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'Charlatans, mountebanks and other similar people': the regulation and role of itinerant practitioners in early modern Italy*

In 1692 Girolamo Bondoni, custodian of the customs-house in Siena, observing a charlatan in the city's main square, 'wanted to see if he was able to cure [his] wife'.[1] His wife, Orsola, a consumptive, had been ill off and on for six years, 'because it is a disease that gives truces but no peace', according to the family maid. The maid was later asked if Orsola had been treated by physicians, to which she replied: 'Oh, tell me, did [Girolamo] fetch the physician? It is five months without cease that Dr Caperci has been coming! And he called Dr Calvisi as well, and Dr Grifoni came once; but Dr Caperci is the usual physician.'[2] Orsola agreed to have the charlatan examine her out of her 'anxiety to get better'. This meant ceasing to take the ass's milk prescribed by the physician and begin taking 'a certain oil' of the charlatan's.[3] The charlatan, Lazzaro Tambi of Florence, known as 'il Dottore', took her pulse and said he would bring her the oil, which he called the 'Elisir Proprietatis' and which he said would restore her 'vital spirits'. She took the oil in some broth every other day, as well as 'certain powders dissolved in water', and Tambi visited her 'almost every day'.[4] However, instead of getting better, as Tambi had promised, Orsola felt no better at the end of the treatment and had lost weight. Her husband had none the less paid Tambi forty lire for the necessary ingredients.

What concerned the *protomedico* and counsellors of the Sienese Medical College most was how Tambi behaved and whether he took any payment, since the treatment had not worked. In early modern Italy charlatans were permitted to sell their wares, as long as they

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[1] 'Contro NN et NN, vulgarmente detto il Dottorino, pubblici circolatori', Archivio di Stato, Siena, *Archivio dello Studio* (hereafter A.S.S., *Studio*), 58, fol. 608v.

[2] *ibid.*, fols 612v–613r.

[3] *ibid.*, fol. 610r.

[4] *ibid.*, fols 613v–614r.

followed the necessary licensing procedure. They were not permitted to practise physic, especially not for financial gain. At the trial, Tambi was described as twenty-nine, 'fat in the waist, rather short in stature, dressed in black with a cassock down to his knees'. At first Tambi sought to minimize his role in the whole affair. He insisted that his occupation as mountebank was only a temporary one and he had been in Siena for one month, serving under Giuseppe Dangeli, who called himself 'il Dottore Lombardo' (the Lombard Doctor). Nor did he know much about the alleged oil, which was manufactured by Dangeli. Tambi referred to Dangeli as 'my master, because this is not my profession; I am with him because I am a good talker, nor do I do anything else'. Tambi began as a school master and healer before being invited to peddle remedies alongside Dangeli. If we are to believe Tambi's words, Dangeli wrote to him from Grosseto, offering to 'try' him for one month – a sort of apprenticeship.[5] Tambi eventually admitted to treating Bondoni's wife. But he played down his own role by saying that he did not have to ask her about the nature of her illness since she volunteered the information herself. With regard to taking her pulse – the physician's realm – he replied: 'I was led to understand she might have a fever, so more to please her than otherwise I took her pulse.' He administered the remedies the first time and instructed her how to take them – the court wanted to know about doses – but he denied having prepared them. He was forced to admit that he had received some money. In his defence, Tambi pleaded ignorance, saying that he had treated sick people elsewhere in Tuscany and that, as a foreigner, he was unaware of the Sienese College's constitutions forbidding unlicensed practitioners from administering internal medicines.[6] He was found guilty, fined twenty-five gold scudi and ordered to repay Bondoni. In fact, after having paid back Bondoni, Tambi pleaded that as a 'poor foreigner' he could not afford the fine, and the court released him from this payment.[7]

The above trial represents one of the rare occasions when the historian can actually observe the 'charlatan' in action, described by the very people who made use of his services. Much despised and satirized but rarely understood, the figure of the wandering, theatrical, remedy-selling charlatan was nevertheless quite real in early modern Europe. Indeed, charlatans are an important test case for historians, since attitudes to them reveal a great deal about shifts in mental categories over time. We only have to think of the connotations the word 'charlatan' has for us now, and contrast them with the connotations it had for early modern Europeans. Even more importantly, as an object of historical study the ambiguous status of charlatans reveals the built-in contradictions within the mental categories of early modern Europeans themselves. In general terms, through an exploration of this category, this article will account for the popularity of charlatans and the needs they fulfilled, as well as the contradictory reaction of the medical, civic and ecclesiastical authorities. As we shall see, this reaction combined revulsion and ridicule with a grudging acceptance. In particular, I shall look at the role of charlatans in healing and how they fit into the early modern medical system. I begin by surveying the general characteristics of Italian charlatans, before proceeding to outline the licensing procedure, since it provides much of our data about them. The data will be used to discuss the

[5] *ibid.*, fols 611–12. The profession must have agreed with him, since his son, Giovan Domenico Tambi, also took it up, surfacing in the records of the Rome *Protomedicato*. Archivio di Stato, Roma (hereafter A.S.R.), *Università*, 67, 3.ix.1716.

[6] A.S.S., *Studio*, 58, fols 619–22.

[7] *ibid.*, fol. 632.

different types of charlatan – not by any means a homogeneous group – their marketing of 'secrets' and their use of theatre.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

In his encyclopedic description of 'all the world's professions', first published in 1585, Tommaso Garzoni did not leave out the charlatan. Indeed, this off-quoted entry is one of the most memorable for its sheer carnivalesque mayhem. Garzoni conjures up a lively scene in a city square, where theatrically named charlatans appear from all corners, performing tricks and skits, and selling trinkets and dubious remedies, all competing for the attention of the public. Garzoni's square has become a stage, upon which each charlatan acted out a role in order to sell his own medical 'secret'.[8] In early modern Italy the charlatan was not always deemed to be perforce a fake, though fraud was often thought to lie behind his selling technique. A closer look at the word itself may be helpful. 'Charlatan' was not yet used to indicate impostors in general. The Latin word used to indicate a charlatan was the generic-sounding *circulator* (stroller, pedlar; the same root gives us circus). The English word 'charlatan' derives, via French, from the Italian *ciarlatano*, itself a result of the intromission of the verb *ciarlare* (to chatter, prattle) into the word *cerretano*. The latter term designated someone from the Umbrian town of Cerreto, whose inhabitants had the ill fame of wandering about dressed as pilgrims, collecting alms under false pretences. They eventually gave their name 'to all kinds of importunate mendicants and vagabonds'.[9] By the end of the fifteenth century *ciarlatano* added to this the connotation of the 'subtle and insidious eloquence'[10] which lay behind the sales pitch of these pedlars of unguents and powders. During the sixteenth century *ciarlatano* and *cerretano* were often used synonymously, as were the terms *montimbanco* (in English as 'mountebank') and *saltimbanco*, referring to their mounting a stage or platform to sell their wares. In Tuscany, however, the term *ciurmatore* (from *ciurmare*, to charm or bewitch) was generally used, reminding us that the sacred is never far away. In 1632 an ex-vice-*protomedico* for the Papal States defined a 'charlatan or mountebank' as 'those people who appear in the square and sell various things by means of entertainments and buffoonery'.[11] The word 'empiric' (*empirico*) was also used, though it was not nearly as common.

Many of the above labels contain value judgements. In fact, as Alison Lingo has observed with regard to French charlatans, the charlatan was always considered the 'other', in usage if not in fact.[12] As far as the medical profession was concerned, charlatans were depicted as malicious and manipulating, while those who bought and made use of their secret remedies were gullible and foolish.[13] And yet, in the language they used and the remedies they sold, charlatans were not so different from the regular physicians and apothecaries. Indeed, many charlatans were educated, to judge from their detailed

[8] Tommaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (Venice, 1616), 321–5.

[9] Bruno Migliorini (and Gwynfor Griffith), *The Italian Language* (London, 1984), 188.

[10] Piero Camporesi (ed.), *Il libro dei vagabondi* (Turin, 1973), introduction, cxv.

[11] A.S.R., *Università*, 67, ii/5, fol. 113v.

[12] Alison Lingo, 'Empirics and charlatans in early modern France: the genesis of the classification of the "other" in medical practice', *Journal of Social History*, xix (1986), 583–603.

[13] Roy Porter, *Health for Sale. Quackery in England, 1660–1850* (Manchester, 1989), 6.

handwritten petitions to the medical authorities for licences. Some – it is impossible to say how many – had studied physic at university, but for one reason or another had never taken a degree. They took up the only career left open to them. In addition to their stage routines, they made use of printed handbills to sell and describe their wares. These were based on humoralist assumptions about disease and made frequent use of Latin to impress. Charlatans did not seek to be of the people by means of their handbills, but, in a world of dialects, wrote in Tuscan Italian, the language of the educated. Charlatans are better seen as intermediaries between learned and popular forms of healing. As such, they are testimony to the way these two worlds were in constant contact, 'hating and penetrating each other', as one scholar has aptly put it.[14]

But there is a paradox here, one that is in many ways typical of the way in which baroque power structures functioned. While almost always described as a scourge and a threat, charlatans were officially tolerated, as long as they did not exceed certain limits. On the one hand, the Dominican and 'public physician' Girolamo Mercurio rhetorically asked in 1603 how, as charlatans were ignorant of medicine, could their remedies do what they boasted of them? For instance, with regard to their much-touted powders for ridding the body of worms, Mercurio remarks that ingredients like scordium (the herb water germander) might kill worms 'in the square', but forcing worms out of the human body was something else entirely. Such things 'are so essential, that it is impossible for a wandering and boorish man to know them'.[15] Yet, on the other hand, countless charlatans were examined and licensed to sell just such remedies, and others besides, by the physicians of the Medical Colleges and *Protomedicati* the length and breadth of Italy.[16] Their remedies were subjected to scrutiny and, usually, approved, as we shall see in the following section. Their 'secrets' were largely compatible with the learned medicines prescribed by physicians and dispensed by apothecaries. When the electuary of the charlatan Matteo di Berti, 'il Toscano', was confiscated by the Bolognese *Protomedicato* in 1683, it was not destroyed but donated to the Hospital of St Ursula.[17] Moreover, the similarity of charlatans' remedies to those sold by apothecaries – at least to the extent that apothecaries regarded charlatans as competition from below – is reinforced by the fact that charlatans in Bologna were required to pay an annual monetary tribute to the Company of Apothecaries.[18] In Florence in 1574 several charlatans were even listed as members of the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries.[19] Although this is exceptional – since charlatans did not normally have a guild, corporation or association to represent them – their ambivalent position in society is readily apparent. In many ways the charlatan is typical of the contradictions characterizing

[14] Jean-Pierre Goubert, 'The art of healing: learned and popular medicine in the France of 1790', trans. E. Forster, in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (eds), *Medicine and Society in France. Selections from the Annales E.S.C.* (Baltimore, 1980), 3.

[15] Girolamo (Fra Scipione) Mercurio, *De gli errori popolari d'Italia* (Verona, 1645), 267.

[16] The *Protomedicati* were set up to regulate the healing professions. See David Gentilcore, '"All that pertains to medicine": *protomedici* and *Protomedicati* in early modern Italy', *Medical History*, XXXVIII (1994), 121–42.

[17] Archivio di Stato, Bologna (hereafter A.S.B.), *Studio*, 320, 16.ix.1683.

[18] A.S.B., *Assunteria delle Arti speciali*, b. 22, *Riforma de' statuti dell'Onoranda Compagnia de' speziali*; cit. in Piero Camporesi, *La miniera del mondo: artieri, inventori, impostori* (Milan, 1990), 274.

[19] Andrea Corsini, *Medici ciarlatani e ciarlatani medici* (Bologna, 1922), 62.

early modern Europe. Just as he was ridiculed and marginalized, so he was officially recognized through licensing and patenting.

How, then, can we explain the opposition to charlatans? On a symbolic level, as itinerants charlatans were regarded as threats to the carefully protected 'moral order' of the towns.[20] This was true whether they were from the next town or the other extreme of the peninsula. The Paduan magistrates, for example, exiled unlicensed charlatans from the city and forbade their re-entry for one year.[21] Whenever a community's order was upset, as in time of plague, charlatans were the first to go, along with other vagabonds. In addition, charlatans mixed professions which those in power thought should be kept separate. Not only did they sell medicine like apothecaries, but they frequently treated people as well, practising the supposedly separate categories of physic and surgery. Charlatans thus found themselves outside the officially recognized categories of healer. The authorities – medical, civic and religious – sought to push charlatans to the margins of society, without attempting to eliminate them altogether. The situation in Italy was much more closely regulated than that in, say, England at the same time, which also has the advantage of providing more fodder for historians.[22] Since much of what we can learn about charlatans in early modern Italy is derived from the licensing records, a word about the actual procedure is in order.

THE LICENSING PROCEDURE

The licensing of charlatans had begun with the medical colleges, like the 'assumpti contra empyricos' within the College in Bologna. The first Italian edicts against charlatans, dating from the 1570s, were directed against unlicensed healing in general and at mountebanks practising physic and surgery in particular.[23] The edicts became even more common during the seventeenth century and often resulted in spates of licensing.[24] The church authorities, too, were involved, under the legitimate guise of enforcing feast day observance. Thus the bishop of Lecce in 1640 issued an edict stating that on such days charlatans, mountebanks 'and other similar people' were not to 'practise their profession

[20] Anton Blok, 'Gli spazzacamini come mediatori simbolici', *Quaderni storici*, XXI (1986), 537–60 and 'Infame beroepen', *Symposion*, III (1981), 104–28.

[21] Gustavo Tanfani, 'Processi contro esercenti abusivi delle arti sanitarie, a Padova, durante i secoli XVII e XVIII', in *Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag Max Neuburgers* (Vienna, 1948), 455.

[22] For comparisons, see Leslie Matthews, 'Licensed mountebanks in Britain', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, XIX (1964), 34–5 and Porter, *Health for Sale, op. cit.*, 27–8. Regulation in France and the Dutch Republic was more like that in Italy. See Matthew Ramsey, 'Traditional medicine and medical enlightenment: the regulation of secret remedies in the ancien régime', *Historical Reflections – Réflexions Historiques*, IX (1982), 215–32; and Frank Huisman, 'Itinerant medical practitioners in the Dutch Republic. The case of Groningen', *Tractrix. Yearbook for the History of Science, Medicine, Technology and Mathematics*, I (1989), 63–83.

[23] One of the earliest is the edict issued by the *pretore protomedico* of Palermo in 1572, quoted verbatim in Giuseppe Pitrè, *Medici, chirurgi, barbieri e speziali antichi in Sicilia, secoli XIII–XVIII* (Rome, 1942), 293.

[24] Such was the case in Siena in the years immediately following the edict of 1611. A.S.S., *Studio*, 60, for licences and *Studio*, 45, for the edict, 9.iv.1611.

publicly or privately, whether under the pretext of selling medicinal things or anything else'.[25]

A more informative edict issued in 1594 by the papal legate in Bologna referred to the charlatans' 'impostures and deceptions' and noted that 'by selling useless and sometimes harmful remedies, [they] fraudulently take money away from the simple poor'. The edict annulled all licences issued previously and threatened a fine of twenty-four scudi and three strappados for whoever sold 'powders, potions, pills, ointments, plasters or other medicinal thing' without the approval of the city's Medical College. It concluded that all 'useful' remedies had to be presented to the College, legitimately assembled, which had the authority to approve or reject them. An approval required the favourable vote of two-thirds of the physicians present.[26] In his petition for a licence, a charlatan might stress his poverty, affirming that he had received no payment from the people he had so far treated with the remedy. He was moved by charity and 'the continuous cries of sick people', not by any selfish interests.[27] He would include a list of the remedy's ingredients and their relative quantities, and as many signed testimonials confirming its virtue and licences issued by the Colleges of other cities as he could muster.

What sort of examination did the learned physicians perform before approving or rejecting a charlatan's petition? The simplest and most widespread method was simply based on the written evidence submitted by the charlatan himself. This is reflected in the wording of a licence issued for a balsam approved by the Bolognese College, 'having seen various favourable testimonials about it and having approved all the ingredients'.[28] To judge by surviving records, it would seem that very few petitions were turned down. This was especially the case with the simpler remedies that were the charlatans' bread and butter. In fact, it was only in cases of electuaries against poison that the Colleges of Bologna, Siena and Rome seem to have adopted a stricter and more overtly experimental approach when evaluating petitions from charlatans. Alleged poison antidotes began to proliferate as the seventeenth century wore on. In 1650, after appearing on several occasions before the College, without success, Francesco della Nave was finally issued a licence to sell 'Orvietan': an antidote to poison and general remedy. The College physicians had two dogs bitten on the testicles by a viper and administered Orvietan both internally and on the wounds. The dogs emerged unharmed and the physicians approved the electuary.[29]

Though apparently a system of control, licensing was also a form of official recognition that the charlatan could turn to his advantage. Authorization and approval by one Medical College could persuade a neighbouring one to follow suit. Moreover, it was used in marketing the product, testifying to its efficacy. But a College licence did not give a charlatan *carte blanche*. It could be revoked and the remedy confiscated if it was found not to resemble the one described in the petition. This happened to Angelo Carli in 1725, a year after being granted a licence to sell his 'Innocentian Balsam' by the Sienese

[25] *Secunda synodus diocesana ab Aloysio Pappacoda, episcopio lyciensi* (Rome, 1669), appendix, 12.

[26] A.S.B., Studio, 233.

[27] So asserted Pietro de Rossi's 1712 petition to the Roman *Protomedicato* to sell his balsam for scrofula. A.S.R., *Università*, 62, fols 1731–3.

[28] A.S.B., *Studio*, 325, fol. 47v.

[29] A.S.B., *Studio*, 214, fol. 56v and *Studio*, 319 fols 162v–165r.

authorities. The *protomedico* had several physicians examine Carli's supply and found it to be 'not only wanting in the ingredients, but not corresponding to the full quality of the said balsam'.[30] For reasons such as this many charlatans chose not to bother obtaining a licence at all. Added to this was the expense of the licence fee and the necessity of repeating the operation every time they entered another College's jurisdiction. There was also the occasional medical official who might pocket the licence fee without noting it in his register.[31] It is impossible to say how many charlatans attempted to sell their remedies without a licence. The very nature of their offence means that they are not usually present in the records. But when an ex-vice-*protomedico* of Rome was asked if charlatans were able to sell things without licence from the authorities, he replied: 'Yes sir, they can sell what they like without authorization, because there is no impediment whatsoever.'[32] In 1677 two mountebanks, Africano Colombo of Genoa and Giuseppe Pettola of Naples, were called to appear before the Sienese College to undergo examination and licensing. We do not know how long they had been selling their remedies before the College was informed. They appeared and asked for two days' grace before being examined, which the College conceded. It was a mistake: several days later, the College minutes note, there was no further trace of them in the city.[33] There was nothing the College could do.

TYPES OF CHARLATAN

Writers of the period, especially if they had any medical pretensions, failed to see anything but an undifferentiated mass of tricksters. This was part of a strategy used by the educated elites to marginalize those who did not possess the necessary requisites to practise any of the medical 'professions'. But it is the variety of charlatans that strikes the historian perusing the licensing records. Today we think of the charlatan as a seller of cure-alls, patented panaceas bearing outlandish names. In fact, this type of charlatan had its origin in early modern Italy. But while they were the most notorious, they were by no means the most common. The most widespread seem to have been the less glamorous charlatans who dispensed remedies designed to treat more specific and routine maladies. The English traveller, Fynes Moryson, who visited Italy in the late sixteenth century, noted of the charlatans that, 'The wares they sell are commonly distilled waters and divers oyntments for burning aches and stitches and the like, but especially for the itch and scabbs, more vendible than the rest.'[34] These were less sensational and more workaday remedies. Because of their more generic quality, these types of charlatans do not frequently appear in the licensing records, at least in any way that can be quantified.

The licensing records of the Sienese *Protomedicato* are a happy exception. According to these, simple remedies made up the bulk of the charlatans' trade, at least at the end of the sixteenth and for the first few decades of the seventeenth century. Of the fifty-two licences issued to charlatans in the period when records begin, in 1592, to the 1611 appearance of Girolamo Ferranti, 'The Orvietan' – specializing in the poison antidote that was to bear his nickname (a specialist *par excellence*) – only a handful of licences went to charlatans

[30] A.S.S., *Studio*, 61, fol. 741r.
[31] A.S.R., *Università*, 1, fol. 233.
[32] A.S.R., *Università*, 67, fol. 113v.
[33] A.S.S., *Studio*, 60, fol. 42v.
[34] Charles Hughes (ed.), *Fynes Moryson's Itinerary* (London, 1903), 425.

selling just one 'secret' remedy.[35] The rest sold a variety of fairly unglamorous specific remedies: a 'conserve' or a powder for teeth, a plaster or an oil for 'chill pains', coral oil or powder for worms and an ointment for scabies. These were the sorts of very common ailments that sick people would wish to treat themselves. The charlatans' remedies complemented the apothecaries' wares – no surprise, since they bought many of their ingredients from apothecaries – as well as the domestic cures available at the time.

Another type of charlatan was the small-scale itinerant pedlar who sold the odd remedy alongside other trinkets. Such people seem to have been generally tolerated at the local level – except, of course, during times of plague. Some wandered about in the guise of pilgrims, either genuine or fake, selling healing relics from some well-known shrine, like the original *cerretani*. Such pedlars, known as *madonnari* after the images of the Virgin Mary they bore, would wander through the towns and countryside, playing music to attract attention, recounting tales of miracle cures and selling relics. More beggars than charlatans, these pedlars continued to sell their wares alongside dynasties like the Gambacortas, makers and sellers of the 'Oil of the Sun', and the Ferrantis, originators of the Orvietan electuary, the most famous and widely travelled of them all. The phenomenon of brand-names, for which the originators and sellers sought a monopoly, became prominent in the second half of the seventeenth century in Italy. As the licensing records of the Sienese *Protomedicato* show, this coincides with a general decline in the number of charlatans licensed to sell simple remedies.[36] The new, specialized charlatans sought to give their secret remedies an exotic ring. So the 'Oil of the Sun' was described as 'the Great Turk's preservative, obtained from his gallery'.[37] In 1612 the Roman *Protomedicato* reacted by seeking to control what it considered charlatans' excesses. An edict of that year began with the following general complaint:

> In order to deceive [the charlatans] make many, indeed nearly all of the titles of their remedies hyperbolic, very misleading, specious, especially using unknown terms and not giving their oils appropriate names, but [calling them] inestimable gems, treasures of infinite value, incomparable secrets, which astound the world, are approved by all the Colleges of Italy . . . better still if they are Persian, Arab, Chaldean or from other remote regions (which they have not even seen).

The edict's main complaint was that charlatans exceeded the licences issued to them by describing their secrets as suitable 'for fevers, pleurisy, uterine diseases, epilepsy and many other very serious diseases, which are not theirs to treat or even recognize'. It sought to ensure that charlatans did not make use of 'descriptions, written or printed things, epitaphs, tablets, portraits, pictures, banners, unless the *protomedico* has first approved them in the due form of a licence granted'.[38]

The edict wanted to give the impression of regulatory activity and authority. It was not, in fact, seeking to eliminate the hyperbolic claims made by charlatans. This is clear from the handbills which have survived, all printed with the approval of one or more Colleges and as florid and confident as ever. Indeed, another Roman edict issued a mere six years

[35] A.S.S., *Studio*, 60.
[36] According to the 'Libri del Protomedicato', A.S.S., *Studio*, 60–3.
[37] A.S.S., *Studio*, 48, fol. 159.
[38] A.S.R., *Università*, 23, vi.

later reminded charlatans that, in addition to obtaining the usual licence, they were not to dispense remedies 'without the [printed] recipes declaring what sort of diseases the said remedies are good for, so that one thing is not sold for another and one disease is not treated for another'.[39] The handbills were not just advertising, but a necessary accompaniment to every sale. Although the word 'recipe' is used in the edict, the handbills did not contain the remedies' ingredients – they would hardly have been 'secrets' if they did – but they did give detailed information on how to take the medicine and what it would cure.

Numerous handbills from the seventeenth century survive in the petitions for licences made by charlatans to the various Italian Medical Colleges or in trial records, when charlatans were forced to defend themselves in court. One example will suffice. In 1663 Marcantonio de Corvi of Perugia, going by the name of 'il Dottor Villano' (the Peasant Doctor), petitioned the Sienese *protomedico* for permission to sell his 'Compound Balsam'. The straightforward name belied the balsam's purported efficacy. According to the enclosed handbill, it was effective against cough, catarrh, anxiety, tightness of the chest, urinary gravel, weakness of nerves, headache, sciatica, worms, simple sores and quartain fever. A licence was duly issued.[40] There are several features worth noting. The long list of ailments meant that the readers could single out the one from which they were suffering. The diseases listed were not usually fatal; rather they tended to be serious and unpleasant. The idea was that sufferers would still be in a condition to buy the remedies and the charlatans would feel confident that they could handle these complaints.[41]

Perhaps, paraxodically, there was a degree of safety in advertising a remedy as a cure for a multiplicity of ailments, as someone was bound to get better. However, charlatans did not shy away from fatal diseases like plague, the great menace of the age. In 1691 'l'Idiota italiano' (the Unlearned Italian) boasted that his 'Angel Oil' against plague had been tested in Milan and Bologna during the plague of 1630 and 'publicly compounded in Rome in the year 1656 to universal benefit'.[42] Since charlatans, along with other vagabonds, were the first to be expelled from cities in time of plague, was this simply an idle boast? As it was, the charlatans of Rome had to petition the city governor to be allowed back into the city after the epidemic of 1656.[43] And yet there is at least one case of a charlatan being given free range of a city during time of plague. Desperate times called for desperate remedies. On 21 October 1630 the papal legate in Bologna, Bernardino Spada, issued a licence to Gaspare Pecinini of Ferrara, 'who has in his possession a secret against the present contagious diseases, to be able to treat freely all types of the aforementioned contagious diseases throughout our legation and city of Bologna'.[44] No doubt further examples lie hidden in the records of other cities.[45]

Such was the fame of these remedies and the livelihood they brought to the patent-holders that families of charlatans sought to pass on the exclusive right to them to their descendants, as would be done with any other form of property. The disputes that occasionally ensued among the heirs before the courts of the *Protomedicati* and Medical

[39] 'Bando del Protomedico contro i venditori di olij . . .', 1618, A.S.R., *Università*, 23.

[40] A.S.S., *Studio*, 48, fols 84–90.

[41] Porter, *Health for Sale, op. cit.*, 135.

[42] Camporesi, *Miniera del mondo, op. cit.*, 270.

[43] Corsini, *Medici ciarlatani, op. cit.*, 65.

[44] A.S.B., *Legato: expeditiones*, 155, fol. 196.

[45] Richard Palmer has uncovered a number of mountebanks licensed by practical-minded Venetian Health Officers to sell their remedies for plague (the results of his findings are as yet unpublished).

Colleges are an important source of information about these families and their remedies. In 1676 the Palermitan Caterina Gambacorta willed the patent for the 'Oil of the Sun' to her partner, the Neapolitan Tommaso Rinaldi, 'for affairs pending between them'. Rinaldi immediately had himself recognized as the remedy's 'universal donee' by the Roman *protomedico*. To ward off continuing illicit competition, in 1684 Rinaldi had a 'strict injunction' issued against anyone who sought to sell a balsam under the same name. When Rinaldi's daughter and her half-brother inherited the remedy, they also inherited this injunction. In this case, the dispute, which they launched in 1711, was strictly a family matter. It charged that an alleged daughter of Gambacorta and her husband, and then their daughter, were illicitly making and peddling a balsam with the family name, even though they had no right to do so. It was clearly an important source of income for both the legitimate and illegitimate sellers of the remedy.[46]

Not all charlatans were born into the profession as part of a family dynasty, though this was clearly the easiest and most direct way. Others had to start from scratch or join an existing troupe. We saw at the beginning of this article how Lazzaro Tambi, a school master and 'healer' (whatever that meant), undertook an apprenticeship with an established charlatan, because Tambi was recognized as 'a good talker'. Charlatanism could be but a stage in a person's life strategy, giving way to other activities according to need and opportunity. It could also be used to complement or supplement other economic activities. Typical is the Tuscan Bastiano Giannelli, a shoemaker by trade, who would buy things like pins and needles in Lucca and sell them in nearby towns. When the town guards arrested him in Volterra at the end of August 1631 on suspicion of being an *untore*, a plague-spreader, they found him carrying various drugs which he bought and sold:

> They found on me [testified a rather shaken Giannelli] some St Johnswort root which I gave to whomever I met for toothache, and I also had some lavender oil which I bought in Volterra, and the root I bought in Ripomarance, and some terra sigillata [an astringent clay used as an antidote] that I had bought in Empoli, with some burnt rock allum with which I made a water for the eyes, and I was told that the terra sigillata was for fever and I went about selling it.[47]

As the prototype of the entrepreneur, charlatans behaved as they did in order to make money.[48]

Contemporary descriptions often give the impression that mountebanks were constantly on the move. Certainly, it is useful to link charlatans with other vagabond populations, as historians have done; but it may be an exaggeration to suggest that their 'dealings with their clients were largely one-off'.[49] As true as this might be in many cases, it is not the whole story. Certain charlatans were more sedentary. Empirics treating people

[46] A.S.R., *Università*, 62, fols 1707–23. See also A.S.S., *Studio*, 48, fols 158–9.

[47] Archivio di Stato, Florence, *Sanità*: *Negozi*, 148, fols 692–702; cit. in Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year. The Social and Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trans. D. Biocca and B. Ragan (Berkeley, 1989), 25. As the English translation is inaccurate here, I have substituted my own from the passage quoted in the Italian edition: *Storie di un anno di peste* (Milan, 1984), 37.

[48] Matthew Ramsey, *Professional and Popular Medicine in France, 1770–1830. The Social World of Medical Practice* (Cambridge, 1988), 155.

[49] Porter, *Health for Sale, op. cit.*, vii.

for the 'French pox' (syphilis) were a special category of resident charlatan, for a course of treatment could last many months. These empirics did not circulate much in the open; instead, sick people had to know how to get to them. However, even many of the more stereotypical remedy-selling charlatans had established shops of their own, according to the licensing records. One such charlatan, Giovan Domenico Toscani, was even known as 'il Mercantino' (the little merchant) and sold his 'Samaritan Balsam' from his workshop: 'the said shop . . . situated near Piazza Barberini, [has] for a very long time been known and well-thought of for the sale of the said balsam'.[50] Charlatans were evidently not afraid of living amidst potentially dissatisfied customers, any more than were physicians, surgeons or apothecaries. And, as we shall see, it was the only way women patent-holders could operate.

Some families of charlatans divided themselves up: some members stayed at home, while others went 'on tour'. Moreover, many charlatans – it is hard to say how many – though on the move, stayed in one place for weeks, even months. Thus Giuseppe Magetti, 'il Pastore Toscano' (the Tuscan Shepherd), seller of a 'Healing Balsam' and minor surgeon and tooth-drawer, though on the move for fifteen years, spent one year in Macerata and its province, five years in the small state of Urbino, two years in Venice, four years in Tuscany and four years in Perugia. In addition to his stage activities, Magetti treated people in their homes, developing a clientele through word of mouth. In fact, this is why we know about him. A local physician, miffed at this illicit competition, accused Magetti of treating sick people without a licence, leading to his arrest and imprisonment.[51]

Though charlatans can be divided into a wide variety of types, there was only a limited role for women to play. This is in clear contrast to the crucial place women had in domestic medicine, as part of their running of the household and the care of its members. Charlatanry was a predominantly male profession. Women only took part as members of established troupes, acting alongside their husbands or performing dances and songs to draw in the crowds. In this sense, the use of the female form to sell goods is certainly nothing new. In any case, it was a secondary role. Where women did momentarily acquire patents, it was as heirs, at which point they usually passed on control to the nearest fit male relative – usually husband or son – or financial partner, as in the case of Caterina Gambacorta, seller of the 'Oil of the Sun'. There was no question of such women carrying on independently.[52] More than anything else, as women, they had much less freedom of movement than men. The most they could do was set up shop in their own home. Thus in 1687 a Bolognese woman named Caterina Cattani Greca, realizing that, 'since, as a well-born woman, she [was] not allowed to mount platforms in public squares', petitioned the Bolognese *Protomedicato* to be permitted to hang up a sign indicating the diseases treated by her 'secrets'.[53]

[50] A.S.R., *Università*, 59, xliv.

[51] A.S.R., *Università*, 62, fols 1689–1702.

[52] Barbara Hanawalt (ed.), *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Bloomington, 1986), introduction, xiv.

[53] A.S.B., *Studio*, 340; cit. in Gianna Pomata, *La promessa di guarigione. Malati e curatori in antico regime: Bologna, XVI–XVIII secolo* (Rome, 1994), 159.

THEATRE AND HEALING

It is now time to turn to the methods that charlatans adopted to sell their wares. Their use of theatre was another expression of their liminality. Indeed, it was one of the aspects of charlatanry that most outraged the medical profession. Official medicine sought to separate the commercial and theatrical aspects of the selling of medicines from the medical aspects of diagnosis and treatment.[54] The histrionics of charlatans were thought to bring medicine into disrepute. 'If medicine is a virtue', Mercurio asserted, then 'to want to sell it by means of clowning is to butcher it'.[55] For Mercurio it was an 'error' even to watch charlatans' performances, 'because stopping to listen to their tittle-tattle provides the main opportunity to buy their medicaments, which, because it is full of lies and woven with deceit, has fraud as its end'. Not only can their medicines not provide the relief they promise, but 'whilst one is waiting for them to work, one misses the opportunity of employing other remedies, of help to the sick'. But Mercurio did not stop here. Following St Thomas Aquinas, Mercurio concluded that to watch their 'stage-plays, or performances acted out by zanies, Gratians, puppets or other sorts of buffoons' was a mortal sin, since they 'contain dirty words, dishonest acts and are put on at improper times'.[56]

No doubt this helps to explain their popularity. Charlatans mixed care for the body with an understanding of popular culture and sensibilities. The combination of spectacle and treatment became a kind of social ritual. In a very public space, they offered entertainment, escape, laughter, play, fear and surprise, along with medical treatment and the easing of suffering.[57] Italian charlatans borrowed from carnivalesque and theatrical traditions – especially the *commedia dell'arte* – and, in turn, contributed to them. Indeed, charlatanry and theatre often shared the same stage, the charlatan becoming the actor and vice versa. The two roles could even exist in the same person, as their adopted nicknames – or stage names – reveal. There was 'il Padovano Saltatore' (the Paduan Tumbler), Giuseppe Bua, who sold an 'Artificial Balsam' and 'Theriac Electuary' in Siena and Rome.[58] The tooth-drawer and seller of a 'Refreshing Ointment' for burns and sores and an oil to help hair grow, Tommaso Maiorini of Capua (near Naples), went by the name 'Polcinella', one of the characters in the *commedia dell'arte* and particularly linked to the city of Naples.[59] And the playwright Carlo Goldoni began his theatrical career with an intermezzo written for the mountebank Buonafede Vitali and his company in 1735.[60]

[54] Lingo, 'Empirics and charlatans', *op. cit.*, 588.

[55] Mercurio, *Errori popolari*, *op. cit.*, 265.

[56] *ibid.*, 282–3.

[57] Camporesi, *Vagabondi*, *op. cit.*, cxl.

[58] A.S.S., *Studio*, 50, fols 222–7 and A.S.R., *Università*, 67, 14.ix.1716.

[59] A.S.S., *Studio*, 48, fols 93–97 and 60, fol. 84v. He also wrote a pamphlet on his secret remedies. See Domenico Scafoglio and Luigi Lombardi Satriani, *Pulcinella. Il mito e la storia* (Milan, 1992), 45; Carlo Ginzburg and Marco Ferrari, 'The dovecote has opened its eyes', trans. E. Branch, in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (eds), *Microchistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991), 18 n. 13. For a detailed discussion of the booklets of medical 'secrets' written by charlatans, see William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature. Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, 1994), chap. 7.

[60] Goldoni's own father was a mountebank of sorts, selling various ointments and elixirs, as well as practising physic. He had studied at university, though he never took a degree. Franca Angelini, *Vita di Goldoni* (Bari, 1993), 21, 52–4.

The sympathetic description by the Jesuit Giovan Domenico Ottonelli is worth quoting at length in this regard, its rosy quality counter-balancing the overt hostility of Garzoni and Mercurio:

> On occasion a company of these gentlemen appears in town. They bring women with them . . . since without women they fear they will come to nothing and be judged unworthy of applause. They spread the word that they want to serve the public, selling excellent secrets and putting on good entertainments. . . . They choose a place in the public square, where, having set up a stage, they get up on it, to be first the charlatan and then the actor. Each day at a convenient time a zany goes on to the platform . . . and begins to amuse the public gathered around, either by playing or singing. A little later someone else comes on and then another, and often a woman, too. And then all of them perform a medley of popular entertainments, with clowning and other things. Then the main actor arrives, who is the seller of the secret and head charlatan. And in a well-mannered way he begins to speak about the great and incomparable credit of his marvellous medicament. After which, having done a good trade in it and collected the money, the main selling comes to an end. Then another charlatan begins his own routine, if he has not already done so. And then the woman, too, sells her musk-scented lozenges or other dainties. At the end the audience is told this: Now come, the comedy commences. The comedy! And with the boxes locked up and the trunks taken away, the platform becomes a stage and every charlatan an actor. And a theatrical performance begins which, in the comic tradition, entertains the people for about two hours with revelry, laughter and amusement.[61]

What do we know about the actual stage routines of mountebanks? The answer is relatively little. We know that they often dressed flamboyantly, were accompanied by a zany and sometimes other actors and made use of props like live animals, banners and music. Yet precisely because they were so much a part of the culture of the period, detailed descriptions of their routines are rare. However, appearances by charlatans in the records of Medical Colleges and other licensing authorities can shed light on their routines. In 1741, for thirty lire the cardinal legate of Bologna licensed the Florentine Marco Tambi and his company to mount a stage 'and perform tricks in the comic style to assemble people and sell his secrets', as long as he did not sell internal medicines without the permission of the *protomedico*.[62] In 1651 he licensed the Neapolitan Francesco Sacchi to use hand and card tricks, the Paduan Marco Toscarini, 'l'Impirico' (the Empiric), to set up a puppet booth, Giovanni Marani of Faenza to mount the stage on horseback, and others simply to *'fare circolo'* (to peddle and clown).[63]

The most notorious routines belonged to those charlatans who sold poison antidotes. These electuaries were exceedingly popular and represent a high proportion of the licences issued to charlatans, particularly in the second half of the seventeenth century. Charlatans would allegedly swallow poison or have themselves bitten by snakes on stage to

[61] Giovan Domenico Ottonelli, *Christiana moderatione del theatro, libro detto l'ammonimento a' recitanti* (Florence, 1652), iv, 455, cit. in Camporesi, *Vagabondi, op. cit.*, cliii.

[62] A.S.B., *Legato: expeditiones*, 234, fol. 49.

[63] A.S.B., *Legato: expeditiones*, 172, fols 155v, 92r, 149v.

demonstrate the efficacy of their secrets. In reality, complained Garzoni, they would eat plenty of raw lettuce, seasoned with large amounts of oil, before going on stage. In winter, when lettuce was unavailable, they would eat plenty of tripe, so that their stomachs were 'as tight as a drum'. This had the effect of momentarily absorbing the arsenic or other poison, until, out of sight, they could vomit what they had eaten together with the poison. Another alleged method was to arrange a deceit with a nearby apothecary beforehand, replacing the tablet of arsenic with 'a mixture of candied sugar, starch and other things'. He would then send for this tablet during the course of his act.[64] The charlatan feigned the symptoms of poisoning, until he was supposedly returned to health by his remedy. At this point, adds Mercurio (who repeated Garzoni's words almost verbatim), 'the rabble [*popolaccio*] run at breakneck speed to get the said medicament, as if it were not sold by charlatans but sent from heaven'.[65]

Criminal trials conducted by the Medical Colleges and *Protomedicati* suggest that such acts might not have been far from the truth, at least as far as mountebanks selling electuaries were concerned. In 1632, before the Rome *Protomedicato*, the dean of the Medical College charged the charlatan Lavinio Sclavo with bringing the College into disrepute, abusing his licence to sell an electuary against poisons by relying upon 'false experiments' to demonstrate its supposed efficacy. As performed in Piazza Navona, Sclavo's routine involved three deceits. The first was to dissolve the poison in a glass of water, to show the audience how other charlatans would seek to fool them:

> and so he covered the glass with one hand [the accusation reads] and, bringing it to his mouth, he said, 'the other [charlatans] who sell electuaries against poisons do it in this way, that is, they pretend to drink the poison and they do not, but they let the glass drop to the ground in this way', and so he let the glass drop to the ground with the matter inside.

The second deceit was to have the poison mixed in a salad, which he actually did not touch and which was quickly taken away. This was all a build up to the third deceit, which the audience was meant to regard as genuine. It consisted of putting the poison on an egg, which Sclavo then swallowed. In fact, the accusation goes on, he immediately spat the egg out and 'then pretended to take his electuary and get better'. What was worse, the *protomedico* had even allowed him to 'hang a picture above the said demonstration with certain letters', to call attention to it. The dean sought the revocation of Sclavo's licence, prohibiting him from repeating the faked demonstrations and finding fault with other people's medicines which shed a negative light on the College.[66]

However, another trial suggests the possibility that not all of the charlatans' routines were deceitful. In 1669 the mountebank Matteo Moscati was accused before the Sienese *Protomedicato* of selling an electuary against poisons without a licence and, 'in particular, in Grosseto that he had his helper bitten by a viper, who would have surely died had a physician not been present who had him treated'. In his defence, Moscati affirmed that he was licensed. The event occurred as part of his act, when he had the boy bitten on the back of his hand by a viper that Moscati carried about with him in a small box.[67] Moscati was

[64] Garzoni, *Piazza universale*, *op. cit.*, 322r.
[65] Mercurio, *Errori popolari*, *op. cit.*, 278.
[66] A.S.R., *Università*, 67, ii/5, fols 110–11.
[67] A.S.S., *Studio*, 58, fols 478r–480v.

reluctant to reveal the tricks of his trade and since the court was concerned primarily with verifying his licence it was satisfied with his version of events. We cannot therefore be certain that the viper was actually meant to bite Moscati's helper during the routine or whether it was used more as a prop, with the boy proceeding to act out the results of a fictitious bite before being given the allegedly life-saving electuary.

It is understandable that someone like Moscati, whose profession is described as 'viper-catcher' (*viparaio*),[68] should want to put his snake-handling skills to good use. Aside from being a dangerous nuisance, vipers were required for the official pharmacopoeia's theriac, and so viper-catchers had an officially recognized role. The association between snakes and healing has ancient antecedents, as in the rod of Asclepius. The profession of viper-catcher and snake handler was hereditary and much respected in popular culture, where it was imbued with sacred dimensions. Moscati's type of routine was a common one, described by Garzoni in the form of the charlatan Mastro Paolo of Arezzo, a *sanpaolaro*.[69] The *sanpaolari* claimed to be members of the house of St Paul and used live snakes to demonstrate the effectiveness of their snakebite treatments and remedies.[70] Because of their skills and sacred claims they came to be known as *ciurmatori* in Florence (from *ciurmare*, to charm or bewitch), which by the early modern period had become the general term for charlatan there. The sacred element in the routines of the *sanpaolari* meant that ecclesiastical authorities were particularly keen to limit their activities.[71]

Whatever the true nature of Moscati's routine, there is no doubting the element of hyperbole in the charlatan's operations. It is an omnipresent feature: in their stage names, in the names they gave their secrets, in the maladies they boasted would be cured by them and in the wordy discourses and handbills used to sell them. Thus there were stage names linking their bearers with the medical profession: 'il Dottore Villano' and 'il Dottore Lombardo' (the Peasant Doctor and the Lombard Doctor), neither of whom were doctors, and 'l'Aromatario Fanese' (the Apothecary of Fano), who was not an apothecary. There were geographical names, which rarely seem to correspond to the charlatan's place of origin: 'il Mantovanino' (the Little Mantuan), from Rome, 'l'Orvietano' (the Orvietan), who was from Naples but lived in Rome (not to mention later imitators from Pisa, Ravenna and Bergamo), and 'il Lombardino' (the Little Lombard), from Vicenza. In addition, there were more bombastic names like 'il Gran Piemontese', 'il Gran Milanese' and 'il Gran Napoletano' (the Great Piedmontese, Milanese and Neapolitan, respectively). There were more far-off places of origin: 'l'Americano', 'l'Indiano', 'il Tedeschino' (the Little German) and 'lo Spagnoletto' (the Little Spaniard). These charlatans capitalized on an apparent weakness, by turning their quality as outsiders into a selling point. Others boasted of their more home-grown and uneducated status: 'il Contadino Idiota' (the Unlearned Peasant) and 'l'Idiota italiano' (the Unlearned Italian).

[68] A.S.S., *Studio*, 49, fol. 7.

[69] Garzoni, *Piazza universale, op. cit.*, 324.

[70] Angelo Turchini, *Morbo, morso, morte. La tarantola fra cultura medica e terapia popolare* (Milan, 1987), 148–59; Alfonso Di Nola, *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana* (Turin, 1976), 92–105; Peter Burke, 'Rituals of healing in early modern Italy', in his *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge, 1987), 213.

[71] David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto* (Manchester, 1992), 149–56.

THE BOUNDARIES OF TOLERATION

It was a short step from selling remedies to administering them directly to sick people, as well as performing other acts of physic. It was thus a step that many charlatans took. Since practising physic and surgery without approval and licensing of some sort was against the statutes of the Medical Colleges, charlatans occasionally found themselves before the courts, like our Lazzaro Tambi. They were charged variously by educated professionals, angered at the presence of illicit practitioners in their midst; dissatisfied patients wanting their money back; or even other charlatans, seeing an easy way of thwarting the competition. The motivation to launch a complaint could be more than just rivalry or animosity. If the accused was found guilty, a portion of the fine would go to the plaintiff.[72] What is clear from these trials is that charlatans were not on the fringe, in the sense of providing some sort of 'alternative' medicine. Recourse to them by sick people was part of a strategy of employing various healers in the hope that one of them would get it right. Sick people thought nothing of seeking a second or third opinion from any of a whole range of healing specialists, as suggested by Bondoni's testimony used to introduce this article. As the custodian of the customs house in Siena, Bondoni would not have seen himself as among the 'rabble' that Mercurio characterized as rushing to buy charlatans' nostrums. Yet the question of their actual clientele remains an open one. The trials against charlatans are simply too few to formulate any kind of hypothesis. None of those I have seen involves a member of the elite as patient. However, the elites did make use of the charlatans' services when they promised cures which the regular practitioners could not provide, as in the case of French pox and plague.

The trials also indicate that charlatans were willing to accuse and testify against one another. Disputes could involve members of the same troupe.[73] There was no fraternal solidarity among charlatans, united against physicians and surgeons. On the contrary, to conjure up Garzoni's image again, the space in the square was limited and the mountebanks many. Competition was cut-throat. In 1711 Carlo Sassi of Jesi, 'lo Spagnoletto' (the Little Spaniard), petitioned the *protomedico* of Rome that as a licensee he be permitted to have several 'vagabonds' – note the tone of contempt – arrested. 'They dispense balsams,' Sassi complained, 'stones for the eyes and other things without any authorization, stealing money – I must put it in these terms – from the people throughout the Papal States.' He promised to have them arrested and sent to Rome without any cost to the College.[74] Perhaps the *protomedico* – the anatomist and papal physician Giovanni Maria Lancisi – felt this was not a task appropriate to a charlatan: although the petitions survive, they bear none of the marginal comments Lancisi so often made, nor is there any record of a reply. This rooting out of charlatans, if the need was felt, was a task normally entrusted to special appointees, usually surgeons. Thus the Palermitan surgeon, Ottavio Bonaiuto, was made a 'special commissioner' by the Sienese *Protomedicato* in 1610. His task was to find those 'who go about empirically treating people' without a licence and bring them to justice, in co-operation with local legal officials.[75]

[72] In Siena the proportion was one-quarter. *Consitutiones collegii senensis philosophiae et medicinae doctorum* (Siena, 1612), 19.

[73] A.S.R., *Università*, 67, 22.vi.1705, 6.iv.1713, 3.ix.1716.

[74] A.S.R., *Università*, 62, fol. 1723.

[75] A.S.S., *Studio*, 60, fols 19v–20r.

But then, by 1711, the war waged by the authorities against charlatans had begun to diminish in intensity. A survey of the records of the Sienese *Protomedicato* (more complete than elsewhere) shows a decrease in the total number of licences, and most go to charlatans selling their own brand-name medicines. It would seem that by the eighteenth century charlatans no longer posed the same threat as they had in previous centuries. The rate at which surgeons were licensed – to use them as a control group – remains relatively constant during the two periods for which records survive, 1590–1664 and 1695–1784. By contrast, the rate for charlatans falls dramatically from a quinquennial average of sixteen in the first period to three in the second.[76]

CONCLUSION

The activity of charlatans, and the reactions to them, are loaded with an ambivalence and paradox that soon undermine our neat historiographical categories. Influenced by the negative connotations the term has acquired over the centuries, traditional medical historiography tended to approach them, if at all, with a mixture of disdain and whimsy. As healers who existed outside the tripartite model of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries, charlatans were not considered worthy of serious consideration. But their close links with the regular medical profession – in the remedies they sold, the language they used and, above all, in their licensing by the medical authorities – belie this simplistic and exclusionary approach to healing in early modern society. Added to this is their popularity with the public at large. At a time when the choice of healer was still set largely by the sick people themselves, charlatans were an important part of the healing network available to the sick. Charlatans transgressed a whole series of boundaries instituted to maintain moral order in early modern Italy. For this reason they can tell us much about the period's mental categories and its attempts to enforce them. As outsiders, charlatans were often mistrusted; but it would be wrong to see them as impostors who sought only to take advantage of the gullibility of sick people in order to amass a fortune.

The stereotype of the wandering, cure-all-touting mountebank is a blurred image, in need of focusing. As this article has shown, some charlatans were in fact sedentary, selling their remedies from their homes or workshops. Others travelled during one part of the year and stayed at home the rest, or divided the family up, some members staying at home, others taking to the road. To its practitioners, charlatanry was a means of earning a living, a trade like any other. Some were born into it, some adopted it briefly through economic necessity, others discovered they had a natural talent for peddling and so took it up. Most led a rather wretched, wandering existence. And as for the medicines they sold, they were just as likely to be common, household remedies for simple, everyday ailments, obtained from an apothecary's shop, as the patented, brand-name 'secrets' for poison or plague. Their remedies can be seen as a further attempt to counter the relative impotence of the age in dealing with disease.

The stigmatization and marginalization of charlatans were part of a reaction set on

[76] The latter figure may be as much as a point higher, since several of the years at the beginning of the eighteenth century are incomplete. Compiled from the 'Libri del Protomedicato', A.S.S., *Studio*, 60–3.

limiting their activities. This was due in part to the competition with which they provided regular medical practitioners. But opposition was also due to the charlatans' pretensions of knowledge and experience which, the elites believed, should have been the monopoly of university-educated physicians and surgeons. Finally, charlatans mixed theatre and popular entertainment with the selling of medicines and the treatment of disease, polluting an activity that should have been virtuous (medicine) with one generally regarded as sinful (theatre). Ironically, it was precisely this mixing of entertainment and promised health into a very social ritual of spectacle and treatment that made charlatans popular with crowds everywhere. The fact that they straddled learned and popular worlds made charlatans as difficult for the elites of early modern Europe to deal with as it would, later, for historians. In a contradiction typical of early modern European power structures, charlatans were reviled and ridiculed by the educated elites, but were officially tolerated, as long as they made the pretence of going through the licensing procedure and were not seen to exceed their occupational limits. But it is the revulsion and ridicule that has proved the stronger image, outliving the charlatans and distorting our historical view.

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