

Practicing between Earth and Heaven: Women Healers in Seventeenth-Century Bologna

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SUMMARY

1.—Lay healing: women on the margins. 2.—Sacred healing: women at the center.

ABSTRACT

In the highly stratified medical system of seventeenth-century Bologna, women healers occupied a low-rank position. Officially women could practice medicine only as midwives or as holders of permits for the sale of patent medicines. Women were a relatively marginal group even within unauthorized medical practice. Of the criminal proceedings against unlicensed healers only 12% were directed against women. In contrast, women were prominent in religious healing—as shown by the record of healing miracles attributed to female saints, and the importance of female convents as centers of supernatural healing. The different status of women in each case might be related to the different role of the body in lay and religious medical practices. While contact with the «holy bodies» of the saints was absolutely central in religious healing, «healing with the body» was considered a mark of inferiority in lay medical practice.

BIBLID [0211-9536(1999) 19; 119-143]

Fecha de aceptación: 30 de noviembre de 1998

On December 17, 1682 the Senate of Bologna granted the «honest woman» Margherita Luppi Bettini a license for the exclusive confection and sale of a patent medicine—the so-called «electuary of Martino Grimaldi the Neapolitan». Possibly with a view to justifying such concession

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to a woman, the senators stated in an unusual preamble that «The virtue of the soul, which ought to be admired in women more than the comeliness of the body, does elevate them to such an extent that, albeit it is their lot to belong to a sex inferior to the virile one, yet they are often wont to surpass the industry of men, especially in those things that require diligence and application» (1).

The «electuary of Martino Grimaldi» was one of the many patent medicines, or «medical secrets» available on the market of early modern Bologna. What is striking about this particular drug is that its sale permit was renewed by the city's municipal and medical authorities for more than a century and a half. The patent had been granted originally in 1614 to Martino Grimaldi himself, who bequeathed his «medical secret» to his brother-in-law, Gio. Batta Galvani, who left it to his wife, Isabella Fontana, «as one who always had a major role in preparing said electuary». Isabella's last will and testament passed it on to her servant, Fulvio Baroncini. He handed it down to his widow, Bernardina Guidotti, who in turn gave it to her heir, Margherita Luppi Bettini. Margherita left it to her great-grandson, Domenico Maria Galeazzi, who signed it over to his widow, Bianca Bulbarini Galeazzi, who finally gave it to her nephew, Giuseppe Moreschi, in the year 1755 (2).

As you can see, women were well represented in this Bolognese dynasty of «professors of medical secrets»: the fabrication of the «elettuario Grimaldi» was definitely a family affair, in which women played a prominent role. In fact, Isabella Fontana claimed sole responsibility for the preparation of the drug, declaring that her husband was simply in charge of selling it. When the widowed Isabella asked for a renewal of her license in 1641, the Assonti di Studio inspected her workshop, and were so impressed

ABBREVIATIONS

AAB: Archivio Arcivescovile di Bologna.

ASB, Coll. Med.: Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Archivio dello Studio, Collegio di Medicina ed Arti.

ASM: Archivio di Stato di Milano.

BCAB: Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna.

BUB: Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna.

(1) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 207, no. 38.

(2) ASB, Assunteria di Studio, Diversorum, b. 100, no. 10.

by the magnitude of the enterprise that they declared that «the whole apparatus seemed more suitable for the preparation of theriac than of a mere electuary» (3). This was high praise indeed, as theriac was the very symbol of the official pharmacopoeia, ritually prepared every year in the Studio with a long and complex ceremony supervised by the *Protomedici* (4). The fact that the «Elettuario Grimaldi» was often prepared by female hands was scornfully pointed out by a competitor, the charlatan Giovanni Garofalo, who claimed that his own nostrum was «entirely made by himself, with no women meddling».

While women certainly meddled with the confection and sale of «medical secrets», there is no doubt, however, that the medical system of early modern Bologna was massively, uncompromisingly, overwhelmingly male. From the end of the sixteenth century to the second half of the eighteenth, there were absolutely no women among the licensed practitioners—physicians, apothecaries, and barber-surgeons—whose rolls were published regularly by the Bolognese *protomedici* and posted in the apothecary shops for the information of the public. This presents a clear contrast with medieval Bologna, where we find evidence of women healers practicing under the honorific title of *medica*—a term that simply disappears in later records (5). In early modern Bologna, the only female practitioners who were given official recognition were midwives, and, as shown by the case of Isabella Fontana and Margherita Luppi Bettini, some women dispensers of patent medicines.

And yet the presence of women healers in early modern Bologna cannot be said entirely marginal. Against all odds, women were part of the official and the unofficial side of the city's medical system. Moreover,

(3) ASB, Assunteria di Studio, Diversorum, b. 100, no. 10. The Assonti di Studio were the senators appointed to supervise the University's affairs. In 1689 and 1697 also the *protomedici* visited the home of Margherita Luppi Bettini in order to inspect the ingredients of the electuary: see ASB, Coll. Med., b. 320.

(4) See CAVAZZA, F. *Le scuole dell'antico studio bolognese*, Milan, U. Hoepli, 1896, p. 262 ff.

(5) See SARTI, M.; FATTORINI, T. *De Claris Archigymnasii Bononiensis Professoribus*, Bologna, Ex Typographia Laelii a Vulpe Instituti Scientiarum Typographi, 1769-72, vol.1, p. 522, n.7, who quote a document from the census of 1304 referring to «Jacobina, filia quondam Bartholomei, medica». For similar evidence from 14th-century Venice see MONTICOLO, G. *I Capitolari delle arti veneziane*, Rome, Forzani e c. tip. del Senato, 1896, vol. 1, p. 341.

and most significantly, women were prominent among the supernatural healers—the saints to whose thaumaturgic powers the people of Bologna appealed in their illness. There is in fact a striking contrast between women's limited presence and role in what we may call the «earthly» medical sphere, and their high profile in the «heavenly» realm of supernatural healing. Exploring the seeming paradox implied by this contrast will be the main goal of this essay.

1. LAY HEALING: WOMEN ON THE MARGINS

1.1 At the turn of the seventeenth century, with a medical faculty and college already firmly established for over three centuries, Bologna was definitely a city of doctors (6). It was also very fully staffed with apothecaries and barber-surgeons: the density of practitioners in the healing arts was exceptionally high for an ancien-regime city (7). Exceptionally strong, compared with other European cities, was also the power enjoyed by the Bolognese College of Medicine—an academic elite that regularly appointed among its members three *protomedici* in charge of supervising medical practice. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the college acquired authority over the entire field of medicine, including pharmacy and surgery, thus taking over the jurisdiction and licensing rights of the guilds of apothecaries and barber-surgeons. The main consequence of the college's new power was the increasing stratification of medical practice. Traditionally, and in spite of the pretensions of academically-trained physicians, the healing trades had coexisted without a rigid division of labor and a vertical ranking of their functions. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, however, the Bolognese college managed to replace this traditional pluralism with a three-tiered hierarchy of professionals (from top to bottom: physicians, apothecaries, and barber-surgeons) with mutually complementary roles but decreasing degrees of standing and authority (8).

(6) On the history of the College of Medicine of Bologna and its *Protomedicato* see POMATA, Gianna. *Contracting a Cure: Patients, Healers, and the Law in Early Modern Bologna*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1998, pp.1-13.

(7) POMATA, note 6, pp. 56-59.

(8) POMATA, note 6, pp. 63-72.

The doctors' top rank in the medical hierarchy was based on the fundamental assumption that internal remedies were more important than external ones, and that consequently only the physician should prescribe oral drugs. If there is a fundamental rule in the set of regulations enforced by the Bolognese *Protomedicato*, it is the ban on the administration of oral remedies by anybody other than physicians. This rule was printed on all licenses granted to surgeons and barber-surgeons, midwives and charlatans: «*Nihil exhibeat per os*» («Let he or she give nothing by mouth») (9). Beside protecting the doctors' turf from the intrusion of all other healers, the new stratification of medical labor also served the objective of distancing the physician's role from the manual and menial work of the lesser practitioners. From the perspective of the medical elite, a huge gap divided the academically-trained physicians from apothecaries and surgeons: as put by Paolo Zacchia, the author of the most important medico-legal treatise of the seventeenth century, the physician «treats the body by using his intellect, not his body»; apothecaries and surgeons, by contrast, use their hands rather than their minds: they «cure the body with the body», and as such their work is on a par with that of servants (10). Medical rank, in this perspective, was crucially related to distance from the body.

When the medical college of Bologna embarked upon its program of control over all healing trades, women had already been marginalized from medical practice—if indeed they had ever had a significant part in it, which we simply don't know (11) In late medieval Bologna, the crucial factor for the ousting of women from medical practice was probably not so much their inability to enroll in the Studio for the academic study of medicine as their exclusion from the guilds of the apothecaries and barbers (12). The statutes of the barbers' guild of

(9) See ASB, Coll. Med., bb. 195, 197, for examples of licenses carrying this prohibition.

(10) ZACCHIA, Paolo. *Quaestiones medico-legales*, Lyons, 1662 (first ed. 1612-30) lib. 6, tit. 1, quaest. 8, p. 467.

(11) On women's medical practice in medieval Europe see GREEN, Monica. Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe. *Signs*, 14, 1988-9, 434-473; and GREEN, Monica. Documenting Medieval Women's Medical Practice. In: Luis García-Ballester et al. (eds.), *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1994, pp. 322-352.

(12) Since the middle ages and through the early modern age matriculation in all

1556 specified that only a master's sons and grand-sons (in the male line) could inherit the right to keep shop open in the city. In 1560, a clause added to the statutes revised this norm, stating that also «female heirs» could inherit «the right to keep shop open», but the shop had to be run by a male master (13). As a matter of fact, the rolls of licensed barber-surgeons (masters and apprentices) periodically published by the *Protomedicato* from the early seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth do not include any female names (14). It is possible of course that a few women practiced the craft on the sly. We know, for instance, that in 1630 Susanna Ricci, *barbiera*, treated women in the plague hospital (15): but in this case the exceptional circumstances of the epidemic might have caused a relaxation of the gender segregation of surgical practice.

Excluded from the three-tiered hierarchy, women practiced at the fringe of the medical system, as midwives, as holders of temporary permits to sell patent medicines, or as unlicensed healers. What is striking is that women seem to have been a relatively marginal group even within unauthorized medical practice. Of the criminal proceedings against unlicensed healers held in the Bolognese *Protomedicato* from 1605 to 1776, barely 12% were directed against women (16). Also the unofficial world of charlatans seems to have been predominantly male. Cases such as that of Margherita Luppi Bettini and the various women holders of the «privilegio Grimaldi» were probably the exception rather than the rule.

Bolognese guilds was reserved to men; women could be affiliated to some guilds only in the subordinate role of *obbedienti*, which included all those workers who had no representation on the guild's council but were nevertheless subjected to the guild's regulations: see GHEZA FABBRI, Lia. *L'organizzazione del lavoro in una economia urbana. Le società d'Arti Bolognesi nei secoli XVI e XVII*, Bologna, Clueb, 1988, pp. 60, 89.

- (13) BUB, ms. 3873, «Statuti antichi dell'Arte de Barbieri di Bologna approvati dall'Eccelso Senato di Bologna».
- (14) In 1766 in Milan a list of barbershops included the names of the «masters' sons and daughters», suggesting that a barber's daughter could also practice. However, of 265 names, only one was a woman's. See ASM, Sanità, parte antica, b. 243/44.
- (15) See PASTORE, Alessandro. *Crimine e giustizia in tempo di peste nell'Europa moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, p. 123.
- (16) POMATA, note 6, p. 73.

It is quite clear, moreover, that women healers were not perceived as a threat to the medical establishment. This is indicated by the fact that midwives were the last group to be brought under the supervision of the medical college. Whereas the examination and licensing of apothecaries were regularly entered in the minutes of the *Protomedicato* by the end of the sixteenth century (and those of barber-surgeons by the beginning of the seventeenth), the licensing of midwives started only in 1674. On 15 January of that year the *protomedici* issued an edict requiring midwives to take an oath of allegiance to the laws of the *Protomedicato*: like all other low-rank practitioners, they had to swear not to administer oral remedies, nor to draw blood, a task reserved to barber-surgeons. They also had to take an oath «not to pronounce any judgment as expert witnesses on matters concerning the deflowering of virgins without the advice of a licensed physician» (17).

The records of the licensing of midwives are irregular at first and only become part of the *Protomedicato's* routine after 1682. On August 18 of that year the *protomedici* required all midwives to show their licenses and on September 24 they published the first printed *Catalogo* or roll of licensed midwives, listing 50 names (18). They also started to exert some control over the midwives of the countryside, examining applicants during their yearly inspections of the apothecary shops in the villages around Bologna (19).

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- (17) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 221, Quinto libro segreto di medicina: 1661-1693; for the records of the licensing see bb. 320, 214 and 352. The authority to establish a woman's virginity seems to have passed over to surgeons. The medico-legal handbooks for surgeons written in this period teach how to compile official reports on sexual assault of women and children: see for instance CIUCCI, A. *Il Filo d'Arianna: ovvero fedelissima scorta alli esercenti di chirurgia per uscire dal Laberinto delle Relazioni e Ricognizioni dei vari morbi e morti*, Macerata, 1689. On midwives as expert witnesses in Italy see FILIPPINI, Nadia Maria. The Church, the State and Childbirth: the Midwife in Italy during the Eighteenth Century. In: Hilary Marland (ed.), *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 152-175 (p. 155).
- (18) Rolls of midwives licensed to practice in the Bolognese territory were published by the *protomedici* throughout the eighteenth century: in 1711 (listing 28 women), in 1727 (listing 60), in 1738 (listing 35), in 1772 (listing 76): ASB, Coll. Med., bb. 235, 236.
- (19) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 321.

Thus it is only in the last decades of the seventeenth century that we find some concern that the trade of midwifery be practiced under the supervision of the medical college. Why so late? Two possible reasons: traditionally, midwives had been licensed by the church authorities. Indeed, ecclesiastical control over them did not stop with the *Protomedicato's* intervention, as the license issued by the *protomedici* required a testimonial over the moral character of the woman by her parish priest (20). In Counter-Reformation Bologna, the College might have deemed expedient to avoid friction with ecclesiastical authorities over this issue. But there is probably a more important reason. Differently from apothecaries and barber-surgeons, midwives did not pose any threat to the authority and jurisdiction of the college. Although the art of midwifery had a semi-professional character, Bologna's midwives did not belong to a socially recognized trade association. Excluded from the guild system, they did not have a public voice—as did barbers and apothecaries, who were backed by their guilds' political and social clout.

1.2. What was involved in the *Protomedicato's* licensing of midwives? What, if anything, did it change of their practice? Midwives were caught in the meshes of the *Protomedicato's* control for prescribing oral drugs or ordering a barber-surgeon to draw blood (both of which were strictly reserved to doctors), or also for usurping the barber's role by drawing blood, applying leeches and cupping-glasses. The possibility of women performing bloodletting was seen with particular concern by the medical authorities because the drawing of blood from the saphenous vein (in the foot) was considered a well-known means of inducing abortion (21).

(20) See ASB, Coll. Med., b. 340 for testimonials on the moral conduct of thirty midwives sent by their parish priests to the *protomedici* in 1677. In Counter-Reformation Bologna, of course, also male practitioners, including doctors, were subject to some moral and religious control: in 1702 and 1747 the Holy Office required the College of Medicine to strike off the rolls two physicians who had got in trouble with the Inquisition (see ASB, Coll. Med., b. 258, «Ristretto delli Atti e Decreti piu' notabili fatti nel Collegio e *Protomedicato* di Medicina dall'anno 1565 all'anno 1792», hereafter: *Ristretto*). On church control over midwives in Counter-Reformation Italy in general see FILIPPINI, note 17, pp. 157-161.

(21) See on this issue the manual written by a barber-surgeon: MAGNI, Pietro Paolo. *Discorsi sopra il modo di sanguinare*, Rome, Per Bartholomeo Bonfadino, 1586, pp.

There is however no evidence among the *Protomedicato's* records of midwives practicing bloodletting themselves. Usually they seem to have relied on a barber to perform the procedure when they thought it expedient for the women they took care of. Thus for instance in 1668 the midwife Angelica Benini was summoned in the *Protomedicato* under charge of having prescribed bloodletting to a woman (the occasion of the inquiry being the woman's death). She testified:

«My trade is midwifery, which I have been practicing for over forty years. Yes, I did order bleeding many and many times, and in fact I do it almost daily according to the need of women in childbirth ... I never had a license for prescribing bloodletting but I've always done it freely with no license whatever as do all other midwives, and as used to do my teacher, who was named *comare Sabbina*» (22).

Angelica frankly admitted that «many barbers have drawn blood at my bidding», apparently unaware that she had broken thereby a fundamental rule of the medical establishment. About ten years later, in 1677, in another inquest prompted by a woman's death after delivery, the *protomedici* accused another midwife, Caterina Casoli, of prescribing bloodletting from the woman's foot. Caterina Casoli adopted a completely different line of defense: she stated first of all that she had a regular license issued by the College in 1674, and she disclaimed all responsibility for the bloodletting. She testified that finding the woman in bad shape she had «persuaded her people, that is Messer Alessandro her husband, to call on a physician, which he did ... The physician ordered a bloodletting and many other medications but to no avail» (23). Caterina Casoli was perfectly aware of the new rules of her trade. Within the span of a decade, the *protomedici* had managed to bring some midwives at least within the pale of the new hierarchical ordering of medical practice.

19-20. Even barbers were not allowed to draw blood from pregnant women without a doctor's prescription (see *Liber pro recta administratione Protomedicatus*, Bologna, 1666, p. 17).

(22) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 350, deposition of Angelica Benini. For evidence of midwives applying or requesting the application of leeches in mid-eighteenth century Venice see FILIPPINI, note 17, p. 156.

(23) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 340, deposition of Caterina Casoli. All charges against her were dropped.

Undoubtedly the ban on the prescription of oral medicines seriously hampered the customary practice of midwives, who used to employ such remedies in treating a wide range of female ailments. And there is clear evidence that they kept prescribing oral medications when they deemed it expedient, in spite of the *Protomedicato's* rules. When Virginia Calegari was in danger of miscarrying in her second month of pregnancy in 1717, her mother called on a certain «Angela midwife»: «I asked her—the woman testified—which remedy could be administered to prevent my daughter's miscarriage and to stop the bleeding from her parts, and said midwife took me to the apothecary, where she ordered a bolus (*boccone*) ... which I then gave to my daughter with a cup of broth» (24). In the evening of the same day Virginia miscarried; she died a few days later at the Hospital of Santa Maria Maddalena, where her husband had taken her. It was her husband Lazzaro who filed charges against midwife Angela Nannini (25).

As it turned out, the «bolus» prescribed by Angela Nannini had been «confection of chermes» (26) which was actually a medication traditionally used for stopping hemorrhage in pregnancy. Interestingly, we can compare this case to a very similar one which happened about a century earlier, described in the medico-legal treatise *Quaestiones medico-legales* by Paolo Zacchia (27). A woman in her seventh month of pregnancy miscarried after falling off her horse. The midwife summoned to her assistance administered «powder of chermes» and applied leeches to the woman's breasts in order to stop the hemorrhage; but twelve days later the woman died. The midwife was arrested under charge of having caused the death by «forcibly stopping the bleeding». The Roman *protomedico* Zacchia, summoned in court as expert witness, argued in defense of the midwife that the «powder of chermes» was a «well-tested, long-used and quite safe remedy» not only largely used by midwives but

(24) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 351, deposition of Anna Fornasari.

(25) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 351, deposition of Lazzaro Calegari.

(26) This detail is given in the summary of the case in ASB, Coll. Med., b. 258, Ristretto, p. 6.

(27) Zacchia does not give the date of this trial, in which he participated as expert witness; but as his *Quaestiones medico-legales* came out between the years 1612-1630, we can assume that the case happened in the early seventeenth century.

even taken by pregnant women on their own when they wanted to «inhibit the menstrual purgations lest they bring about an abortion» (28). Zacchia's opinion was that the midwife ought to be acquitted. About a century later, in contrast, Angela Nannini was severely reprimanded by the Bolognese *Protomedicato* and was ordered to stop prescribing all oral medicines under penalty of the suspension of her licence (29). In the early eighteenth century, the prohibition to administer oral drugs had become much more rigid. And yet, even when midwives infringed upon the prerogatives of doctors by prescribing oral remedies, their transgression was clearly perceived as less threatening than that of other practitioners, as shown by the fact that Angela Nannini was reprimanded but did not have to pay a fine, as was the regular fate of barber-surgeons under similar circumstances.

1.3. Like the expertise of midwives, also the practice of unlicensed women healers seems to have been directed mostly to women's diseases. In 1642, for instance, a certain Angela Righetti was sentenced to a fine of twenty-five lire and the seizure of the drug she «made and sold for women's purgation» (menstruation). A Frenchwoman, Giovanna Dupont, who was visiting Bologna in 1709, distributed a broad-sheet describing her ability to heal «all those women or girls whose uterus came out of place» by means of «a marvelous medical secret of her own» (30).

The restriction of women's practice to the treatment of female diseases was prompted by cultural norms that heavily limited women's activities. In 1687 Caterina Cattani Greca asked the *Protomedicato* to let her post above her door «a signboard listing the diseases that she cures with her remedies, offering assurance that they do not go beyond external use.» She could not sell her drugs in the public square like a mountebank—she argued in her plea—«because she was a well-born woman» (31), and honest women had no place in public. In 1698 Ancella Ferrari, denounced by the husband of a patient she had treated

(28) ZACCHIA, note 10, Consilium XXIX, p. 34 (second pagination).

(29) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 351.

(30) ASB, Coll. Med., bb. 236, 352.

(31) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 340.

for eye disease, ran away from home «fearing prison». In a written plea sent to the *protomedici* from her hiding place, she begged them to believe «that she had treated only her children, and only by using external and female medications» (32).

External and female medications: with these words, Ancella Ferrari pinpointed exactly the restrictions women healers had to face. Not only were they to use external remedies, like all inferior practitioners; being women, they also had to limit their practice to female patients or to the members of their families (as suggested by Ancella's attempt to convince the *protomedici* that she had medicated only her children). Occasionally women were allowed to apply «external medications» to both male and female patients, but as a rule they could go beyond the limited sphere of «female medications» only if they were under direct male supervision. For instance, Lavinia Olimpì was mentioned as co-holder of a license, issued in 1638 to her husband Domenico, for «treating, with external medications, several kinds of diseases affecting the exterior of the body» (33). Because of her experience with these medications, Lavinia was authorized to apply them on patients in her husband's absence.

There is in fact some evidence of cooperation between the sexes in the practice of healing, especially between women and barbers, whom we often meet together at the bedside of patients. When Stefano Golinelli broke one leg in Budrio, in the year 1700, his servant declared that «a woman called Madonna Virginia Nicolai Giovannini ... gave him first aid; and later she was joined by a barber of Budrio named Sebastiano Atti, and together they performed the required tasks» (34). Despite their marginal role in professional practice, women were constantly present at the bedside of the sick. In the *Protomedicato's* trials, the voices testifying on the illness and treatment of relatives or neighbors were primarily women's. In the menial, routine chores of treatment, women were the ones who actually took care of the sick body. Indeed, they were

(32) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 213.

(33) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 214; but see also for instance the case of Anna Beloi who in 1697 was issued a license to treat external diseases with no mention of the sex of her patients (b. 321).

(34) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 342, case of Atti vs. Golinelli, 1701, deposition of Francesco Tavolari.

caregivers, not just healers. Women and barbers presided over the manual care of the sick body, which the higher-rank practitioners disdained as a demeaning task. They «healed the body with body»—and consequently were at the bottom of the ladder of the old-regime medical arts.

2. SACRED HEALING: WOMEN AT THE CENTER

2.1. Among the women practicing on the fringe of the Bolognese medical system we should also include nuns who prepared drugs in their convents and sold them to the public (35). This was a practice tolerated by the medical authorities, but highly resented by the apothecaries who viewed it, understandably, as unfair competition. In 1697 and 1699 the Company of the apothecaries wrote to the *Protomedicato* to protest against «the monasteries both of friars and nuns who sell internal and external remedies». They even brought their complaint all the way to the pope, and their lobbying in Rome was successful, as in 1737 Clemens XII issued a «Notification» which prohibited «all regular clergy of both sexes to practice the art of the apothecary in Bologna unless for their own internal use», and especially forbade them any kind of sale to the public (36).

But beside the preparation and dispensation of drugs, more portentous healing practices were going on in the Bolognese female convents,

(35) ASB, Coll. Med., b. 248, «Medicamenti levati dalla lista de medicamenti che facevano le monache». The practice of pharmacy by Bolognese nuns is illustrated in a series of eighteenth-century watercolors depicting the crafts practiced in the convents: see *Abiti e lavori delle monache di Bologna in una serie di disegni del secolo XVIII*, intr. M. Fanti, Bologna, 1972. On pharmacy in Italian convents see BENEDETTI, Alberico. *Malati, medici e farmacisti*, Milan, 1947, pp. 540-541. Several female convents had an *aromataria*, that is a nun in charge of preparing medicines for the infirmary. The duties of the *aromataria* are described in a manual for the confession of nuns: ALESSANDRI, Gaetano, *Confessarius monialium*, 4th ed., Venice, 1728, pp. 448-455, which also reports some decisions of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars over the vexed issue of the nuns' sale of medicines to the public (pp. 450-451). Thanks to Elissa Weaver for kindly referring me to this source.

(36) ASB, Coll. Med., bb.342, 346, 224. The «Notification» is enclosed as «Allegato D» in b. 224, Liber secretus: 1725-38.

which were throughout the seventeenth century thriving centers of religious healing. We have seen how women were confined to the fringe of the lay medical system. Things are quite different if we look instead at the supernatural healing attributed to the saints. Even if we don't consider the Virgin Mary, whose cult left a long track of healing miracles in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bologna (37), women saints and *beatas* were prominent among the city's supernatural healers. In the early modern Bolognese pantheon, as described by local hagiographers, holy women vied closely with holy men (38).

As a source for investigating the practice of religious healing, however, I will not use the hagiographic literature—heavily filtered by the perspective of the church authorities—but the proceedings for beatification and canonization held in the local ecclesiastical archives, where the accounts of healing miracles come directly from the *viva voce* of eye-witnesses and of the *miracolati* themselves. Of the seventeenth-century proceedings to legitimize the cult of local saints, four deal with men (Nicolò Albergati, Ludovico Morbioli, Cesare Bianchetti, and the Jesuit Giorgio Giustiniani) (39)

(37) AAB, Miscellanea vecchia, Cart. 32 contains records of inquests on miraculous images of the Virgin Mary from 1585 to 1796.

(38) See BOMBACI, Gaspare. *Memorie sacre de gli huomini illustri per titoli, e per forma di santità della città di Bologna*, Bologna 1690; BOMBACI, Gaspare. *Memorie venerabili susseguenti à Bolognesi illustri per santità*, Bologna, 1695; MELLONI, Giovanni Battista. *Atti, o Memorie degli uomini illustri in santità nati, o morti in Bologna. Della classe di quei che da tempo immemorabile sembrano aver culto pubblico e titolo di Beati o di Santi con tolleranza della Chiesa*, Bologna, L. Dalla Volpe, 1773-1780; MELLONI, Giovanni Battista. *Atti, o Memorie degli uomini illustri in santità nati, o morti in Bologna. Della Classe de Santi e Beati che hanno culto pubblico ed approvato dalla Chiesa*, Bologna, 1786-1818 (hereafter: Melloni 2). Both authors list all holy men and women for whom there was evidence of popular cult, not only those officially canonized.

(39) Manuscript records of the seventeenth-century canonization and beatification proceedings are in AAB, Atti e Processi per Beatificazione e Santificazione (hereafter: Atti) b. 745, k/498/21: Nicolò Albergati; b.745, k 498/7: Cesare Bianchetti; b. 495, 498/5: Ludovico Morbioli; b. 746/2, k/499/2: Giorgio Giustiniani. Of these proceedings only the case of the Bolognese bishop Nicolò Albergati (1375?-1443) was concluded successfully in 1743 but only with beatification (see *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, Rome, Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università lateranense, 1961-70, s.v.). None of the other cults was recognized by Rome.

and two with women—a Franciscan tertiary, Prudenziانا Zagnoni and a nun, Caterina Vigri—but the richest evidence of miraculous healing come from the files of the latter (40). Indeed the most important canonization proceedings held in seventeenth-century Bologna, and the only ones successfully concluded thanks to the political and financial sponsoring of the Bolognese ruling class, were those for Caterina Vigri, proclaimed in 1712 Saint Catherine of Bologna (41):

Known in seventeenth-century Bologna simply as *la Santa*, Caterina Vigri was a fifteenth-century Franciscan nun, founder of a local convent of Poor Clares, the Corpus Domini. An extraordinary figure of intellectual—writer, painter, calligrapher, miniaturist—her personality combined a vibrant humanist and religious identity (42). In her first *Life*, written in 1469, six years after her death, by her fellow sister Illuminata Bembo, it is her extraordinary intellectual and religious charisma that is stressed: her role of healer is not particularly prominent. We are just told that she was full of tender care for her fellow nuns in their infirmities

«and hardly any day would go by but she was employed in medicating now two, now three, now four of them, some in the feet, some in the hands, some in the ears, some in the mouth; and she carried around a

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- (40) AAB, Atti, bb. 737,738,739,740: Caterina Vigri; and bb. 741, 742,743,744: Prudenziانا Zagnoni. On Prudenziانا Zagnoni (1583-1608) see ROTA, Giovanni Andrea. *Vita di Suor Prudenziانا Vergine Bolognese*, Bologna, 1650; BOMBACI, *Memorie venerabili*, note 38, pp. 76-84 and MASINI, Antonio di Pietro, *Bologna perlustrata*, Bologna, 1666, part 1, pp. 230-231. Proceedings for her beatification were not successful. On Caterina Vigri (1413-1463) see *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979, vol. 22, pp. 381-383, s.v. and SPANÒ MARTINELLI, Serena. Per uno studio su Caterina da Bologna. *Studi medievali*, third series, 12, 1971, 713-759. Portions of the proceedings of her canonization were printed as *Acta bononienses canonizationis B. Catharinae a Bononia*, Bologna, 1712.
- (41) See SPANÒ MARTINELLI, Serena. La canonizzazione di Caterina Vigri: un problema cittadino nella Bologna del Seicento. In: Sofia Boesch Gajano; Lucia Sebastiani, *Culto dei santi, istituzioni e classi sociali in età preindustriale*, L'Aquila-Rome, Japatre, 1984, pp. 719-733.
- (42) See BERRIGAN, Joseph. R. Saint Catherine of Bologna: Franciscan Mystic. In: Katharina M. Wilson (ed.), *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, Athens, Georgia U.P., 1987, pp. 81-95; WOOD, Jeryldene. *Women, Art, and Spirituality: The Poor Clares of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1996, pp. 121-144.

little box containing medications of her own ... and never did that blessed woman recoil from the stench and foulness [of their sores] but with angelic mien she would bear them all looking as if she were ready to lick their sores [with her tongue]» (43).

In the canonization proceedings, however, Caterina is described prominently as a healer; as told by a witness in 1669: «there isn't a sick person in this city who doesn't appeal to the *Beata*: many votive offerings can be seen hanging in her chapel, and almost constantly clothes that have touched her body are sent to the sick by the nuns» (44).

Caterina's thaumaturgic powers were crucially linked to her incorrupt body, which is still kept today, apparently untouched by the centuries, sitting on a chair in a little chapel inside her convent's church—where I saw it while writing this essay. In a dramatic and vivid narrative *Illuminata Bembo* tells how some weeks after Caterina's death she and her sisters perceived miraculous signs around her burial place in the convent's graveyard, and missing the physical presence of their beloved «mother» they dug up her body finding it—to their great joy—totally incorrupt (45). A chronicle of the *Corpus Domini* started in 1559 by two nuns recounts in great detail how the sisters debated at length how best to display the «holy body» to the devotion of the Bolognese people, who flocked to the convent to venerate it, and how it was finally arranged in sitting posture on a chair to be shown on request through a small window in the convent's church (46).

The veneration for Caterina's body spread well beyond the convent walls. In the canonization proceedings many witnesses said that they began «visiting the body» as children or adolescents, taken by their parents (47). When asked about Catherine's cult in 1670 the barber-

(43) See BEMBO, *Illuminata*. *Specchio d'Illuminazione*. In: *Le armi necessarie alla battaglia spirituale, operetta composta da Santa Caterina da Bologna*, Bologna, 1787, p. 122.

(44) AAB, Atti, b. 737, deposition of ecclesiastic Antonio Francesco Giovagnoni, 2 June 1669.

(45) BEMBO, note 43, pp. 139-149.

(46) AAB, Atti, b. 740, k/493/5: «Libro inscripto Memoriale del Monastero del SS. Corpo di Christo incipiente de anno 1559 et finiente sub die 25 octobris 1648».

(47) AAB, Atti, depositions of Antonio Francesco Giovagnoni, 2 June 1669 (b. 737);

surgeon Giacinto Fabbri said: «this cult and veneration consists in visiting and venerating her blessed body, in praying to her and hanging votive offerings, in having masses celebrated [in her honor]» (48). Another witness, the priest Alfonso Arnoaldi, pointed out that Caterina competed with the most prominent male saint buried in Bologna, Saint Dominic himself: «There is more concourse of people going to venerate her body than there is for that of Saint Dominic, or at least the same» (49). Several people relate having not only seen but touched Caterina's body, mostly with awe-struck devotion but also, no doubt, with some amount of down-to-earth curiosity: the same priest Arnoaldi, for instance, recalled how he «saw her without a veil on her head and her hair was long to her shoulders. This was about the year 1646. I tried to pull out one of her hair and it wouldn't come».

2.2. There are two sets of records that describe Caterina's miraculous healing through the direct testimony of eye-witnesses: a series of *fedi notarili* dating from the years 1590-1598 (the first stage of the canonization proceedings) in which the recipients of the miracle briefly told their story in front of a notary; and the much more detailed interrogations of witnesses in the proceedings of 1669-1675 (50). In both sets of records the mode of Caterina's healing is either by apparition in dreams or, more characteristically, through the application of objects related to

Sister Giulia Anna Maria Giraldini, Mother Superior of Santa Marta, 2 November 1669; Alberto Carradori physician, 13 April 1671; Gio. Batta Dolfi, nobleman, 28 April 1671; Livia Sarti Carradori, wife of physician Carradori, 30 April 1671 (b. 738); Giacomo Bovio, barber-surgeon, 27 June 1674 (b. 739).

(48) AAB, Atti, b. 738, 3 Feb. 1670.

(49) AAB, Atti, b. 737, 5 June 1669. Spanò Martinelli suggests that the presence in Bologna of Caterina's «holy body» might have been a crucial factor in the success of her canonization proceedings, as contrasted with the case of Nicolò Albergati, who was instead buried in Tuscany. See SPANÒ MARTINELLI, note 41, p. 727. On the meaning of the relics of local saint for civic and municipal identity in Counter-Reformation Italy see DITCHFIELD, Simon. *Martyrs on the Move: Relics as Validators of Local Diversity in the Tridentine Church*. In: Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, London, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 283-294.

(50) The canonization proceedings were started in 1586 but were discontinued after 1605 to be resumed in the mid-seventeenth century (see Spanò Martinelli, note 41, pp. 724-725).

the cult of her body. The most commonly used of these objects were, as described by the witnesses: «the Blessed Caterina's cowl, called *Pazienza*, with a prayer to be recited by the sick while putting on said *Pazienza*», and also the water in which the garment had been soaked; «the Water of the Blessed Caterina, which is the water with which the nuns wash her holy body», as well as the washcloth or wadding used for the same purpose (51). All of these things were sent to the infirm upon request: when going around the city to collect alms, the *converse* nuns from Corpus Domini carried the objects directly to the houses of the sick (52). Corpus Domini was by no means the only female convent that offered such a steady supply of healing objects. In the convent of San Bernardino, for instance, the nun Prudenzianna Zagnoni juniore, sister of the Prudenzianna Zagnoni of holy fame, kept a flask of the water in which her sister's bones had been washed, and also sent it to the people who asked for it (53). But Corpus Domini had the advantage of having a whole holy body, not just bones—a body that needed to be regularly sponged to be kept clean and whose garments also had to be washed from time to time. It is clear that by their daily, loving care of Caterina's body the nuns of Corpus Domini managed to produce a practically inexhaustible supply of objects that offered vicarious contact with the holy body and, as such, were perceived as charged with its healing powers.

For the nuns of Corpus Domini—and for the few privileged who were allowed to enter the cloister—direct contact with Caterina's body seems to have been the preferred mode of healing. In 1664 a nun of Corpus Domini, Giacinta Calcina, fell off a ladder and hurt her hand so badly that she couldn't move it any more. Her case is described by two

(51) AAB, Atti, b. 738. For the word *Pazienza* to indicate the nuns' cowl or scapular see *Vocabolario della Crusca*, Florence, 1733, s.v.

(52) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Livia Sarti Carradori, 30 April 1671.

(53) AAB, Atti, bb. 741, 742, 743, 744 contain extensive late seventeenth-century documentation on healing miracles performed by applying the water in which Prudenzianna Zagnoni's bones had been washed, as reported by eye-witnesses. Prassede Zagnoni (d. 1662), younger sister of Prudenzianna, had taken the veil in San Bernardino in 1608, assuming her sister's name and she therefore was known as Prudenzianna Zagnoni juniore. She clearly felt in charge of administering her sister's religious legacy, including the miraculous water. On her see MASINI, note 40, pp. 231-232.

physicians, her brother Dr. Giulio Calcina and Dr. Carlo Riarii, physician in ordinary to the convent, who had been responsible for her treatment. Riarii diagnosed the case as «semi-paralysis [of the hand] with loss of the faculty of motion». He told the ecclesiastical judges how he had treated the nun unsuccessfully for over fourteen months, at the end of which period she had remonstrated with him asking for a change of treatment. «And I—the doctor admitted—lost my temper and rudely told her to get off my back because there was nothing I could do for her» (54). Giustina broke into sobs and her fellow-sisters, to comfort her (and perhaps to spite the doctor) took her to Caterina's chapel and made her put the paralyzed hand «over the sacred hands of the holy relic many times in the space of about an hour», whereupon—we are told—she was suddenly able to move her hand again and «went straight to the kitchen to wash the cups» (55).

To bed-ridden nuns, when it was impossible to take them directly to «visit the body», the sisters brought another object connected with Caterina's cult, the picture of the Baby Jesus painted by the *Beata* herself after a vision in which the Virgin had given her the child to hold in her arms. In some cases, simply the fervent desire to «once again see the holy body» seems to have effected the miracle, so that nuns confined for months to their beds were suddenly able to get up and walk to the *Beata's* chapel (56).

2.3. In the proceedings of 1669-75 the ecclesiastics in charge of collecting evidence for Caterina's sanctity relied much more heavily on medical evidence than on the accounts told by the recipients of the miracles. Among the witnesses in these later records we find a high number of medical personnel (five physicians and two barber-surgeons) (57). And in fact the only healing miracles that were taken in

(54) AAB, Atti, b. 737, deposition of Carlo Riarii, 5 August 1669.

(55) AAB, Atti, b. 737, deposition of Giulio Calcina, 3 July 1669.

(56) AAB, Atti, b. 737, depositions of Simone Santagata, priest, 29 July 1669 and Vittore Vittori, 29 July 1669. The painting of the Baby Jesus is still kept in the museum of Corpus Domini.

(57) They were the doctors Giulio Calcina, Francesco Saccenti, Carlo Riarii, Alberto

detailed consideration were those for which direct medical testimony was available. Let us look, then, at how the doctors viewed Caterina's miraculous healing.

In one of these cases, the *miracolato* was himself a physician, Dr. Alberto Carradori, who claimed to be a «repeat recipient» of Caterina's aid. In the year 1655, he declared, he was healed from a very serious disease thanks to a vow to the *Beata* made by his wife in his behalf. Again in 1671, taken by «a very violent pain of the upper opening of the stomach», he was saved by the joint intervention of the *Beata* and his wife, who «sent to the nuns of Corpus Domini for a certain small garment of the Blessed Caterina which my wife put over the hurting part». He immediately got better, but the following day he fell into «disorderly conduct» by drinking some wine and contracted an «inflammation of the liver», which would have had alarming consequences had he not sought out once again the *Beata's* aid. He procured «some wadding that had been in contact with the *Beata's* flesh» and applied it over his liver, whereupon all pain disappeared. The ecclesiastical judges were understandably in doubt as to the number of healing miracles involved in this last case: two or three? To be considered miraculous, recovery had to be instantaneous and complete, not followed by relapse (58). They asked Carradori whether the inflammation of the liver might have derived from the same cause as the previous stomach ailment—in which case his recovery from the stomach ailment would have been only apparent, not real. But Dr. Carradori was not going to be cheated out of one of his miracles. He answered: «Absolutely not», and proceeded to explain, with fulsome display of medical terminology, that there had been two distinct diseases with two separate causes: the first had been occasioned by «a raw juice generated in [his] stomach by the eating of

Carradori and Galeazzo Manzi, and the barber-surgeons Giacinto Fabbri and Giacomo Bovio. Riarri, Carradori and Manzi had all worked at some time as «physician in ordinary» to the convent. On the role of doctors in canonization proceedings in this period see GENTILCORE, David. *Contesting Illness in Early Modern Naples: Miracolati, Physicians, and the Congregation of Rites. Past and Present*, 1995, 149, 117-148.

(58) The rules to discern miraculous from natural healing were discussed by ZACCHIA, note 10, lib. IV, tit.I, quaest. VIII, pp. 11-13.

iced food» while the liver condition was brought about by his «disorderly drinking» which «inflamed the sulfurous and saline components of the blood» (59).

The recipients of the other two healing miracles were a young girl in the Conservatorio di Santa Marta and a nun of Corpus Domini. The Conservatorio delle Putte di Santa Marta was one of the Bolognese institutions for the decorous upbringing of girls whose family's poverty put them at risk of losing their honor (60). At the end of November 1666 one of the *putte*, Maria Girolama Biasetti, a girl of about thirteen, began to feel intense pain from a swelling in her right breast. She concealed the disease «out of shame and fear» until the tumor broke out discharging so much purulent matter that it dirtied all the front of her shirt. She was found in this condition by her teacher, sister Clara Polini, who insisted on examining her breast, and believing the swelling to be a mere *bogno* (carbuncle) she applied some ointment and a plaster. A few days later the girl was visited by the house surgeon, who insisted that a doctor be called, fearing that the condition might be a «cancerous tumor» (61). Dr. Saccenti, Santa Marta's regular doctor, diagnosed indeed «a cancerous tumor». He ordered a purge, some draughts and bloodletting, but with little hope, believing the illness to be «chronic and incurable». He visited the girl again after a few days, and was totally taken aback at finding the tumor «turned tender and soft to the touch, pain, heat, fever all gone and the patient in much better spirits» (62). Considerably disconcerted, he discussed the case with the Mother Superior, who admitted that a little religious healing had been going on between his visits. The nuns of Corpus Domini, she explained, had lately sent to Santa Marta, whose inmates specialized in fine needlework, a small carpet long kept under the feet of the Blessed Caterina, which they wanted renovated to match the *Beata's* dress. Sister

(59) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Alberto Carradori, 13 April 1671.

(60) On the Conservatorio di Santa Marta see RICCI, Giovanni. *Povert , vergogna, superbia. I declassati tra medioevo ed et  moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1996, p. 77.

(61) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Sister Clara Polini, 30 January 1670; cfr. depositions of Maria Girolama Biasetti, 3 February 1670 and Giacinto Fabbri, barber-surgeon, 3 February 1670.

(62) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Francesco Saccenti, 15 November 1669.

Clara Polini had had the idea of using some of the threads removed from the carpet to make a pad (*tasta*) to apply over the tumor, which she did, and the following morning she found the girl much better. Sister Clara, however, discreetly waited for the barber's visit and only when he exclaimed: «If this is not a miracle I don't know what it is», she told him what she had done (63). As to the doctor, he certified that it was indeed a miracle because «the immediate cause of the disease was removed instantaneously». Originally, he explained, the disease had derived from a scabies which had affected the girl for a long time. The scabies had several times been «anointed»: «whereupon the infected blood, that formerly had found vent through the skin, had gone back to the veins, polluting the whole mass of blood», and finally settling in the breast. As customary in establishing miraculous healing, he excluded that the recovery might have happened by natural means, because there had been no crisis with heavy discharge of morbid matter: «only a little watery matter had come out of the opening of the tumor» (64).

The other case, which occurred in Corpus Domini in 1674, was the sudden healing of a nun, Maria Geltrude Ghirardelli, from a condition described by the doctors as «a lethargy that deprived her of sense and motion» (65). For several weeks she laid in a heavy sleep, forcibly fed with liquids, not stirring even when the barber bled her (and he declared he drew no less than twelve ounces of blood from her right arm) or applied even more violent remedies (66). In this case, the medium of healing was not contact with Caterina's body but the imitation of her behavior. Suor Maria Geltrude claimed that waking up from her heavy stupor in the middle of one night she realized it was Christmas Eve and recalled how on such a night the Blessed Caterina had recited a thousand Hail Mary in honor of the Virgin. Which she proceeded to do, stopping

(63) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Sister Giulia Anna Maria Giraldini, Mother Superior of Santa Marta, 30 January 1670.

(64) AAB, Atti, b. 738, deposition of Francesco Saccenti, 15 November 1669. On natural healing as characterized by some form of discharge («per vomitum, per haemorrhagiam, per alvi fluorem, per sudorem, per urinam, aut aliam quamquam evacuationem») see ZACCHIA, note 10, lib. IV, tit.I, quaest.VIII, p.13.

(65) AAB, Atti, b. 739, deposition of Galeazzo Manzi, physician, 3 July 1674.

(66) AAB, Atti, b. 739, deposition of Giacomo Bovio, barber-surgeon, 5 July 1674.

at five hundred for a nap and concluding the following morning, when she amazed her fellow sisters by getting up and insisting to go to Communion. Even more amazed were her doctors: one of them—she recalled with a dash of amusement—was «so startled at seeing me up and about that he staggered and stepped back so suddenly that he would surely have tripped had not a pillar behind him stopped his fall» (67).

The same doctor, Galeazzo Manzi, testified that he and the other physicians «ordered the Mother Abbess to prevent with the utmost care the spreading of the news beyond the convent» so that they could keep observing the patient in the following days in order to ascertain whether she was truly recovered. After due observation, however, he was convinced in all conscience that the recovery went beyond «the ordinary way of nature» because, had it happened the natural way, «it would have required a long convalescence of months» and especially because

«the ordinary way of nature in recovering from diseases caused by obstructions, suppression of the menses, effervescence of heat in a very fat body with very thin veins and arteries (all of which things were present in our patient) never occurs without some evacuation or discharge of the morbid matter in some tumor either internal or external, or some crisis by urination or sweating—none of which was observed in our case» (68).

In all these episodes Caterina's religious healing was certified and indeed received a decisive stamp of approval by the doctors' authority (69). Thanks to their specialized knowledge of nature's «ordinary ways», only

(67) AAB, Atti, b. 739, deposition of Sister Maria Geltrude Ghirardelli, 24 April 1674.

(68) AAB, Atti, b. 739, deposition of Galeazzo Manzi, 3 July 1674. His opinion was backed by Dr. Carradori (AAB, Atti, b. 739, 3 July 1674).

(69) Of course the last word on the legitimization of miraculous healing did not belong to the doctors but to the ecclesiastical authorities. Of all the healing episodes documented in Caterina's dossier the Congregation of Rites officially defined as miraculous only two: that of Giustina Calcina and that of Maria Geltrude Ghirardelli (see MELLONI 2, note 32, vol. 3, pp. 361-362). It would be interesting to know why those two.

the doctors could discern natural from supernatural healing and could therefore attest that Caterina's cures had been truly supernatural.

We have seen how in the case of secular healing doctors were mostly concerned to check that women kept within the bounds of their subordinated position on the fringe of the medical system. In the case of religious healing, however, they seemed perfectly willing to accept and acknowledge women's prominence. Why so? Doctors were specialists of the «ordinary course of nature»: the supernatural healing powers of women laid outside their sphere of competence, and therefore did not threaten their role. Moreover, in religious healing the hierarchies that deeply structured lay medical practice did not hold any more: external remedies, for instance, were just as important as internal remedies, as shown by the objects that carried Caterina's healing powers (water to drink, garments or wadding to apply externally). And most importantly, «healing with the body», which was a mark of inferiority in lay practice (recall Zacchia's sentence quoted above) carried no such stigma in religious healing: it was mainly by her body, as we have seen, that Caterina was believed to perform her cures (70).

Of course Caterina's body was a very special kind of body: in the eyes of her devotees it was a «glorious» body—a «beautiful and precious relic» (71) that prefigured, in its incorrupt state, the future incorruptibility and glory that the bodies of the blessed will achieve after resurrection in paradise. Such body was completely out of the province of medical knowledge, which dealt by definition with the mortal body, in all its vulnerability and corruptibility.

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- (70) Gender hierarchy seems not to affect religious healing: relics of male and female holy bodies appear to have been considered equally effective. Evidence from early modern piety, however, suggests that female sanctity was more deeply connected with the body. In his study of saints in seventeenth-century Naples Jean-Michel Sallmann has shown that the dissection of the body of a saint (which was often performed in the early modern period for devotional purposes) was much more frequent in the case of women than of men. This was because the bodies of women saints were supposed to display miraculous signs of holiness much more prominently than the cadavers of holy men. See SALLMANN, Jean-Michel. *Naples et ses saints à l'âge baroque (1540-1750)*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, pp. 307-308.
- (71) AAB, Atti, b. 738, notarized statement of Pietro Alessandri, tailor, 25 May 1595.

Interestingly, some of the same doctors who testified in no uncertain terms as to the miraculous nature of Caterina's healing displayed a much more cautious attitude when asked to inspect her cadaver in order to ascertain its incorrupt state and establish whether it was due to supernatural causes (72). The body, they said, was in a «desiccated» state and could not be properly called «incorruptible». How could they establish «incorruptibility»? In this case, they were out of their waters, as they would have been if asked to explain the efficacy of the means used for religious healing. All they could say was that nature could not do it: there they reached the outer limits of their knowledge.

While it is a fact that women were prominent in religious healing, we must also bear in mind that the confinement of their prominence to the domain of the supernatural made it also belong, by seventeenth-century standards, to the sphere of the exceptional and extraordinary. Women's prominence in religious healing laid outside the boundaries of the natural. It did not question the ordinary way of nature, nor did it question the ordinary subjection of women on earth. This is why doctors could accept it with equanimity and even, when they happened to find themselves in the role of patients, seek it out for their own benefit.

(72) In the morning of May 13, 1671 eight physicians (Carlo Riarii, Alberto Carradori, Alberto Fabbri, Carlo Mattesilani, Marcello Malpighi, Alessandro Guicciardini, Andrea Volpari, Galeazzo Manzi) were sent to the Corpus Domini for an ocular and manual inspection of Caterina's body. They made individual reports to the ecclesiastical judges in the afternoon (records in AAB, Atti, b. 738). Riarii, Fabbri, Malpighi, Guicciardini and Manzi expressed cautious skepticism as to the body's «incorruptibility», while Carradori and Mattesilani stated instead that it was «definitely incorrupt by supernatural virtue».