

Artisans of the Body in Early Modern Italy: Identities, Families and Masculinities

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Reviewer: Guido Giglioni

Sandra Cavallo's *Artisans of the Body in Early Modern Italy* will appeal to scholars interested in the social history of medicine for more than one reason. The book is a meticulous study of the community of barber-surgeons in late 17th- and 18th-century Turin, Italy (in an arc of time that roughly spans from 1660 to 1780) and has the merit of interweaving several lines of inquiry into one coherent picture. First, Cavallo looks at early modern barber-surgeons as craftsmen concerned with the care of the body of their clients, where the word 'care' includes the aspects of comfort, embellishment, hygiene, disguise and enhancement, in addition to its strictly medical connotations. To better capture the comprehensive nature of this kind of care, the author has come up with a new label: 'artisans of the body'. Second, the investigation of the medical milieu surrounding the artisans of the body has led her to question a notion of the medical marketplace that, in recent years, she thinks has been applied too narrowly and mechanically. Finally – and here lies her most original accomplishment – the reassessment of the economical and social aspects characterising the activities of 18th-century barber-surgeons has provided Cavallo with sufficient documentary evidence to revisit the notion of masculinity that has been traditionally associated with the world of craftsmen. To put it in a nutshell, this study offers three main scholarly contributions: a fresh look at the complex figure of the early modern barber-surgeon (in its various personae as hospital surgeon, anatomical demonstrator at university, surgeon working for the relief of the poor, or employed in military healthcare), a revision of the traditional economical and social model underlying the activities of such a profession, and, finally, a more rounded understanding of related questions of gender and masculine identity.

Cavallo's study is original in that the scope of investigation is dramatically broadened. She rightly argues that the emphasis on the strictly medical aspects of the surgeon's job has overshadowed other relevant features of the profession, while excessive focus on the growth of professional specialisation has obfuscated the system of occupational contiguities connecting a whole network of trades related to barber-surgeons. Barber-surgeons were part of a complex occupational milieu that she calls the world of the artisans of the body. To be intimate with the body of their clients was a professional trait that barber-surgeons shared with a community of related professions, such as baigneurs, *aiutanti di camera*, parruquiers, accouchers (male midwives), jewellers and upholsters. This interpretative choice means that a comprehensive notion of health care lies at the centre of Cavallo's study. The author shows convincingly how the notion of health at the time was broader and richer than our largely medicalised view of wellbeing. It should be said that, in applying the

category of bodily artisanship to the study of early modern barber-surgeons, she has recovered a very old notion of culture of the body. At the beginning of the early modern period, in his *Advancement of learning* (II, x, 1), Francis Bacon pointed to the existence of four kinds of ‘goods of man’s body’, namely ‘*Health, Beautie, Strength, and Pleasure*’, and to four occupations dealing with them: ‘*Medicine, or Art of Cure; Art of Decoration; which is called Cosmetike; Art of Activitie, which is called Athletike; and Art Voluptuarie, which Tacitus truly calleth Eruditus Luxus*’. Cavallo has turned this notion of bodily care into a powerful interpretative tool and barber-surgeons are thus seen as providers of medical, cosmetic and aesthetic services, an integral part of the culture of bodily appearances boosted by the growth of urban life, the establishing of a new kind of gentlemanly behaviour and the demands coming from an increasingly more refined and elaborate courtly etiquette.

Undeterred by the daunting aspects of such a revisionist project, she sets out to question long-established traditions of academic research such as history of migration, gender studies, labour history and social history of medicine. She is right in pointing out that many recent accounts of early modern surgery are still largely based on information provided by regulatory texts written by physicians to discipline and police the medical marketplace. What is more, traditional accounts in histories of medicine follow a series of long-accepted dichotomies to differentiate the work of physicians from that of surgeons, and the work of ‘learned’ surgeons from that of ‘practical’ ones: holistic approach versus local intervention, study of internal humours versus examination of visible surfaces, application of universal remedies versus prescription of topical medicaments, health care versus aesthetic treatment, manual dexterity versus theoretical knowledge. Instead Cavallo argues forcefully that the line of demarcation separating physicians from surgeons, and ‘learned’ from ‘practical’ surgeons was not clearly drawn at the time and is not always easy (or plausible) to draw in any case.

To avoid the risk of paying excessive attention to prescriptive and judicial documents written by members of colleges of physicians or protophysicians’ boards, Cavallo has decided to consult less biased sources – such as the 1695 census of all barber-surgeons in Turin, the 1705 census of Turin population, hospital, municipal and military records, parish records and notarial deeds – or sources that are biased towards the surgeon profession, such as printed works by ordinary barber-surgeons. To further prove that she is interested in exploring the ordinary lives of surgeons, Cavallo opens her book with a chapter centred on one Paolo Bernardo Calvo, ‘a thoroughly unremarkable surgeon, though firmly rooted in the professional reality of Turin’ (p. 18), who happens to have written two treatises, respectively on tumours (1702) and wounds (1711). By exploring ‘the life trajectories of ordinary surgeons’ (p. 8), she argues in favour of a biographical rather than statistical approach. This choice has produced important results. She demonstrates how families could have a decisive role in propelling successful careers and shaping the occupational milieu through mechanisms of intermarriage and inter-trade marriage. She extends the meaning of family by erasing the scholarly distinction between bonds of kinships and family ties. A recurrent point in her research is that a study of the world of early modern barber-surgeons cannot be limited to their professional activity, but should include a consideration of their social, public and family life. In a very creative way, she combines investigative strategies characteristic of labour history with the most innovative results of recent medical history. She examines the mechanisms behind the transfer of labour and expertise in the occupational milieu of the artisans of the body and shows how the market was regulated as it were from within and below, i.e., by mechanisms of family succession and work nepotism, rather than by institutional interventions from without and from above (such as the practice of granting licences) or by individual competition. Cavallo argues that surgeons’ workshops functioned as teams of practitioners and that, as a result, any control based on the release of licences was much looser than one would expect. She also points out that local experience and professional collaboration, more than the actual possession of a licence, represented a source of credibility and legitimacy for surgeons. Likewise, the way a surgeon was able to build trust and reputation within his community was more effective than any emphasis on geographical provenance and cultural affiliations. Cavallo calls this phenomenon ‘lightness’ of origins. She points to the existence of ‘locally based professional coalitions’ of related trades and professions: ‘It is these connections between neighbours, colleagues and artisans in occupations allied to surgery that loom large in the social horizons of the

surgeons, rather than those dictated by geographical origins' (p. 236).

While Cavallo assigns a key role to family relationships in investigating the economic and social organisation of communities of barber-surgeons, her emphasis on marriage as an economic and social force is not confined to the traditional conjugal and patriarchal model. In addition to husbands and wives, daughters and sons, she demonstrates in a very original manner the historical relevance of such family actors as fatherless young men, unmarried men and childless couples. Not only does she insist on the necessity to abandon the patrilinear view of kinship, she also advocates a model in which all the ties be taken into account, 'whether biological or affinal, patrilinear or matrilinear, cognatic or agnatic' (p. 10). She identifies larger kinship groups, with more than one father figure, often characterised by a broad notion of property, not limited to money and material assets, but inclusive of such key elements as knowledge, appointments, reputation, clientele and tools. She also emphasises the existence of relationships that connected masters and pupils through expanding networks of allies and colleagues, capable of bringing forth 'relations of authority' that were 'more nuanced than that between father and son' (p. 198). In this case, the biographical analysis proves to be a resourceful approach in showing how the individual could 'create' the ties that he or she deemed more suitable to his or her life and career. It is especially this attention to family ties that has led her to challenge accepted views concerning early modern notions of male identity and masculinity.

Cavallo argues that professional performance was an important factor in the construction of a masculine identity. Studies of early modern masculinity have pointed to marriage and fatherhood as the defining characteristics of manhood (e.g., man's role in public and domestic life, independence from father, ability to form a household of his own, moral authoritativeness and self-control). Less attention has been paid to bachelors, despite their considerable number in early modern society, not to mention such aspects of early modern male experience as one's reactions to the death of his father, temporary or permanent bachelorhood, delayed marriage, remarriage of widowed males and artificial fatherhood. In German-speaking areas, for instance, marriage did confer social respectability, political rights and economic independence on men. However, in the Piedmontese milieu, marital status and the ability to rule the household seem to have been less crucial in defining one's manhood. When confronted with the issue of masculine identities in the communities of barber-surgeons, Cavallo has found out that archival and documentary evidence does not match the traditional model. In historical accounts of early modern young men, aspects of subversion and restlessness have been privileged, while the figure of the *pater familias*, viewed as a central authority capable of imposing restraint and a sense of decorum on the other members of the family, has dominated the study of male adult experience. Historians have often agreed that the social status of a young man depended on marriage and his professional identity was shaped by his father's decisions. By contrast, in exploring the life cycle of young surgeons, Cavallo has found out that autonomy from paternal authority came before marriage and that young men could be quite independent in their professional choices in their late teens. Her important conclusion is that, '[d]espite still being overlooked in estimations of the weight of paternal authority in the early modern period, the absence of a father from the young man's life was in fact a frequent phenomenon' (p. 183). Making an original use of the little-studied deeds of emancipation (i.e., documents that sanctioned a son's release from the sovereign power of his father), Cavallo has looked at the father-son relationship in a new way. She reminds the reader that this particular family relationship followed different patterns in different parts of Europe and varied according to different legislative systems. Whereas in Italy *patria potestas* could last until the death of the father (unless a son decided to resort to a deed of emancipation), in other parts of Europe paternal authority would come to an end with the son's marriage or legal age (usually at the age of 25).

The author thanks Dr Giglioni for his thorough review and does not wish to add any comments

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