The Letter: Private Text or Public Place? The Mattioli-Gesner Controversy about the *aconitum primum*

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Summary

From 1555 to 1565, Pietro Andrea Mattioli and Conrad Gesner were locked in controversy over the veracity of Mattioli's picture of *aconitum primum*. This dispute led to numerous vehement publications and to intensive exchanges of letters, not only between the protagonists but also within their own and sometimes inter-connected networks of correspondence. This dispute illustrates how 16th-century scholars played upon the ambiguous place of these letters between private and public space to deal with controversy in the Republic of Letters.

Keywords: correspondence; scientific controversy; botany; Republic of Letters; Renaissance

Introduction

For ten years, between 1555 and 1565, Conrad Gesner (1516–1565), the Zurich town-physician, and Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1500–1577), the famous author of the successful *Commentary* on Dioscorides' *Materia Medica*, were engaged in a heated controversy over Dioscorides' *aconitum primum* (figs. 1 and 2). In the last chapter of his 1555 pamphlet *De raris and admirandis herbis* Gesner had stated that Mattioli's illustration of his plant appeared to

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Fig. 1. Pietro Andrea Mattioli. Engraving of Dominicus Custos (Biographical Archive, Institute for the History of Medicine, University of Berne).

Fig. 2. Conrad Gesner. Engraving after an oil painting by Tobias Stimmer (Biographical Archive, Institute for the History of Medicine, University of Berne).

be a fake, not drawn from nature but based entirely on Dioscorides' verbal description (fig. 3). This severe condemnation was accompanied by an image of *tora venenata*, identified as the *aconitum*, and carefully legitimated by numerous testimonies (fig. 4)¹. Several publications followed this initial attack². That such a minor disagreement, concerning only one plant, could lead to a long-lasting controversy and to volumes of writing, both published and unpublished, is perhaps surprising and has been used by several historians of medicine as an example of Mattioli's way of dealing with his colleagues and as representative of the botanical practices in the 16th century. Richard Palmer ended his 1985 study, *Medical botany in northern Italy in the Renaissance*, with this dispute, showing how the scientific community seized the occasion of the controversy to establish the real identity of Dioscorides' *aconitum primum*, exemplifying the close relationship between books and practical experiment during the Renaissance. More recently, Vivian Nutton used the example of Mattioli's violent *Appendix* to the chapter about *aconitum*, added in his 1558 Latin edition, to show how this *Appendix* was used by Mattioli to present himself as a trustworthy, learned botanist³.

Both these studies deal with the open part of the controversy, namely, the part conveyed through various types of publications on both sides. However, after 1558 these publications became rare and most of the controversial discourse took the form of letters. Letters represented an ambiguous space, between the

1 In this paper, I will not discuss the question of the legitimation of images. Such an interesting question certainly deserves an entire paper.

2 Gesner/Guilandinus 1557; Mattioli 1558; Gesner 1558.

3 Palmer 1985; Nutton 2004.

Fig. 3. Mattioli's *aconitum primum*. Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Commentarii in sex libros Pedacii, Dioscoridis Anazarbei de medica materia* (Venice 1554), p. 479.

Fig. 4. Gesner's *tora venenata*. Conrad Gesner, *De raris et admirandis herbis, quae sive quod noctu luceant, sive alias ob causas, Lunariae nominantur* (Zurich 1555).

private and the public spheres⁴. On the one hand, they provided a private space for an intimate “conversation with an absent friend”⁵. On the other hand, they were susceptible to be turned into public documents, as numerous collections of letters were published at this period. For those reasons, they were representative of the early modern tensions concerning the boundaries between private and public spheres. Their importance in the Republic of Letters has already been highlighted: they provided information and social links within the scientific and scholarly community. Recent studies⁶ have shown the existence of strong tensions between the ideal of a universal Republic of scholars and the individual members, their loyalties and faiths. Anne Goldgar⁷ has argued that the community was mostly kept together due to its self-centred discourse. Analysing this discourse, she has underlined how controversies spread a normative discourse about the proper conduct in the Republic of Letters. However, most studies concerning the Republic of Letters have been centred on a later period⁸. Nonetheless, these tensions clearly appeared in Pietro Andrea Mattioli's case, which was thoroughly studied by Paula Findlen⁹: by his letters and his attacks on other scholars, Mattioli created a specific “Republic of physicians”, based not only on a pro-

4 Rice Henderson 2002 provides an excellent depiction of the history and aspects of this ambiguous place.

5 This representation of the letter was one of the most common during the Renaissance; for instance, following Cicero, Erasmus stated in his treatise about letter-writing that the wording of the letter should resemble a conversation between friends (*De conscribendis epistolis*, chapter 7). See, for instance, Nellen 2002.

6 See, e.g., Bots/Waquet 1997.

7 Goldgar 1995.

8 Even Van Houdt et al. 2002 deal mostly with the 17th–18th centuries.

9 Findlen 1999.

fessional, but also on a Catholic and Italian membership. The emergence, during the 16th century, of smaller communities of experts was one consequence of the internal contradictions of the Republic of Letters.

This controversy between Gesner and Mattioli raises the problem of the place where controversial debate belonged during the 16th century: should it remain private or could it be published? As private letters were quoted or forwarded throughout the scientific network, the controversy between Gesner and Mattioli quickly involved other members of the wider scientific community and necessitated a new definition of the public concerned by the dispute. Interpreting the controversy not only through the publications it occasioned, but also through the numerous letters written and received by both protagonists allows us to assess how the scientific community exploited the fluid boundary between private and public letters to deal with this heated dispute.

The letter and the addressee: published letters

The controversy about *aconitum* gave rise to numerous publications. After his first attack in 1555¹⁰, Gesner resumed the initiative in 1557 by publishing in his *De stirpium aliquot nominibus* two letters he had exchanged with Melchior Guilandinus¹¹. In his *Preface*, Nicolaus Philesius put forward a delightful explanation for the history of this publication. Presenting himself one day at Gesner's home, he found him reading a letter from Guilandinus. On being invited to read it, he experienced so much pleasure and gained so much instruction that he asked Gesner on the spot to authorise the publication of both this letter and his answer. Triumphant over all Gesner's scruples, Philesius promised to emphasise Gesner's reluctance and to assume full responsibility for publishing what was originally a private communication between friends.

This charming story is hardly to be taken at face value. It was common, at this time, to take issue with a fellow-naturalist through the medium of a published letter¹². But, nominally at least, criticism belonged to the private

10 See Palmer 1985, who summarises the different stages of the controversy, centred on the scientific question of the identification of Dioscorides' plant.

11 Melchior Guilandinus, or Melchior Wieland, in Italian Ghilandini (Königsberg 1520–Padua 1589), was in charge of the Botanic Garden of Padua.

12 For instance, Taddeus Dunus (1523–1613) published in 1592 a book of *Epistolae medicinales* related to the use of *Oxymel*. In these letters he violently attacked the empiricist Thomas Zoius, by publishing one letter addressed to him, as well as his correspondence concerning this debate with several other scholars. However, I do not know of any synthesis about the role of letters in controversy during the 16th century.

sphere and was therefore entrusted to the confidential medium of the letter¹³. By publishing his disagreement, Gesner was trespassing the border between private letter and public discourse, and there is some affectation, and also some hypocrisy, in pretending to have had a perfectly innocent mind. The wider diffusion of such a book certainly added to the outrage. The epistolary genre was very widespread during the Renaissance, following the rediscovery of Cicero's epistles and the numerous publications of the correspondence of distinguished names¹⁴. Gesner was living in the Germanic world and Guilandinus in Padua, and they maintained contact with colleagues throughout Europe. The fame of the authors as well as the clearly polemic character of the title, which alluded to the ignorance of other anonymous physicians¹⁵, would also attract the attention of scholars. Therefore, when Gesner accused Mattioli of cheating the public's expectations, the charge was a really serious one and undermined the confidence accorded to Mattioli following the success of his *Commentary*.

Mattioli's 1558 *Appendix* was a reaction to this attack on his credibility, and not to Gesner's earlier appeal for scientific texts and pictures to be founded on testimonies coming from reliable authorities. He deployed every rhetorical artifice to highlight his indignation at Gesner's hypocrisy and unreasonable demands¹⁶. Mattioli's honesty and the truthfulness of his illustrations were being called into question by a man who had publicly commended him in other writings and who had himself presented fictitious pictures in his own *History of Animals*! In a flamboyant finish Mattioli responded to Gesner's demand for witnesses by giving a long list of names, from the painter of the illustration to the very mountains where he had found the plant.

Gesner responded with great moderation in the *Preface* to his *History of fishes*¹⁷. In contrast to Mattioli, he used a very restrained tone and a plain style, without polemic notes, simply justifying his position and appealing to the moral conscience of his adversary, whom he forbore to name.

At that point, the controversy had reached an impasse: the protagonists were fighting on entirely different grounds. Gesner had published what should have remained a private disagreement with Mattioli. However, the issue rapidly became whether or not it was permissible to disagree with Mattioli.

13 See Nellen 2002, 244.

14 See Clough 1976.

15 The complete title is *De stirpium aliquot nominibus vetustis ac novis: quae multis iam seculis vel ignorarunt medici, vel de eis dubitarunt, ut sunt Mamiras, Môly, Oloconitis, Doronicum, Bulbocastanum ... epistolae II, una Melchioris Guilandini; altera Conradi Gesneri* (1557).

16 See Nutton 2004.

17 Gesner 1558.

The letter and the referee: public letters

Towards the end of 1558, instead of appealing to the whole scientific community through a publication, Gesner wrote letters to several other well-known physicians, summarising the facts and asking for advice or, more accurately, for a verdict. The experts of this committee were chosen from among the prominent personalities of 16th-century medicine and came from all over Europe. One of them was the court physician Girolamo Donzellini¹⁸. Far from being of a quarrelsome temperament, none had had any part in a dispute before. Their publications were recognised as excellent. Moreover, they all had had continuous relationships with both contenders, whether through letters alone or through regular encounters while attending on their imperial patron. Perhaps – as Mattioli suggested in a letter to Aldrovandi¹⁹ – Gesner had realised that he needed support. However, by this movement back towards a more private space, he also defined a circle of experts entitled to deal with the problem away from general public knowledge. In a letter to Gesner, Girolamo Donzellini explained how he arrived at his decision, after having waited for enough leisure to considerate it thoroughly:

When I found this free time, I did not want to decide in this controversy on my own, but I submitted the whole question to the very erudite leading physicians in this city, who were already your very great friends, Hieronymus Heroldus and Joannes Hessus, and I requested a discussion together. As they were aware what a disadvantage could result for the republic of Physicians from exciting still more the minds of such great men against each other – for they were otherwise well disposed towards each of you – they showed themselves very quick to agree to this. That is why each of us read for himself the writings of each party, and examined them zealously. Then we discussed them seriously for quite a long time, and this finally is our verdict ...²⁰

This collegiality, as well as the careful reading of the writings of each party, guaranteed the quality and the fairness of the verdict. Moreover, both the additional referees chosen by Donzellini, Johannes Hessus and Hieronymus Heroldus qualified for this role by their erudition and their medical profi-

18 The referees comprised Italians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Germans ... (Hanhart 1824, Letter to Kentmann IX). There is no evidence of who they were, except for Donzellini: Gesner always referred to them anonymously. To the best of my knowledge, their letters are lost, except for a few exchanged between Gesner, Mattioli, Girolamo Donzellini and Johannes Hessus, and now kept in Zurich Zentralbibliothek (ZBZ, Ms C50a).

19 Raimondi 1906, 162.

20 “Ocium nactus, huic controversiae solus praesse nolui, sed eruditissimis atque in hac civitate primaris Medicis D.D. Hieronymo Heroldo, et Joanni Hesso, tibi alioqui amicissimis rem totam patefeci: illud rogans, ut communi opera a nobis discuteretur. Illi vero cum animadverterent, quantum detrimenti ad Medicorum rempublicam si tantorum virorum animi magis adhuc invicem exacerbarentur, redire posset: cum alioqui erga utrumque egregie sint affecti, promptissimos ea in re sese exhibuerunt. Quare utriusque parties scripta, singuli seorsumque perlegimus, ac diligenter examinavimus. Deinde collocuti serio, ac diutius sumus: atque haec tandem nostra est sententia.” Donzellini to Gesner, ZBZ, Ms C50a, II, 22.

ciency. As learned physicians, they were part of the Republic of Letters as well as of the professional sphere of the Republic of physicians²¹. However, letters determined another sphere, i.e. that of the group of experts appointed to deal with this controversy. This smaller community emanated from the Republic of physicians, represented it in the debate and tried to protect it from the bad example of two quarrelling scholars: that was the reason why their correspondence should remain semi-private. In this very long letter, signed only by Donzellini and Hessus, they decided in favour of Mattioli:

Since Mattioli, when he painted the *aconitum primum*, did not add to it anything more than what Dioscorides had imputed to it before, one might suspect that this image was extracted from the latter's words; but one must leave free of that suspicion the candour and the authority of this excellent and erudite man, who has, by his painstaking work, done so much for the whole of humanity.²²

They continued by wondering why Gesner was being so unreasonable (who cares about a picture not being drawn from life?) and then contested his identification of *tora* with *aconitum primum*. Most of their rhetorical display consisted in refuting the notion that the validity of a picture simply embodying Dioscorides' description of a plant, without reference to nature, could present a problem: Donzellini considered that Mattioli's *fides* was enough to prove his point, without necessarily referring to a real plant. This decision led Gesner to write two more letters addressed to the referees and to Mattioli. These letters represent an interesting instance of the blurred space occupied by letters between private and public: although nominally addressed to a single person, they were supposed to be read by others. That is why, for instance, Mattioli and Donzellini had their letters specially copied, only dating and signing in their own hand. For the same reason, our manuscripts of Gesner's letters are drafts, certainly recopied afterwards by a scribe, in order to improve their presentation. Gesner sent his letter to Mattioli unsealed. Actually, the first intended reader was not the latter, as one might suppose, but Donzellini, who could thus judge whether the Swiss physician was polite and deferential enough towards his senior.

I am writing to Mattioli himself, yet certainly with more bitterness than before: as his letter indeed demands; you will find my answer unsealed and enclosed in this letter, so that you

21 Donzellini and Hessus seem to be using here 'Republic of physicians' as a synonym for Republic of Letters, contrary to Mattioli as Paula Findlen depicted it (1999). This use is attested, as asserted by Bots and Waquet 1997, 16, to represent the medical part of the whole Republic of Letters.

22 "[...] cum Matthiolus in pingendo aconito primo nihil plus illi affinxerit, quam quod Dioscorides illi adscribit, aliquam certe suspicionem facere, ex ejus verbis desumptam esse illam picturam, cui tamen suspicioni praepollere debeat optimi, atque eruditi viri candor, atque autoritas: qui tot vigiliis ac laboribus de toto mortalium genere est benemeritus." Donzellini to Gesner, 1.11.1558, ZBZ, Ms C50a, II,22.

may open and read it; send everything to him afterwards, so that I will not repeat in a letter to you what I have already written to him.²³

Besides granting the referees some control over the controversy, there was another useful point in sending this unsealed letter. By insisting on the waste of time represented by writing two letters about the same subject, Gesner depicted himself as a very busy man, the model of a scholar at this time. The letter itself was full of discreet allusions to his numerous activities and continuous exertions. Mattioli was also master of this play on *ethos*: in his own letter, sealed but copied several times and diffused among his friends²⁴, he represented himself as a weak old man, having to put up with violent attacks from the ambitious young physician Conrad Gesner, who lacked all respect for age and reputation²⁵:

You certainly can see me, an elderly man of almost sixty, devoting every moment to the care of my Prince, totally engaged in the cure of the sick and in the writing of books. You want me, I say, just for the sake of defending myself before you, to hasten to the Alps, to unearth plants for you: because, as you have not seen them in the natural world, you do not want to believe they exist!²⁶

The opposition between Mattioli's age and respectable pursuits and Gesner's unreasonable expectations and banal demands contributes both to the creation of a certain image of the true scholar and to the edification of the readers. These public letters aim to provoke judgement both on characters and on facts: as a representative of the whole "Republic of physicians", the referee is therefore a judge. But while these letters enable all parties to expose and justify their positions, nevertheless, far from debating the accuracy of Mattioli's image or even the value of this kind of archaeological image²⁷, the main part of the argument is devoted to Gesner's identification of the *tora venenata* with Dioscorides' *aconitum primum*. It reveals how much the position between Mattioli and Gesner has changed. The latter is no more the accuser, but the defendant.

23 "Ad ipsum Mattiolum scribo, et quidem me acrius quam antea: quoniam sic ejus epistola postular; id responsam meam nullo sigillo nimium huic epistolae infectis, ut aperias et legas: postea ad ipsum mixtas omnino: ne quaedam ad ipsum scripta in nobis alia literis mihi reponenda sint." Gesner to Donzellini, 7.8.1559, ZBZ, Ms C50a, II, 43.

24 Raimondi 1906, 162.

25 Mattioli was actually 58 years old in 1558, and Gesner only 42.

26 "Scilicet vide me senem fere sexagenarium Principis mei negotiis singulis momentis addictum, curandis aegris, conscribendisque voluminibus occupatissimum, vis me inquam defendendi mei apud te tantum operis gratia, proficisci ad Alpes, effoderi tibi stirpes, quas quia tu non vidisti in rerum natura esse eas credere nequis?" Letter from Mattioli to Gesner, 15.4.1559, ZBZ, Ms C50a II, 37.

27 I am indebted for this idea to Laurent Pinon.

The judgement itself is deeply related to this tension between private and public letter. Gesner was astonished at the Nuremberg referees' decision: "In your previous letter, you wrote this: 'Concerning Mattioli's case, I will not write more about it until I can show you the plant itself, because here we particularly need *autopsy*.'"²⁸ Whereas Donzellini seemed to have taken Gesner's side in his private letter, the definitive answer, being public and destined for wider diffusion, was a more diplomatic one. Gesner was convinced that Donzellini, forced to choose between his friendship with himself and his fidelity towards the great and famous Mattioli, had not wavered very long before coming down publicly on the side of Mattioli. Gesner, therefore, refused to submit to this verdict and asserted very vehemently his right to dissent from Mattioli:

You try to persuade me to be concerned only for Mattioli's friendship and benevolence, in case I should have another controversy in the future; but I consider that too servile and incompatible with my love for freedom and truth; and I scarcely desire to keep the friendship of one who does not condescend to acknowledge his mistakes, and who uses calumnious words against others just as he pleases, both privately and publicly, and afterwards enjoins the men he exposes to derision to keep quiet if they want his good will.²⁹

In appealing to truth and refusing to renounce his freedom³⁰, Gesner was stressing the referee's submission to and dependence on Mattioli as a patron. Meanwhile, both protagonists wrote private letters to friends about the controversy, each claiming he was in the right, and looking for allies. On 26 November 1558, Mattioli wrote a letter in Italian to Ulisse Aldrovandi, the famous naturalist of Bologna, portraying Gesner as a servile coward, who had sought the referee's help and had seen the result turned against him. Mattioli thus presented a personal view of the controversy, relating everything to power and the fear he inspired. He also promised to send a copy of the referees' decision to Aldrovandi.

28 "In priora epistola tua sic scribebas: Quod ad causam Matthioli attinet, nil amplius ea de re scribam, donec plantam ipsam tibi ostendere non possum, cum hic maxime requiratur αὐτοψία." Gesner to Donzellini, 7.8.1559, ZBZ, Ms C50a, II, 43; autopsy is here used for "to see by oneself".

29 "Quod posthabita omni controversia de sola amicitia et benevolentia Matthioli suades ut sim sollicitus, nimium id servile et a libertatis ac veritatis amore alienum existimo; nec admodum expeto amicitiam illius qui suos errores agnoscere non dignatur: et verbis calumniisque in alios pro suo libidine publice privatimque postquam usus est homines a se traductos tacere pro suam benevolentiam quaerere jubet." Letter from Gesner to Donzellini, 7.8.1559, ZBZ, Ms C50a, II, 43.

30 Gesner alluded here to the growing opposition of a reformed and republican Europe and a Catholic and monarchic one. He was, himself, a free man: town-physician of Zurich, he did not depend on a patron. His reputation was already well established, he was largely out of reach for Mattioli's circle of relations, and therefore could proclaim his love for truth at no expense. See Findlen 1999.

Gesner's letters to his friend Johannes Kentmann³¹ differ in their reasoned and far from triumphant tone. On 25 August 1558, he questioned Kentmann about his contested *aconitum pardalianches* and stated his intention to answer Mattioli. He asked Kentmann to provide arguments for him, and stressed his intention to publish as soon as possible a book on the *aconitum primum*.

I would like you to read what Mattioli has written, and to judge freely and to write to me after mature reflection so that I can finish more quickly the little book on *aconitum* that I intend to publish soon (certainly for the Spring fairs), in which you will read lots of wonderful things. However, I would not press the matter, if I did not seem to have to answer Mattioli, fearing that, if I wait longer, I will appear to concede the matter to him: and that I do not want. However, I will act with extreme modesty and simplicity (unless I get beside myself or forgot myself) so that readers will understand that I am more concerned to seek the truth than to reproach Mattioli for anything.³²

In contrast to Mattioli, Gesner affirmed that he was striving to establish the truth and despised his enemy's ambition. These private letters, however, are far from being as determined as more public ones by the consciousness of an extended readership. Their authors try less to build their image than to win sympathy for their cause; they stress mainly their links, and especially their friendship, with their addressee.

The controversy, which was played out against the political and religious tensions of the time³³, shows how much the intermediary status of the letter complicated the game. Nonetheless, Gesner claimed his right to dissent from Mattioli and refused to write a private letter of submission, despite the numerous entreaties of several Court physicians³⁴. After this, he was silent for some two years, until the publication of Mattioli's *Medical Letters*³⁵ stirred everything up again.

31 Johannes Kentmann (1518–1565) was a physician in Meissen and in Torgau. He specialised in illustrations and left at his death a manuscript book with more than 600 painted and coloured images of medicinal plants, as well as illustrations of the biblical plants and animals.

32 “Cupio te legere quae Matthiolus scripsit et judicare libere matureque ad me perscribere, ut libellum de aconitis quem meditor brevi edere (saltem ad nundinas vernas) in quo multa mirabilia leges, citius absolvam. Quanquam non accellerarem, nisi Mattiolo respondendum videretur, ne si diutius differam, concedere ei videar, quod nolim. Modestissime tamen et simpliciter agam (nisi egomet mihi excidam, aut mei obliviscar) ut majorem inquirendae veritatis quam reprehendendi Matthiolum curam mihi fuisse lectores intellegant.” Gesner to Kentmann, 25.8.1558, in Hanhart 1824, XIII.

33 For instance, both Gesner and Mattioli referred to the competition between German and Italian scholars, and tried to excite patriotic sentiments in their correspondents. Gesner thus underlined the contempt in which the Italian Mattioli held the Germans (letter to Kentmann, 25.8.1558, in Hanhart 1824, XIII).

34 Letter to Kentmann, 27.2.1559, in Hanhart 1824, X.

35 Mattioli 1561.

Letters and individual mediator: private text, public action

This collection belongs to a range of publications of “medical letters” during the Renaissance. However, in contrast to Manardi’s or Lange’s epistles³⁶, Mattioli’s are not long essays dealing with medical issues but are designed to proclaim their author’s fame and splendour, even to the extent of including numerous letters of support from referees³⁷. Among the numerous scholars urging forbearance and patience on the Italian physician was Johannes Crato, physician at the imperial court and one of Gesner’s friends³⁸.

His intervention in the controversy, through his correspondence with Gesner³⁹, marks a new turn in the debate about *aconitum*. Gesner’s firmness is striking. He continued uncompromisingly to maintain that Mattioli’s plant was a fake and that Mattioli’s conduct towards a friend was not what it ought to be. He made his anger appear: on 17 March 1561, the very pious Gesner wrote: “I wanted to contain myself, but I cannot: I am ready to bet any amount of money, that Mattioli’s *aconitum primum* does not possess any lethal property, neither by making things colder, nor by making them hotter: and if that is not true, do not believe anything I say from now on!”⁴⁰ Gesner’s indignation seems indeed to have been great, to lead him to wager. But it also indicates the very private dimension of these letters, which were not supposed to be divulged to anyone, as he soon after explained: “However, I would like you to be discreet about all this: and I will never, myself, publish anything like this, especially if he corrects his calumnies and his false citations of my books, as when dealing with the *cytisum*.”⁴¹

The many Greek sentences scattered throughout the letters constitute another token of the very private character of this correspondence. One of

36 Giovanni Manardi’s correspondence was published for the first time in 1521 in Ferrara, and that of Johannes Lange in Basel in 1554. Both authors wrote letters to colleagues and patients, assuming the form of long dissertations on a medical subject.

37 Donzellini wrote two consolation letters to Mattioli, published in this book.

38 Johannes Crato von Krafftheim (1519–1595), physician to Emperor Ferdinand I in Vienna. He exchanged regular letters with Gesner, which were published in 1577 in *Epistolarum Medicinalium libri III*.

39 Unfortunately, only Gesner’s letters have survived so that we can only rely on half the correspondence concerning this controversy, amounting to thirteen letters. Without detailing the contents of the letters, which are readily accessible through their publication, I only would like to highlight a few points.

40 “Volui me coercere, sed non possum, paratus sum quacumque pecuniam deponere, Matthioli aconitum primum, lethalem vim neque refrigerando, neque urendo possidere: hoc nisi verum sit, nihil amplius mihi credas.” Letter to Crato, 17.3.1561, Gesner 1577, 9v.

41 “Haec tamen a te adhuc dissimulari velim: nec ego tale quid unquam publice scribam: praesertim si ipse quoque calumnias suas et male citata ex libris meis, ut de Cytiso, corrigat.” Letter to Crato, 17.3.1561, Gesner 1577, 9v. Mattioli had responded to Gesner’s attack by contesting Gesner’s identification of several plants, among which the *cytisum*.

the last allusions to the controversy is a violent critique of Mattioli and ends with these words: “But destroy all this.”⁴² In these confidential letters, Gesner drew a clearer boundary between private letter and public treatise: threatening to publish a book on the *aconitum primum*, he nonetheless acknowledged that this book should remain moderate in its tone and instruct its readers. By contrast, letters appear as the place of confidence. Nevertheless, this correspondence quickly led Crato to assume a new role in the controversy: he was not a referee, but a mediator. First of all, none of the parties had called upon his help. Gesner refused his intervention several times and even protested:

I do not want you to interfere in our dispute: I would rather answer him publicly, with absolute modesty (I do not approve of Guilandinus’ *insults*), so as to convey to the reader my knowledge of the facts themselves, rather than dispute with Mattioli. [...] If you love me, do not use your eloquence to defend the case of Mattioli, who is an excessively ambitious man, and do not disavow in a public document Guilandinus’ or mine (though they are very different). We all have our deficiencies, and to meddle in someone else’s business, when there is no need, is *unnecessary and superfluous*.⁴³

Crato was thus supposed to keep a silent neutrality in public and to avoid further reproof for his misplaced officious curiosity. Despite this, Gesner was compelled to acknowledge Crato’s attempts at conciliation in several letters, thanking him for his zeal and his love towards him⁴⁴. He had heeded Crato’s call for modesty. Crato, like the referees, was trying to dampen down the controversy, which might be considered scandalous by the scientific community. Yet, by using letters as a private space devoted to personal expression, he gave Gesner every opportunity to put forward his point of view on questions of natural history, thus allowing the debate to move forward.

However, he was not only a confidant, but also a participant in the dispute. As one of the imperial court physicians, he was close to Mattioli and could contribute to the resolution of the controversy. In a letter, written on 28th November 1562, Gesner commented on Crato’s testimony that he had personally witnessed an exhibition of the original *aconitum primum* painted

42 “Ἀλλὰ καὶ σὺ ταῦτα ἀφανίζει.” Gesner 1577, 62 (letter of the 22–24.4.1563). The systematic use of the Greek language for the most powerful attacks against his opponents argues in favour of the use of Greek as a secret code. Mattioli himself was not a skilled Hellenist.

43 “Sed nolo te in contentionibus nostris obtundere: malo publice ei respondere omni cum modestia (nam Guilandini *loidorias* minime probo) ita ut lectorem rerum ipsarum cognitione doceam, non cum Matthiolo altercer. [...] Si me amas, neque Matthioli causam, ambitiosi nimium profecto hominis, eloquentia tua defendes; neque Guilandinus aut meam (quamquam longe diversa est) scripto publico improbabis. Omnes nostra vitia habemus, et causae alienae se admiscere, ubi non opus est, περιττὸν καὶ περίεργον.” Gesner 1577, 7v–8r (letter to Crato, 1.1.1561).

44 Gesner 1577, 8v (17.3.1561).

by Mattioli⁴⁵. Apart from Crato, several personalities had been present: all the physicians of the Emperor Ferdinand and Maximilian, the King of the Romans, as well as numerous anonymous physicians, courtiers and scholars from all over Europe. Gesner had thus won his initial point in the controversy: the plant had been showed to several reliable witnesses. However, he was not satisfied:

I accept your testimony, inasmuch as I can easily concede to you that you have seen a dry plant akin to the plant he has painted: however, I will never concede that this root or any other root properly so-called has no fibres to adhere to the earth [...]: so that I simply cannot believe that such a plant as the one he contrived to paint is the *aconitum* and a venomous plant, whether in its natural state, dried or prepared in some other way.⁴⁶

Here, the scientific argument barely conceals the accusation of fraud. Gesner paid no attention to witnesses because he did not believe Mattioli any more. Therefore, he asked for more evidence, but admitted that the controversy and all difference of opinion would now belong to the private space:

But I will say no more: if Mattioli stands by his position and really desires our friendship, let him send me the plant itself, and I will send it back intact, in all good faith, together with some rare species of my own. If he does it without quibbling, he will be doing something worthy of himself. If not, even if I persist in my previous doubt, even if I cannot easily identify a plant by name or encourage other to do likewise, unless I see that it completely agrees with the description of its virtues, its taste, odour, and whole aspect, nonetheless I will do this for you and for Mattioli: I will then either refrain completely from mentioning Mattioli's name, or delete it from the places where I have previously named him, or, if an occasion arises, I will refer to him only in laudatory terms, as I understand you want me to.⁴⁷

However, these repeated calls for the actual plant did nothing to simplify Crato's mission. In his letter of the 24th April 1563 Gesner affirmed that Mattioli would never send his living *aconitum* and that this fact itself made

45 Mattioli, in his 1565 edition of the *Commentary*, relates his version of this exhibition. See Nutton 2004, where he gives an interpretation of that exhibition.

46 "[...] testimonium accepto sed ita ut talem herbam siccam qualem ipse pinxit te vidisse facile concedam: radicem vero ipsam ut terrae inhaeret carere fibris neque hanc neque aliam ullam [...] radicem proprie dictam concessero: ut et maxime talis sit, qualis pinguitur, sive natura, sive siccitate, sive etiam aliqua arte, Aconitum tamen esse et venenosam herbam credere non possum." Gesner 1577, 3r (Letter to Crato, 28.11.1562).

47 "Sed plura non addam: si suae causae sidit Mathiolus, et amicitiam nostram vere expetit, herbam ipsam ad me mittat, integram bona fide recepturus, simul aliquid ex rarissimis meis. Hoc si fecerit, candide, et rem se dignam fecerit. Sin minus, etsi in pristina dubitatione ego perstabo, qui plantis, nisi plenam virium, saponis, odoris, totiusque formae descriptionem congruere videam, non facile nomina impono, aut imponentibus aliis faveo. Faciam tamen hoc in gratiam tui et Matthioli, ut Matthioli nomine posthac vel omnino abstineam, vel ubi antehac etiam nominavi, deleam, vel si omnino tuleri occasio, honorifice tantum ejus, ut te velle intelligo, meminerim." Gesner, 1577, 3r (28.11.1562). Why did Gesner want the real plant? In all following letters, he presented himself as a man who could not judge what he had not seen, because he identified plants through direct observation, and not through other people's authority: "I call for sense and nature. Or, in such matters, is it evil to call for anything further than the trust in a single man?"

his cause doubtful. A few months later though, he acknowledged receipt of a part of this plant and heartily thanked Crato for his help:

I have seen, with extreme pleasure, Mattioli's *aconitum primum*: at least if it is the plant that he himself has shown to you. I would still wish to know whether he has shown you a fresh and brightly coloured root or a dry one. You will hear why in another letter, and at the same time I will add what I have discovered about this plant; but now I am in a hurry.⁴⁸

We do not have this promised letter. The posthumous publication of his correspondence did not include it, nor the letters to Mattioli or Donzellini. The editor, perhaps anxious to avoid new disputes and to preserve Gesner's excellent image as a scholar, chose to keep them private⁴⁹. The controversy, which had originally concerned the authenticity of a picture, required in the end, in order to arrive at some degree of certainty, an observation of nature and the natural plant, whereas Mattioli had wanted the discussion to stay on the level of his authority. The question of the truth of pictures and their authentication was never addressed in a treatise, but only through correspondence and external interventions, such as that of Crato von Krafftheim. Finally, although Gesner remained certain of his position and the mechanism of the fraud, no consensus was reached, nor ever will be: Mattioli continued to defend his plant and to claim that Gesner's identification of the *aconitum primum* was wrong, and Gesner, surprisingly, stayed silent. All his later conclusions remained in the private sphere of letters to close friends and were never published: although Gesner seemed to have carried his point with his call for an accurate observation of nature to legitimate an image, the scientific community had actually managed to have the controversy quietened down and confined to the field of privacy.

Conclusion

Mattioli and Gesner's controversy over *aconitum primum* is an excellent illustration of the complex status of letters during the Renaissance and of its consequences. Sometimes used as a private confessional, devoted to the expression of feelings and friendship, sometimes as powerful weapons, letters could always become public and thereby affect their author's reputation and

48 "Aconitum Matthioli primum libentissime vidi: si modo idipsum est, quod ipse tibi demonstravit. Scire autem cupio an radicem recentem et splendentem ostenderit, an ipse etiam siccam: causam audies alias: cum simul etiam quae mihi hac de herba explorata sint, addam: nunc festino." Gesner 1577, 14.

49 To know more about Gesner's conclusions about Mattioli's plant, see Hanhart 1824, XVI, letter to Kentmann, 25.8.1563: Gesner accused Mattioli of fraud, but stated that this accusation would remain private.

credibility. Through letters, a space for controversy was created, which neither belonged totally to the private nor the public sphere. Some of the tensions revealed in our controversy originate in that blur. Whereas Mattioli considered that the controversy should remain secret, and in that sense private, he came to organise shows of the plant he claimed to have painted. On the contrary, Gesner was the one to claim a right to criticise openly his adversary, but he very soon came back to other and more silent means, and reverted to the privacy of the epistolary friendship. During the controversy, the situation of each letter in this intermediary sphere varied: whereas letters to the referees were meant to become public, at least for a reduced audience, both contenders intended their letters to friends and supporters to remain private. So did Gesner intend his letters to Crato von Krafftheim, who acted as a mediator.

Moreover, in this blurred space, letters contributed to the constitution of a small group of experts, emanating from the whole Republic of physicians, and meant to protect the community from the disgusting view of two quarrelling scholars by keeping the problem partially private. Although this secretiveness, or this censure, may seem to contradict the ideal rule of an open communication in the Republic of Letters, the existence of such groups is, however, a sign of the liveliness of the scientific community during this period. Scholars could, by their letters and judgment, assume a role other than that of a mute audience: as referees and mediators, the experts in the field could attempt to solve the controversy. No consensus was reached between Gesner and Mattioli, but the impact of this controversy, its length and its violence are closely related to this blurred space, between private and public, created by letters during the Renaissance.

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