

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Valeria Finucci. *The Prince's Body: Vincenzo Gonzaga and Renaissance Medicine.* I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 273 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-72545-4.

Reviewed by Tommaso Duranti (University of Bologna)

Published on H-Histsex (June, 2016)

Commissioned by Katherine Harvey (Birkbeck, University of London)

“This is a book on the body”: thus Valeria Finucci introduces her work (p. 4), revealing to the reader her chosen interpretative pattern for this biography of Vincenzo Gonzaga (1562-1612). The life of this Duke of Mantova, a brilliant example of a Renaissance prince, is structured around four salient moments, set in chronological order, and each offering a poignant psychological perspective: four different variations that allow the writer to tap into the characteristic complexity of the topic of the body. The object, Finucci further writes, is not Gonzaga’s political body but his “natural body,” the mortal one, subject to sickness, deterioration, and aging. In truth, Finucci quickly illustrates the extent to which the prince’s natural body is also a public one, political and politicized, a body upon which not only the subject’s personal idiosyncrasies are enacted but also those of the Italian and European political stage. It is perhaps also a body that projects itself and is projected from private to public space without continuity. Thus from Finucci’s inquiry emerges a physical portrait in the most profound sense: the portrait of a body that is intimate, psychological, and private, but also a public object of propaganda and judgment. The body is the primary and most powerful medium of communication between the individual and the rest of society: even more so the body of the prince, the weakness of which can offer leverage for the overthrow of his authority, if not the government itself.

In chapter 1, Finucci deals with the most notorious sex scandal of Renaissance Italy. In 1581, nineteen-year-old Vincenzo, future Duke of Mantova, married the young Margherita Farnese. A union designed to seal a political pact between the two most influential noble dy-

nasties of northern Italy, it transformed into an explosive event, both dramatic and grotesque in form, with significant political consequences. It was also destined to permanently shape the lives of the two key players. The marriage was unconsummated, due to issues of a corporeal nature. Physicians were summoned to Mantova and Parma but failed to cure the problem. The genitals and sexual performance of the duke and duchess were put on display in front of the whole of Italy. Margherita endured humiliating examinations and became, above all, the scapegoat of the entire ordeal. Her inviolable hymen transformed virginity, one of the most celebrated Christian virtues (as far as women were concerned), into a stigma and a fault: a woman who cannot be penetrated becomes useless, being unable to fulfill the role of genitrix (and object of the husband’s physical possession) to which she is bound by society. The unreadable female body (in this case unreadable by medicine) becomes automatically anomalous and deformed. The marriage, unconsummated because of Margherita’s body, was undone. The young woman, no longer fit for the family’s political purposes, was relegated to a monastery. Vincenzo, on the other hand, was to all appearances unburdened by the suspicion of sexual impotence.

This was the case just in appearance, however. The spread of rumors through the Italian courts unleashed two kinds of problems: psychopathological and political. Understandably, there were consequences for the psychological and physical equilibrium of a young man whose sexuality was publicly mocked. Politically, Vincenzo’s impotence could signify his inability to provide heirs for his own dynasty, with potentially significant

consequences for the Italian nobility. These two perspectives became definitively tangible in the moment of conception of a new matrimonial scheme. Before consenting to the union, the family of the new bride, Eleonora deâ Medici, demanded proof that Vincenzo was capable of a satisfactory penetrative performance for procreative means. The procedure of medical inquiry previously endured by Margherita was now aimed at Vincenzo, who was compelled to prove his sexual capability in front of Italian public opinion. The young prince, victim of the gender stereotype linking virile masculinity to sexual prowess, was to demonstrate his penetrative abilities, silencing malicious conjectures and flaunting an insatiable sexual appetite. It was enough, Finucci acknowledges, to compel a young man to transform himself into the alpha male stereotype.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the aesthetic and medical problems of Vincenzo in his thirties, in particular dermatological infections and, above all, a problem linked to his noseâs shape and functionality. Finucci traces the significance of the nose in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance from a non-exclusively medical perspective. The mutilation of the nose was one of the ignominious punishments provided by European legislation, because, according to the principles of physiognomy and public opinion, its absence indicated sexual profligacy, and therefore a broader lack of morals. It could be the visible marking of a person defeated in combat, and as such undermined the subjectâs masculinity. Lastly, the absence of a nose (or a particularly sunken nose) could be a sign of sickness, an infamous one too, syphilis in particular. For a man such as Vincenzo, an aesthete prince, a face that did not conform to the aesthetic standards of the time was in grave contradiction with the image that he had of himself and wanted to convey. His image, after the traumatizing experiences of his youth, was supposed to comply with the male chauvinistic stereotype of a sexually active male: the sexual symbolism of the nose is, indeed, not an invention of Sigmund Freud. Therefore, one can understand why the problem was, from several different angles, a particularly urgent one for the young duke. To solve it, he summoned the most notorious surgeon of the time, Gaspare Tagliacozzi. Tagliacozzi was a professor at the University of Bologna and author of *De curtorum chirurgia per insitionem* (1597), which he dedicated to the Duke of Mantova. He was also renowned for his expertise in reconstructive surgery. Finucci describes various methods of reconstructive surgical interventions, including Tagliacozziâs favored approach, which was based on taking tissue from the arms.

In chapter 3, one of the *musts* of bodily treatments since classical antiquity is discussed: the thermal bath. During the Middle Ages, thermal baths were recommended for the therapy of both body and spirit. The numerous medieval assays on this topic continued to influence therapeutic practice at the beginning of the modern era. Vincenzo, like his contemporaries, gladly turned to thermal baths, doing so both in different Italian regions and abroad, particularly in Flanders. A place of amusement and delight, in addition to therapy, the baths were a place where members of the European elite met. Vincenzo went there frequently, in an attempt to contain his dermatological infections and also chronic pain, particularly in his knee. This latter complaint was probably a symptom of rheumatoid arthritis, or perhaps, as Finucci proposes, untreated syphilis (maybe also at the basis of his nasal issues).

Lastly, chapter 4 presents a forty-seven-year-old duke who must deal with the aging of his body and with the alteration of his physical and sexual capabilities. Driven by âmale anxiety, narcissistic excess, and a peculiar dream of dominationâ (p. 123), the duke financed an unknown pharmacist, Evangelista Marcobruno, and his expedition in South America, in the search of a legendary remedy, the *gusano*, which was supposed to cure the possible erectile dysfunction or the âpriapic libertinismâ of his grace. The mature years of the prince, whose youth had been overshadowed by a shameful suspicion of impotence, were also characterized by this problem. The sexual objectification of both the public and the private body of the prince, first endured and then encouraged by Vincenzo, ended up being a constant part of his life. Finucci underlines the phallogocentric ideal that drove the search for the exotic âViagra-like remedyâ (p. 122), perhaps neglecting the possibility of actual psychological implications for a young man who had to embody, as a man and as a prince, the cliché of masculinity = sexual potency. These events are known due to the survival of correspondence between the duke and the pharmacist from the years 1609-13. Finucci takes the reader on an informed and interesting journey through the aphrodisiac remedies of the contemporary pharmacopoeia; the sexual stereotypes about women (having a medieval origin but now magnified by the âdiscoveryâ of indigenous women); and the exploration of the new world, the unknown, and the exotic.

Finucciâs book, as stated above, is a book on the body. But it is also a book on medicine, sexuality, and power. Above all, I believe, it is a book that proves very well that the âdiscourses on medicineâ are not solely concerned

with maladies and therapies but can also be the lens through which we can analyze and better grasp the complexity of individuals in society, especially given that, in the last centuries of the Middle Ages, the process called "medicalization of society" began. The ample excursus that the author dedicates to different topics in the four chapters proves that well enough. The research is based

on an ample and varied range of primary and secondary sources. It is provided with a substantial and useful apparatus of erudite annotations, is structured well, and offers the reader an informed, wide-ranging analysis. Lastly, but with great relevance, it is a very enjoyable book to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Tommaso Duranti. Review of Finucci, Valeria, *The Prince's Body: Vincenzo Gonzaga and Renaissance Medicine*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46251>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.