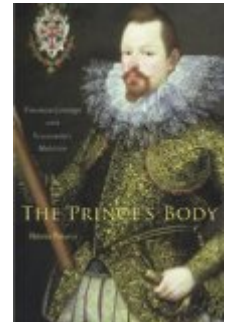


Valeria Finucci. *The Prince's Body: Vincenzo Gonzaga and Renaissance Medicine.* I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 273 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-72545-4.



Reviewed by Tom Tölle

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In the sixteenth century, princes fell sick like common people. But sick princes also caused political problems quite unlike other people. Valeria Finucci has written a new book that explores the intersections between politics and sexuality, medicine and beauty in early modern Italy. Using the ailments of Vincenzo Gonzaga (1562–1612), duke of Mantua, her cultural history deals with four consecutive moments in Gonzaga's life when physical problems determined “not only his self-esteem and body image, but also his strategic alliances and political leanings” (p. 4). This review suggests, though, that the author overall pays more attention to discussions of ailments than to political alliances.

Finucci first discusses the public responses when Gonzaga and the not yet 14-year-old Margherita Farnese failed to consummate their marriage in 1581 (ch. 1). Political concerns about the dynasty's future forced physicians to find exact answers in quite murky corporeal matters. Doctors would either find a remedy or canon law would render this alliance invalid (as ultimately it did). Physicians from up and down Italy exam-

ined the two politicized bodies and Finucci has unearthed astounding sources about it: from the gruesome testing of the strength of Farnese's hymens that found her unfit for marriage to the duke's later intercourse with a paid virgin to test his royal parts *in actu*. She shows how politics and medical diagnosis fuelled one another. Contrary to what the title suggests, Finucci delves deeply into the commodification of women's bodies in dynasties. And she offers a rich discussion about impenetrable hymens, female anatomy and undesirable virginity from Albertus Magnus to Farnese's contemporaries. This medical debate was political beyond doubt.

Gaspare Tagliacozzi, an early plastic surgeon who catered to the obsession of Renaissance man with beauty propels the narrative forward (ch. 2). Finucci argues that the surgeon and Gonzaga, who was obsessed with paintings, objects and his own body, were magnetically drawn to one another. Around 1595, on a Hungarian battlefield, Vincenzo suffered an attack probably of erysipelas, an acute skin infection and soon he also complained about his disease-marked nose. In search

of patronage, Tagliacozzi dedicated a book on rhinoplasty to the duke. Finucci suggests that Tagliacozzi strategically appealed to Gonzaga, a hero of Lepanto and, thus, someone familiar with mutilated bodies. Tagliacozzi's attempts at plastic surgery, reconstructing noses from parts of the arm, form this chapter's core. Beyond the intellectual ties between two hedonists, the author portrays intact bodies as cultural signifiers of power and sexual potency and their frail counterparts as highly malleable.

In a shorter exploration of "comfort cures" (ch. 3), the author moves further in the duke's life to a time when chronic pains drove the prince to travel in search of relief. True to early modern medicinal thought, she argues, Vincenzo went to Tuscany, to Baiae's mineral springs, Pozzuoli's sulphur caves, or beyond Italy to Spa to find distractions, not a cure. Displaced humours in the body, for instance, caused a painful catarrh in the duke's knee. If not treated – physicians argued – the catarrh could spread, slowly corrupting other parts of the body. But according to Finucci, catarrh or rheumatism could as easily have been gout or syphilis as well. Furthermore, those were only two causes for chronic pains. The world of the spa was, thus, as much a medicinal as it was a social space. Princesses and princelings did not go for modern medicinal diagnosis and cure. They often went to enjoy the healing power of sociability. Ulinka Rublack, *Fluxes. The Early Modern Body and the Emotions*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 53 (2002), pp. 1–16.

At an old age, Gonzaga's geographic reach expanded to the newly discovered Americas (ch. 4). In an "orchestrated denial of death" (p. 27), the aging Gonzaga sent his apothecary Evangelista Marcobruno on a hunt for exotic curatives to preserve his potency. Beyond tracing this individual search for sexual enhancers, the chapter contributes to larger questions about the transfer of knowledge: What could Renaissance Italians know about medicine from beyond the sea, who did the

knowledge transfer, and how did perceptions of colonial sexuality impact upon these knowledge brokers. Ethnographic descriptions of odd healing rituals competed with objects in cabinets of curiosities. Marcobruno's search for a poisonous, but allegedly effective worm (*gusano*) resembles the protracted process by which Europeans came to (mis)understand the 'new' world: Corsairs took the apothecary captive, he missed the death of his own patron, and Finucci could not establish whether he ever returned to Mantua with his treasures. But she shows that Renaissance men searched eternal youth in the unexplored realms of knowledge in Peru and Brazil.

Finucci pays most attention to the question how contemporaries responded to the medical conditions of the prince's body. Yet, at two moments she could have tested why such matters gained urgency: The discussion of the failing consummation of the duke's marriage is one example. Finucci convincingly shows just how many people offered their partisan advice. But where the author stresses the modernity of medical debates, the duke's reproductive capacity linked visibly for all family and politics. This Italian world of frail princes was, thus, inseparably tied to the feudal universe of the Holy Roman Empire, its fiefdoms and time-worn modes of legal mediation. Matthias Schnettger, *Das Alte Reich und Italien in der Frühen Neuzeit. Ein institutionengeschichtlicher Überblick*, in: *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 79 (1999), pp. 344–420. And it arguably ties in another aspect oddly unexplored in her work: providence. Readers will not get a clear sense of the role that religious practice held on a spectrum of healing. They may, indeed, be left wondering if the princely body retained any of its legal and sacral dimensions.

As Finucci herself concedes, the moment when Gonzaga embarked on his spa tour in 1603 seems to have been political as well. He was seeking the office of *generalissimo* of the Mediter-

ranean. Integrating both urges, the healing of bodies and of political alliances would have offered a chance to portray spas as spaces of diplomatic sociability, a path recently explored by authors such as Lotz-Heumann. E.g. Ute Lotz-Heumann, *Repräsentationen von Heilwassern und -quellen in der Frühen Neuzeit: Badeorte, lutherische Wunderquellen und katholische Wallfahrten*, in: Matthias Pohlig et al. (eds.), *Säkularisierungen in der Frühen Neuzeit: Methodische Probleme und empirische Fallstudien*, Berlin 2008, pp. 277–330. Furthermore, the rich work by Parrott has suggested some time ago that Gonzaga styled himself a defender of the faith, even a crusader. David Parrott, *A "prince souverain" and the French Crown: Charles de Nevers, 1580–1637*, in: Robert Oresko / G.C. Gibbs / H.M. Scott, *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton*, Cambridge 1997, esp. p. 161f. It would have been worth exploring the troubling tension between such overt claims to power and his visible frailty. To be sure, Finucci touches upon these matters, but she does not systematically engage how princely masculinity undergirded the dynastic state or failed to do so: What did it, for instance, mean to contemporaries that a frail prince was fighting the ‘Turks’?

Finucci often provides laudable contemporary contexts and uses theoretical language to unpack her sources. At some moments both seem forced. One can tie the fact that the correct dimension of the clitoris was only precisely measured in 1998 to the decision to confine Gonzaga’s wife to a nunnery. And both may well show anxieties about women’s political agency. Yet, the fact that Margherita herself was forced to freely accept (sic) her live as a nun (p. 60) bespeaks social constraints that are time specific and merit to be seen in dynastic, legal, and religious contexts. And from a deep immersion in theory, it may indeed be hard to accept that a nose sometimes does not signify the obvious. Overall, Finucci is too nu-

anced a scholar and too good a writer to put psychoanalytical concepts in everyone’s mouth.

Even hard-nosed political historians should, thus, read on. Beyond a nuanced cultural history of medicine told through Gonzaga’s life, Finucci’s work prompts the question why the politics of princely bodies has received so little attention in political history. She suggests that historians have at times studied royal dynasties without making the mortal bodies an integral part of the narrative. For the unconsummated marriage, she is even able to show how rich such a history of political bodies could be. All the while, she remains sensitive to the degree of cruelty that shaped such dynastic schemes.

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