will further unlock the riches of this remarkable resource.

One cannot therefore but praise the editors of the Scaliger correspondence, Dirk van Miert and Paul Botley, as well as Anthony Grafton—who used his 2002 Balzan prize to both found and fund the project. The resulting eight-volume product is also a testament to their scholarly acumen and commonsense approach. The editors wisely decided not to number the letters, which would have been a pointless exercise, not least because more letters may yet turn up. Their standard method of reference (as used above) is remarkably clear, especially when compared with the esoteric standards used by other editions of correspondence. When a letter could not be reliably dated, the editors outline their conjectures so clearly that one suspects that they have as little difficulty moving between the Julian and Gregorian calendars as Scaliger once did. The fact that the letters are in French and Latin, with a substantial number of Greek and, on occasion, Hebrew and Arabic passages, provides further proof not only of Scaliger’s erudition but that of his editors as well. One cannot help wondering what the great man himself would have made of it.

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