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by Melissa Jones

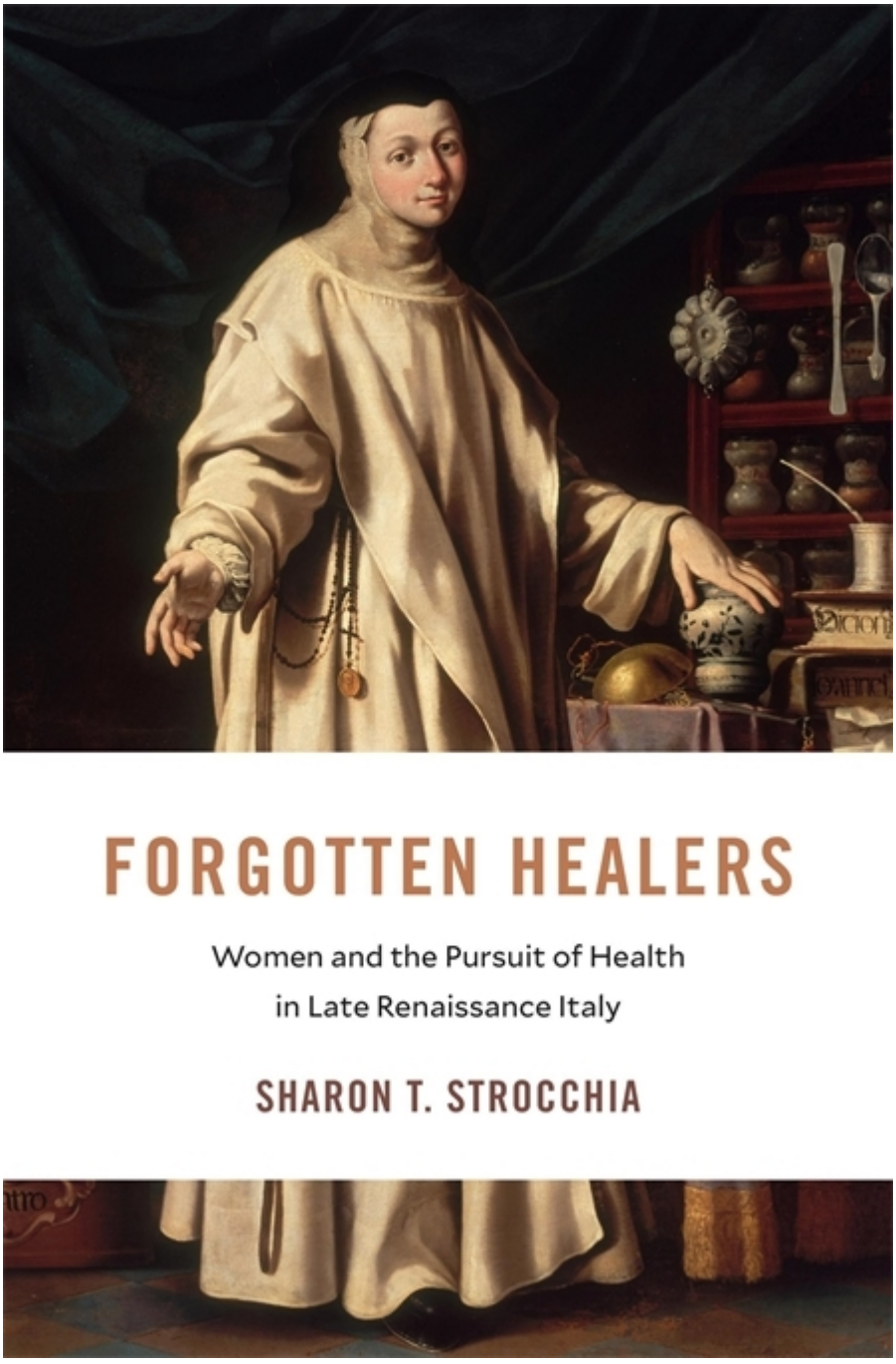
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Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy
Sharon T. Strocchia
352 pages; Harvard University Press; 2019
$49.95

Women in health care are having a moment. Images of bold nurses, clad in scrubs and ready for battle against the novel coronavirus are ubiquitous these days. Although roughly 10% of today's nurses are male, most of the images now circulating in mainstream and social media are female. The public is finally seeing

strong, well-educated and experienced women doing the things they have done for centuries — caring for the bodies, minds and spirits of those who are ill.

It seems strange to assert that a book about Late Renaissance Italian women in health care is relevant to the present global health care crisis, but striking parallels are found throughout *Forgotten Healers: Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy*. Author Sharon T. Strocchia is an Emory University history professor who studies Renaissance Italy's social and cultural history within the greater context of early modern European gender and sexuality.

Forgotten Healers reaches across the categories of gender studies, the annals of medicine and Renaissance history. It is an academic monograph, but Strocchia is a good storyteller who uses interesting historical figures to add color to the book's detailed research.

As is the case in so many other areas of academic research, women's contributions to health care have been consigned to the historical shadows due to their lower status, income inequality and constrained social roles. Strocchia's valuable study augments contemporary scholarly efforts to illuminate historical events and figures that have been previously invisible due to gender bias.

Using class as her organizing tool, the author discusses women from three socioeconomic situations: noblewomen, nuns and lower-class adolescents recruited to work with pox sufferers. If their roles were translated into today's career titles, the women described in this book could be seen as drug efficacy researchers, pharmacists, marketing and branding gurus, pharmaceutical supply chain professionals, nurses, medical publishers, hospital administrators, public health officials, among a list that could go on.

Strocchia starts with an analysis of the roles of two elite women, Maria Salviati de' Medici (1499-1543), who was the mother of Duke Cosimo I, and the duke's wife, Eleonora of Toledo (1522-1562). She notes, "Both women exerted real influence over preventative health measure, daily care routines, and critical decision-making processes as household practitioners." As a noblewoman, Salviati was educated and had access to many helpful resources including a broad network of influential personal contacts, books and other educational materials. She used these resources to develop expertise akin to the medical specialty of pediatrics.

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In addition to learning pharmacy and other skills from her highly respected mother-in-law, Eleonora amassed her own medical recipes and secrets. Through patronage and her strategic granting of medical gifts and favors, she used her health care expertise as an instrument of power both within the court and in the court's extended networks.

Strocchia explains that the production of cosmetics, wellness products and medicinal remedies provided significant financial support for many convent communities of this era. Some of the women in theses religious communities developed great skill in the production of these products. One example offered by Strocchia is the nun and pharmacist Giovanna Ginori, who came from a well-to-do local family and entered the convent at age 12. She began to work in the convent pharmacy early in her religious career and was placed under the apprenticeship of a skilled mentor who taught her how to identify and process herbs into useful and popular remedies. She ran the convent pharmacy, including its business elements, for 37 years and gained respect and fame for her skills. This nun's story is only one of the fascinating depictions Strocchia provides to demonstrate the place of women religious in Italian health care of the time.

The author explains that early 16th-century Italian hospitals were renowned across Europe for their high-quality care. At this time, Italy was also developing specialized facilities such as pox hospitals to treat syphilis and quarantine facilities to forcibly isolate plague patients. Female nurses did the bulk of day-to-day caregiving and were central to the functioning of these institutions, but most were illiterate and did not produce written artifacts like the noblewomen and nuns did.

In Florence, nurses for the pox hospital were adolescent girls from the lower class. They were recruited to this difficult and dangerous work with the idea that nursing service would prevent them from falling into prostitution. Nurses in the pox hospitals required numerous skills essential to patient care and safety, including pharmacy and infection control. Strocchia observes that in addition to expert clinical competency, "Renaissance hospital nurses also tended to complex mind-body connections by helping patients grapple with the emotional and spiritual fallout of suffering."

The novel coronavirus is technically neither pox nor plague, but nurses are still at the bedsides of highly contagious patients, steadfastly present to hold a patient's

hand and help families and patients grapple with the physical, emotional and spiritual fallout of suffering. Our pharmacological, technological and clinical practices are mostly different from those of Renaissance Italy, but Strocchia's book is a reminder that the spirit of innovation and the healer's mission to alleviate human suffering has endured over centuries.

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