

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Sandra Cavallo, Tessa Storey.** *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 448 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-967813-6.

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**Published on** H-Italy (January, 2015)

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Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey have written an engaging intellectual history and cultural anthropology of healthcare spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Turning scholarly attention from public institutions and the urban environment to private homes and practices, the authors vividly reconstruct what health meant to (mostly elite) urban contemporaries and the extent to which their views were shaped by learned medical discourses. Humans and their culture are ultimately the main subjects of this account, but Cavallo and Storey also allocate a major role to medical advice literature, a dynamic genre that thrived throughout most of the period under discussion, circulating in increasingly affordable printed volumes.[1] Beyond making the careers of some medical professionals, these worksâ availability and accessibility, being often vernacular compositions, allowed ideas and debates about best practices in preventative healthcare to inform diverse social strata. Both direct and indirect evidence strongly suggest that insights derived from these texts were appropriated by the urban aristocracy, professional classes, and, perhaps in more limited ways, the urban working classes.

The rich evidence marshaled in this volume far exceeds the numerous guides for healthy living that Cavallo and Storey introduce in chapter 1 and ably analyze throughout the book. Prescriptive texts, after all, have limited significance in the absence of testimonies regarding their application by contemporaries. Of the available ways to gauge the gap between medical theory and social practices, the authors chose two types of sources in particular, each with its own set of interpretative challenges and historiographies (dealt with in chapter 2), namely letters and domestic material culture. A century of corre-

spondence between members of the extended Spada family, variously residing in Roman *palazzi* and salubrious country villas, traces the reception of and occasional resistance to medical advice literature across several generations. Other than underscoring the topicality of well-being in the Spadasâ communications, these texts throw much new light on the cultural role played by the pursuit of health. As the authors rightly stress, skin care, eating, and exercise (for instance, in oneâs private but often visible and even accessible garden) participated in defining oneâs class and forged oneâs cultural identity.

A similar conclusion emerges from the study of material culture, perhaps the bookâs most original and innovative aspect. That health was a marker of class meant, for instance, that elites could commission, refurbish, and furnish their homes according to the latest advice book. The authors accordingly and persuasively propose looking at health regimens as a palimpsest of elite urban and rural architecture, including its orientation and layout, ventilation, heating, and illumination. Examined from the same perspective, pictorial art, household inventories, and period pieces found today in various collections bear the imprint of domestic healthscaping. Combs, brushes, caps, covers, chairs, linen, towels, and wall coverings were just as important to prophylactic care as were beds, braziers, and washstands. Moreover, neither were these accouterments identical nor their uses similar throughout this period, as certain itemsâ rise and fall from the aristocracyâs grace reflected several developments in medical thought. A massive debate about the relative merits of cold versus warm drinks, for instance, has left an indelible mark on elite tableware. And bathtubs, to take another example, were first integrated and

later exiled from elite house interiors, as the popularity of bathing as a prophylactic measure waxed and waned among this group.

These and numerous other insights (including the possible influence that Counter-Reformation teachings had on individual comportment) are developed in chapters 3 to 8, which deal respectively with air quality, sleeping, movement, manners or emotions, drinking, and personal hygiene. In each chapter the authors distill the reigning consensus or key debates about these topics, which approximate Galenic medicine's six non-naturals, and then move to examine their impact on contemporary practices. In so doing, the authors not only solidify the book's structure, but also underscore a crucial point in the history of medicine. Since antiquity, medical practitioners were trained to follow Hygeia as much as Asclepius—that is, they were taught to pursue disease prevention as much as curative interventions. That life in and beyond the Spada households combined both these aspects of healthcare reflects the enduring legacy of premodern medical thought. Galenism's staying power, however, can be seen in two different ways. On the one hand, it influenced an informed resistance to medical interventions and an overreliance on doctors. On the other hand, elites' alternative guides were more often than not trained medical professionals. Cavallo and Storey, following Andrew Wear and others, see this as participating in the medicalization of European society, a not-altogether positive process, but one that nonetheless marks sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy as an arena for the study of modernization processes.[2] It is perhaps for this reason that the authors repeatedly stress the unique qualities of texts and practices in this period (the late Renaissance) as distinct from earlier ones, whether they are framed as belonging to the late Middle Ages or the early Renaissance.

This original and well-illustrated book (twenty-three color plates and over sixty figures) will satisfy anyone's curiosity about a visible and well-documented urban

elite. Given the wealth of ego-documents attesting this group's health regimens, the evidential base of such a study can be far broader, but Cavallo and Storey have paved a highly rewarding path for engaging the relevant texts and material evidence. Although the authors certainly gesture at the role learned medical discourses played among non-elites, the latter's direct appropriations are mostly absent from the account, as are indeed healthscaping practices that defy or at least complicate the top-down process of acculturation that it implies. That is not to say these are impossible to reconstruct, and various sources, including skeletal, plant, and architectural remains, court protocols, testaments, and of course health board records, have and continue to inform the literature on premodern public health.[3]

#### Notes

[1]. The genre itself flourished in and beyond Italy centuries beforehand, as the authors rightly note. See Marilyn Nicoud, *Les Régimes de santé au Moyen Âge: Naissance et diffusion d'une écriture médicale (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, 2 vols. (Rome: École française de Rome, 2007). Beyond Italy, on which the bibliography focuses, see also Michael Solomon, *Fictions of Well-Being: Sickly Readers and Vernacular Medical Writing in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); and Christopher Bonfield, "The Regimen sanitatis and its dissemination in England, c. 1348-1550" (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2006).

[2]. Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3]. See, most recently, Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (London: Boydell, 2014); and an updated bibliography at [https://www.academia.edu/1784639/The\\_History\\_of\\_Public\\_Health\\_in\\_Pre-Industrial\\_Societies](https://www.academia.edu/1784639/The_History_of_Public_Health_in_Pre-Industrial_Societies).

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**Citation:** Guy Geltner. Review of Cavallo, Sandra; Storey, Tessa, *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42492>



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