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# Strocchia, Sharon T. Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy

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à l'histoire de la lecture et s'avérera utile à un large public qui s'intéresse à la culture livresque de la première modernité.

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**Strocchia, Sharon T.**

***Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy.***

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xi, 330. ISBN 978-0-674-24174-9 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

The world of early modern medicine was crowded with a variety of figures, from university professors to charlatans and medicasters, to healers and cunning folk in general. In this diverse world, women played a fundamental if somewhat forgotten role. Focusing on a wealth of archival sources, mostly pertaining to Florence and Tuscany, Sharon Strocchia gives voice to noblewomen, nuns, and nurses engaged in medicine and pharmacy, reconstructing their networks of knowledge and business.

Strocchia argues that an “increased demand for healthcare services coupled with the growing interest in preventive health practices” allowed women “to participate extensively in both the medical economy and emerging cultures of experimentalism” (3). The importance of empirical knowledge and the commercial dimension of women’s medical entrepreneurial activity represent the two major focuses of Strocchia’s book. If women’s medical agency is not unknown to scholars, the extent to which they were able to capitalize on it to enter the market economy is perhaps a less familiar aspect of their activity. Strocchia successfully sheds light on the intertwining of experimentalism and market economy, addressing a variety of case studies involving women from across different social classes, from the elite household of the Medici family to lesser known nuns and nurses serving in convent pharmacies and pox hospitals. In Strocchia’s words, “this book situates female agents of health squarely at the intersection of medical and religious discourse, social welfare

initiatives, consumer culture, and the new information economy sweeping late Renaissance Italy" (12).

Certainly, the gift economy remained central to these female networks: it helped in forging or reinforcing political allegiances, or overcoming diffidence, as in the case of the "foreigner" duchess Eleonora of Toledo. Noblewomen could reciprocally exchange gifts with nuns, the economic imbalance between the two parties being bridged by the spiritual power embedded in the objects sent by nuns to their patrons. In this case, medical knowledge often went hand in hand with the still lingering belief in the magical and talismanic virtues of amulets and religious paraphernalia, as the analysis of the relationship between Maria Maddalena of Austria and Sister Orsola Fontebuoni shows. One must take into account the "holistic conception of health uniting body and soul" (83) that characterized the early modern period and contributed to shaping its pluralistic and polyphonic medical discourse. Yet, nuns had more to offer than prayers, talismans, and simple remedies; instead, they were often involved in scientific and technological progress, keeping surprisingly abreast of the new scientific discoveries.

Nuns could capitalize "on business networks developed through the textile trades and book manufacture over the preceding centuries" (91). Pharmaceutical production—including cosmetics and a range of dietary products—contributed to turning convents into experimental hubs: for example, fostering the development of visual arts, since "painting and pharmacies shared many of the same materials and techniques" (98) or prompting the birth of "new horticultural techniques" (112). Convents hosting literate women were ideal places for large-scale production of pharmaceutical products, since they had the infrastructures, the working force, and the skills. Their commercial networks included individuals but also institutions such as other convents and hospitals. Although navigating the market required some skills, nuns were in general able to skirt the many threats to their trade, for example requesting "donations from clients rather than selling items directly" (127) or developing "a full line of products that crossed the conceptual divide between internal and external remedies" (128). Products aimed at "hygiene and well-being" blurred the distinction between cosmetics and medicinal products, and nuns were often ready to trademark and advertise their wares. Besides, nuns were able to invest in technology: those of the Murate, for example, installed a furnace

that “allowed dozens of glass alembics or lead distilling bells to be placed over a single fire” (154). As Strocchia notes, “the adoption of this commercial-grade apparatus in a female institutional setting underscores both the diffusion of innovative technologies and women’s firsthand exposure to early scientific culture” (154).

Strocchia succeeds in placing women at the intersection of practice-based knowledge, technological innovation, and literacy, exploring the production and circulation, for example, of books of secrets within monastic spaces, or between monastic and external spaces, such as in the case of Caterina de’ Medici who, thanks to her cousin Antonio, had access to the scientific experiments led in the Medici Casino.

Besides and beyond convents, it was in charitable hospitals that nuns and nurses could perfect their experience-based medical and pharmaceutical skills, “blending therapeutic and redemptive goals” (181). Hospitals ran commercial pharmacies and by 1581 “the Innocenti provided some of its own medical personnel” (200), women pharmacists and physicians who “had been foundlings themselves, trained in-house” until they acquired the necessary skills (201). Strocchia argues that “by neglecting healthcare practices at institutional sites such as hospitals and custodial institutions, scholars have underestimated both the prevalence of women’s pharmaceutical expertise and the medical resources dispersed throughout Italian cities” (201). In general, the humble condition of these health workers helped to “undercut the perceived value of nurses’ sensory-based knowledge” (207), causing the loss of a sizable amount of knowledge on early modern medical practices.

Strocchia reinstates women at the centre of a picture in which “knowledge flowed sideways and upward, not merely from the top down” (220), “one that both relied on and stimulated a high degree of connectivity” (221), and one in which women “became immersed in the medical marketplace as commercial agents and innovators” (223).

This book is a pleasant and entertaining read; the author conceals with *sprezzatura* the amount of archival evidence she has mustered, providing the reader with a palatable narrative of intriguing case studies. Because of the interest of the subject, one feels at times the appetite for larger excerpts from the sources, at least in the footnotes, which could have made some references even more perspicuous. This work is a great contribution for all scholars engaging

with early modern healing practices and represents a valuable enrichment of our perception of this field.

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**Thouret, Clotilde.**

*Le théâtre réinventé. Défense de la scène dans l'Europe de la première modernité.*

Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2019. 322 p. ISBN 978-2-7535-7612-4 (broché) 30 €.

« Dans l'Europe de la première modernité », écrit Clotilde Thouret en introduction à son excellent panorama des diverses controverses qui touchent le milieu des comédiens aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles, « le théâtre est une pratique culturelle relativement neuve et encore marginale, même si elle se professionnalise » (p. 22). Ce double constat de nouveauté et de professionnalisation constitue dès lors la prémisse d'une lecture thématique détaillée des apologies du spectacle théâtral en France, en Angleterre et en Espagne durant cette période de profonde transformation de l'espace civil qui a marqué l'Europe occidentale. Face à l'émergence de pamphlets théâtrophobes à la suite de la formation des premiers théâtres professionnels, à Londres notamment (*The Red Lion* voit le jour dès 1567), de nombreux auteurs interviennent sur plusieurs fronts pour contrer ce mouvement de censure et faire valoir la nécessité politique, morale et économique du théâtre. Leurs interventions s'insèrent dans un réseau complexe d'influences dans lequel les autorités politiques et ecclésiastiques jouent un rôle de premier plan. Le théâtre y est bien plus qu'une machine scénique : il attire l'attention sur les artifices du pouvoir, de même que sur la nécessité de renégocier ses ancrages plus ou moins explicites dans une société civile en pleine évolution.

En insistant sur la controverse entourant la publication du pamphlet de Jeremy Collier, *A Short View on the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage*, paru en 1698, et sur les avancées du théâtre institutionnel en France sous Richelieu de même qu'en Espagne sous l'influence de Lope de Vega, Thouret en