

Book Review: Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy by Sharon T. Strocchia

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Strocchia, Sharon T., *Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 352 pages. Hardcover, \$49.95.

Emory College Professor of History Dr. Sharon Strocchia, in her work, *Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy*, successfully illuminates the intricate narrative of the local female healers in the late Renaissance period in Italy. Strocchia saw a trend in the historiographical literature to research male led “academic” medicine, ignoring how reliant society was on women’s use of household medicine (p. 4). Strocchia has multiple goals of her work. On the base level Strocchia seeks to create a complex micro history of the realms in which women were involved in healthcare in the late Renaissance, emphasizing that not all developments came from academic efforts. The deeper goal of the work is to demonstrate how intricate social relationships are in this underrepresented section of the historiographic literature. Strocchia does not present her work as the final word on the subject, but as a demonstration of the value of these underrepresented historical actors.

The author sets the initial argument by using the prism of class, focusing on two Medici women Maria Salviati de ‘Medici and Eleonora of Toledo, grounding theoretical information with examples. By focusing the initial discussion on class relations, Strocchia can ease the reader into the argument rather than losing them in the minutia of more obscure cases. Through the work Strocchia continues to balance the macro and micro narratives to create tangible connections between parts of society ranging from pox hospitals to convents, with women at the center of these crossroads. Strocchia’s main argument was that women were participants in the search for empirical healthcare knowledge in Renaissance Italy. On a deeper level, Strocchia includes class distinctions in the discussion to illustrate how active the participation could be.

To accomplish her goals, Strocchia divides her work by examining the different spaces such as the household, pox hospital, and the convent, in which women interacted with healthcare. This distinction is important because it signals to the reader that there is a variety of factors that make the spaces different from each other such as concepts of space, medical background, and other factors. By warning the reader of these distinctions, Strocchia preemptively defends her work, highlighting how unique individual circumstances must be accounted for before making comparisons. *Forgotten Healers* is a work that is difficult to categorize. There are sections in which the author examines individual cases of Florentine convents (p.92). Yet, Strocchia works to build from these examples to create a complex narrative beyond the individual case. The work is best categorized as an intellectual history, though it examines a variety of issues ranging from religious to gender relations.

Strocchia's research comes from the immediate need to create a holistic picture of medicine in the Late Renaissance. Rather than being a pursuit reserved exclusively for academics, Strocchia charges that individual female pharmacists were pursuing a higher level of understanding in medicine. By reevaluating these distinctions, Strocchia is able to create a more realistic narrative of gender relations and medicine in Renaissance Italy. The author does so by using a variety of narrative sources such as letters, petitions, and guild records (p.5). Strocchia's work and use of examples such as nun apothecaries can be understood by anyone from the layman with passing interest to those looking into rigorous academic discourse. It would be an injustice not to add *Forgotten Healers* to the reading list of anyone looking for a deeper understanding of Renaissance healthcare.

Forgotten Healers should be measured based from Strocchia's self-identified goals, the usefulness of the work, and contributions made to both the field and public understanding.

Strocchia's work exceeds any expectations the reader would have. Rather than attempt some grand unified theory, Strocchia emphasizes the boundaries for the research given. She explains periodization in a way that engages the public and does not sacrifice authority in her work.

Admittedly, some of the historical discourse would be lost on someone without the appropriate background in the subject. This is because *Forgotten Healers* came from a need Strocchia saw in the historical discourse and without knowing what Strocchia was responding to, some context is lost. Yet, Strocchia creates an engaging narrative that allows for a variety of different levels of interpretation and understanding in both the field and the public.

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