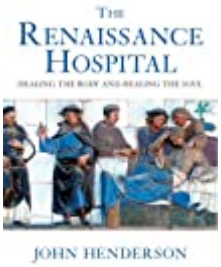
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Henderson. *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing The Soul.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xxxiv + 458 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10995-5.

Reviewed by Brian Nance

Published on H-Italy (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Monica Calabritto (Hunter College, CUNY)

A New Synthesis on the Renaissance Hospital

The word "beauty" is probably not the first that springs to mind at the mention of Renaissance hospitals. Leon Battista Alberti, however, noted that Florence contained many "beautiful hospitals, built at great expense, where any citizen or stranger would feel there to be nothing amiss to ensure his well-being" (quoted, p. xxv). Without accepting Albertiâs view uncritically, John Henderson argues that *bellezza* was a key feature of these institutions, evident in their architecture and adornment. Neither the bleak spaces crowded with the old and dying sometimes described by medieval authors, nor the Foucauldian near-prison of the Enlightenment, these institutions represented a new fusion of the secular and the sacred that sought to treat the whole person by dispensing both Galenic medicine and Christian care. Scholars looking for a model interdisciplinary study that places the history of medicine in a broader societal context could do much worse than turn to this excellent book, which incorporates institutional and financial history, patronage and iconographic studies, cultural studies of the medical, religious, and gendered use of space, and both quantitative and text-based history of medicine. The book focuses on Italian, and particularly Tuscan, institutions during the period 1250-1550. It is thus more geographically constrained than the title suggests, but the author justifies this approach by arguing that northern Italian hospitals served as models for many European cities. Original archival research is evident at every turn, and Yale University Press is to be praised for including over a hundred illustrations.

In the first of three parts, âHospitals and the Body of the City,â Henderson describes a medicalization of charity spurred by the growth of hospital construction that began in the century from 1250 to 1350. Hospitals would continue to serve pilgrims and travelers, but the new foundations treated the sick and the poor with staffs of increasing size and specialization, operating in newly designed architectural spaces. The Florentine hospital of S. Maria Nuova, for instance, founded in 1285 by Falco di Ricovero Portinari (better known as the father of Danteâs Beatrice) employed seven medical specialists and a host of other lay and clerical staff to treat the poor sick

by 1330. In the first detailed study of the extensive financial records of S. Maria Nuova, we see the multifaceted strategy designed to fund the hospital, which, after 1464, even included a service that promised a 5 percent return per annum on money invested in the hospital. Plague houses and *lazeretto*s founded in response to the two new epidemic diseases of the period are considered as part of a larger network of diversified charitable institutions, not as representative or archetypical. Hendersonâs consideration of hospital facades places such well-known structures as Brunelleschiâs Ospedale degli Innocenti within the context of evolving hospital architecture, showing the increasing importance of the *loggia* as a public space. Another section examines the ornamentation and iconography of facades, such as the splendid terra cotta frieze produced by della Robbiaâs workshop from 1525-29 for the Ospedale del Ceppo in Pistoia, a detail of which provides a fitting jacket cover for the book. Henderson notes that the prominence of lay figures in the frieze was a means of attracting new patrons.

Part 2, âHealing the Soul,â turns to the spiritual physic dispensed in the interior of the hospitals, in such key architectural spaces as the church, the chapel, the cloister, and the ward. Examining the origins of the cruciform ward, for instance, Henderson argues that the design of the Ospedale Maggiore, begun by Francesco Sforza in the early 1450s, probably owed more to other Lombard hospitals than to the then incomplete ward of the S. Maria Nuova. Part 2 concludes with a very welcome study of hospital nursing staffs, in which lay men and women served the sick under a wide variety of contracts and arrangements. In part 3, âHealing the Body,â the author turns to the medical treatment of the poor, charting the tremendous growth in the number of physicians, apothecaries, barbers, and surgeons who labored in the new foundations. Henderson stresses the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship between physicians and the hospitals, and argues that contemporary opinion placed many of the best physicians in the hospitals, which offered the healers a change to gain wide experience quickly while serving the poor. Another section provides valuable statistics on the kinds of diseases that the hospitals treated, distinguishing the treatment of the poor sick from those suffering from chronic or epidemic disease. An important argument here is that the Galenic notion of the non-naturals played a key role in fusing learned medicine with Christian piety. Including diet, sleep, exercise, emotions, and other things deemed to be partially responsive to human will and habit, the non-naturals were often the headings under which the regimen of spiritual care was administered.

As hospitals have received less attention from medical historians than subjects such as the universities and medical humanism, this important book will provide a basis for further research for many years to come. For Henderson, the Renaissance hospital grew from medieval roots rather than breaking sharply with them. The broader network of care is the subject here, not simply measures taken during a crisis or epidemic and usually associated with a harder, state-controlled attitude towards the poor. Hendersonâs medicalization is not synonymous with secularization, and the church continued to be deeply involved in founding new charitable institutions. The notion that hospitals should minister both to the body and to the soul enjoyed widespread support from a variety of urban stakeholders, who agreed that a good hospital was a beautiful thing.