
The Professors of Secrets: Mystery, Medicine, and Alchemy in Renaissance Italy by William Eamon

Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2010. Pp. 368. ISBN 978-1-4262-0650-4. Cloth \$26.00

Reviewed by

Allison Kavey

CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice/

CUNY Graduate Center

akavey@jjay.cuny.edu

One of the great joys in an academic's life comes with encountering an elegantly written, intelligently researched, and highly readable monograph. William Eamon's *Professors of Secrets* leaves one feeling in the hands of a master at the pinnacle of his powers, when familiarity with material and competence unite to produce a book meaningful to other specialists and readable by a popular audience interested in the rich intellectual and cultural *milieu* of popular natural philosophy in Renaissance Italy. He provides interesting material to supplement our knowledge of the debates informing what constituted 'legitimate' medical practice and the relationship between experimentation and the acknowledged medical and natural philosophical authorities. He cleverly uses individual stories, which every undergraduate professor will gleefully borrow, to illustrate his argument; and in so doing, he demonstrates the strengths of narrow studies to make important contributions to our understanding of the complex relationship between experience and authority in the construction of medicine and natural philosophy.

Drawing from his earlier work on books of secrets as an important genre within Continental early modern natural philosophy, Eamon shifts his focus in this volume to concentrate on the professors of secrets who proliferated in Renaissance Italy. Drawn into trying to contextualize the biography of Leonardo Fioravanti, Eamon deemed this new approach worthy of his efforts, contending a 'reconstruction of his life can serve as a window into the remarkable world of late Renaissance Italy' [13]. He begins with a speedy review of the history of Bologna in the latter part of the late 15th and early 16th centuries,

©2012 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

All rights reserved

ISSN 1549-4497 (ONLINE) ISSN 1549-4470 (PRINT) ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)

Aestimatio 9 (2012) 352-354

when Italy was under siege by political upheaval, violence, and epidemics. He then situates Fioravanti in this complex cultural picture, paying special attention to the medical events, including a brush with the plague and a typhus epidemic that shaped his childhood and young adulthood. He also describes the conflict Fioravanti experienced between anatomical investigations, newly reinvigorated by Andreas Vesalius and embraced as public events by the Italian universities, and Galenic medical tradition. No fan of the new emphasis on anatomy, Fioravanti concluded, 'The only thing the anatomy lesson proved...was that doctors teach and write about things that don't exist' [46]. The chapter describing the often cited but frequently ill represented field of barber-surgeons is especially valuable as a brief and informative review of this group of practitioners.

Eamon's book provides equally valid insights into the multiplicity of arenas that influenced medical practice during the 16th century. Carnival is often discussed as a means of producing and governing cultural chaos, but I have never before seen it explored as a site of medical education and practice. Combined with Fioravanti's explorations into lay medical traditions, pharmacy, alchemy, magic, and warfare, Eamon's investigations provide the most exhaustive description of early modern medical traditions and the Continental scope of this kind of medical career that I have ever read.

Eamon also sheds important light on the patient/healer relationship, which has obviously drawn scholarly attention before [see [Pomata 1998](#)] but has a different sense here. Fioravanti was frequently viewed as a charlatan by other practitioners and sometimes by patients but he was also sometimes revered by his patients, some of whom were not accustomed to any regular medical treatment and others of whom had disorders previously deemed incurable by other practitioners. Despite the often painful experiences patients faced in the name of a cure, they were frequently grateful for a successful cure. They also spoke out against the tradition of secrecy that kept these secrets from being more widely practiced, an argument that pushed against the longstanding practice of artisanal secret-keeping which also influenced some surgeons and barber-surgeons. This pressure to make secrets public and, of course to profit from them, was central to the success of the professors of secrets. 'When they were sick, people wanted action, not just an intellectual understanding of the causes of their ailments' [167].

From Bologna to Venice, medical education to urban center mountebanks, Eamon illustrates the meaningful interchanges between cultural events and medical knowledge and practice. Fioravanti's complicated career, ranging from university to printing press, demonstrates the rich intellectual traditions that influenced 16th-century medicine. Magic, alchemy, systems of sympathy, pharmacy, and surgery all played critical roles in shaping the majority of medical practices outside of the university. The challenge that this posed to the authority of traditional medicine, especially when the former was widely available and the latter was expensive and often limited to wealthy patients, was real and fundamentally challenged the ways in which patients and healers understood medicine. It also changed both parties' expectations: Fioravanti himself claimed that 'physicians should care for their patients with compassion and love' [239]. Eamon's book is a welcome addition to the literature on 16th-century popular medicine and its intellectual antecedents. Its readability ensures that its important arguments will be accessible to a broad audience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Pomata, G. 1998. *Contracting a Cure: Patients, Healers, and the Law in Early Modern Bologna*. Baltimore/London.