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Ambiguous Bodies: Gender Non-Conformity and Bodily Transformation in Early Modern Italian Art

Abstract

My dissertation examines the relationship between theories of medicine and representations of human bodies which deviated from normative standards of gender in early modern Italian art. Specifically, it focuses on how artists accessed medical knowledge to portray bodies that underwent a physical transformation due to medical conditions or bodily trauma. While the study of anatomy and medicine has long been acknowledged as an artistic strategy for mastering the body in its ideal form, the relationship between medical sources and depictions of unideal bodies has been understudied. I consider how medical sources, such as illustrated treatises on congenital diseases and surgical manuals, as well as treatises on bodily torture, offered artists a set of codes for figuring gender ambiguous bodies – that is, bodies whose physical appearance obscures clear identification as male or female. Taking a conceptual and thematic approach to these questions, my dissertation focuses on multiple artistic centers around the Mediterranean, especially Naples, Salerno, and Catania, which were dynamic sites of exchange between international artists, medico-philosophers and physicians. I argue that paintings depicting the torture of popular religious subjects like Saint Agatha of Sicily (whose breasts were amputated as part of her martyrdom) alongside portraits of castrati and figures with visible symptoms of diseases, such as Spanish women and men from the Canary Islands with hirsutism (the growth of excess hair), reflect the profound extent to which medical knowledge permeated artistic practice across genres. At stake in this project is an expansion of early modern definitions of the “body” and its relationship to medical and social constructions of sex and gender.