

Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima: Santità, possessione, esorcismo dalla teologia barocca alla medicina illuminista. Elena Brambilla. Rome: Viella, 2010. 302 pp. €29.00. ISBN 978-88-8334-417-6.

Reviewed by: **Vittoria Feola**, Medical University of Vienna, Austria

Elena Brambilla's *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima* (Possessed bodies and travels of the souls) is a useful examination of cases of holiness, possession, and exorcism in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Italy. Brambilla's main argument is that as the power of the Catholic Reformation rose, Italian physicians became more prone to giving diagnoses of either possession or prospective holiness, thus showing the rising "clericalization of medicine" (97). On the other hand, as the enlightened eighteenth century moved ahead, physicians stopped speaking of possession and holiness easily, and instead tried to explain their patients' illnesses in strictly physiological terms. Brambilla's argument is that Catholic religious enthusiasm of the seventeenth century produced a scientifically inclined reaction (187-242). As a result, diagnoses of possession became instead diagnoses of hysteria, and medicine freed itself from clerical influences.

This apparently simple and rather obvious argument (the obscurantistic Catholic seventeenth century vs. the more scientifically inclined eighteenth century) is substantiated by a masterful analysis of case studies of women, mostly nuns, who showed symptoms of psychiatric disorders such as the multiple personality disorder, the dissociative identity disorder, schizophrenia, and hysteria. Thus Brambilla shows the influence of Spanish Aristotelianism on both medical and legal thinking. Her explanation of the ways in which Aristotelian theories about monsters were reworked in seventeenth-century Spanish demonology and applied by Catholic Reformation Italian physicians (113) is a brilliant example of the ease with which the author penetrates and makes intelligible rather obscure philosophical, medical, and legal ideas.

An interesting aspect of the case studies under examination is the relationship between women and their confessors. In Catholic Reformation Italy it always involved an implicitly sexual tension and, in some cases, outright sexual practices of tentative cures. *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima* is an extremely informative book for the detailed examinations of sexual cures that seventeenth-century priests practiced (some people would say today that they imposed) on deranged women with the acquiescence of physicians and judges. Here Brambilla writes with great skill and moderation about the possible transfer occurring between women and their confessors. Indeed a merit of her book is the detachment with which she tackles case studies involving people who are still considered as saints by the Catholic Church.

Brambilla never judges, even when feminist historians perhaps would. But she makes clear from the start her Freudian standpoint (19) and sticks to a matter-of-fact empirical analysis that will please her English readers.

On the other hand, English-language historians will find too much France and Spain, and too little England in *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima*. Spanish Aristotelianism and Descartes ought to be mentioned as major opposing intellectual influences on medical and legal practices of Catholic Reformation Italy, and Brambilla is at her best when she explains the manifold ways in which both impacted medical and legal practices. However, her discussion of the relevant English-language literature on magic, possession, and religious enthusiasm is deficient, as seen, for example, in the way she treats the work of Stuart Clark (129). Although it is clear that Brambilla knows her English secondary literature, she does not deeply analyze it for the reader, to the point of writing a far too long footnote on page 213, whereas a few paragraphs would have served us much better. It is as if Brambilla takes for granted that everyone has read English-language historians and, therefore, there is no need to relate them to what she says about Spanish Aristotelianism and Descartes. This makes her historiographical discussion sound deficient even though one senses that she does know about her sources. And this is odd.

An old-fashioned habit of Brambilla's is that she leaves all quotations in the original language. Although most probably all of Brambilla's readers understand English and Latin, it would have perhaps been better to translate them into Italian. Finally, Brambilla makes the curious statement that alchemy and natural magic were not practiced in Catholic Reformation Italy but in Tuscany (129). This claim goes against current historiographical finds and is indeed odd to reconcile with the seventeenth-century Italian demonological literature with which she engages in such an interesting manner.

Brambilla's *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima* is an extremely useful book for all those working on the relation of religious enthusiasm to medical and legal practice in the early modern era. Historians working on Protestant enthusiasm will find it particularly useful in order to enlarge their focus from Protestant to widely Christian enthusiasm in the seventeenth century. It is a good book that should pave the way to further research about the influence of religion on medicine and law.