

text deals with ideas on expanding the use of the operation, with the optimistic premise that a woman can survive not only one but several Caesareans, and that there is no risk to her fertility from the operation. His tone is passionate and polemical: a rhetorical analysis of this text is not part of Cyr's and Baskett's project but would have yielded some interesting insights into the nature of Renaissance scientific discourse. Rousset's detailed descriptions of numerous surgical interventions related to Caesarean section will be of great interest to anyone wishing to understand the scope of Renaissance medicine. With Caesarean section on living women, an area of obstetrics was inaugurated that moved childbirth away from midwifery and slowly but inexorably into the realm of learned men. Rousset's text was soon eclipsed by Scipione Mercurio's *Commare o raccogliatrice* of 1596. Inspired by Rousset, Mercurio had also travelled widely to interview survivors of Caesarean sections and believed, like Rousset, that the operation was possible with a good outcome for mother and child. But Rousset's treatise, considered a masterpiece by some, a 'plague' by others, was still the first to open up this new surgical field. It is the great merit of Cyr and Baskett to have brought this text to the attention of a modern audience through this very good translation and the study of the operation's feasibility in different time periods contained in the notes.

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**Merry Wiesner-Hanks,** *The Marvelous Hairy Girls: The Gonzales Sisters and Their Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. xiii + 248, £18.99/\$30.00, hard-back, ISBN: 978-0-300-12733-1.

Maddalena, Francesca and Antonietta were the daughters of Petrus Gonzales (c.1537–1618). Along with their father and their brothers, Enrico and Orazio, they exhibited the

symptoms of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa: much of their bodies, including the face, were covered with hair. Petrus Gonzales was a minor celebrity of his time, and resided at the court of Henri II of France. He was given a superior education, and many a visitor to King Henri's court must have been astonished when the hairy 'wild man' addressed them in Latin. The Gonzales family became popular with painters, scientists, and lovers of curiosities throughout Europe. The family moved to Parma around 1590, under the protection of the dukes and cardinals there. At least one of the children of Petrus Gonzales brought the congenital hypertrichosis into the third generation.

In *The Marvelous Hairy Girls*, her biography of the Gonzales family, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, uses them to explore Renaissance notions of the marvellous and the miraculous. She rightly comments on the family's 'double identity': they were both 'freaks of nature' and regular residents at the courts of various magnates. We learn much of what the Gonzales family might have meant to others, but little of what they made of their own experiences. The scarcity of sources about them means that Professor Wiesner-Hanks needs to bolster this 248-page book with lengthy digressions on Renaissance court life, but this is quite neatly done and the specialist reader is kept interested throughout.

In the book's discussion, Professor Wiesner-Hanks comments that the hairy Gonzales family soon disappeared from history, only to be re-discovered in the late twentieth century. This statement has the disadvantage of being quite untrue. In Victorian times, there was a vigorous discussion of some of the stranger by-products of Darwinism. One of them was the concept of an 'atavism': had a hairy child or a child born with a tail taken one step down the evolutionary ladder? Many ethnologists and medical scientists were busy gathering information about historical cases of congenital hypertrichosis, the Gonzales family

included. Professor Wiesner-Hanks seems to have chosen to stay away from the medical and evolutionary aspects of her subjects, however: no reference is made to the nineteenth-century discussion of congenital hypertrichosis, or the contributions of Rudolf Virchow and other leading scientists of that time. The index, for example, does not include 'Darwin, C.' This considerably devalues the book for the historian of medicine.

*The Marvelous Hairy Girls* is a solid academic tome, of considerable value to specialist Renaissance historians. Its arcane subject and turgid writing makes it unlikely any person would read it for pleasure, however, and its discussion of the medical aspects of its subject is wholly lacking in depth.

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**Mike Jay**, *The Atmosphere of Heaven: The Unnatural Experiments of Dr Beddoes and His Sons of Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. vii + 296, \$30.00/£20.00, ISBN: 978-0-300-12439-2.

How does one experience the 'Atmosphere of Heaven'? Robert Southey, as the first of an élite circle who inhaled nitrous oxide after its potent effects from inhalation were trialled by Humphrey Davy and Thomas Beddoes, offered that 'the atmosphere of the highest of all possible heavens must be composed of this gas' (p. 176). It is a descriptive enough statement, but one that evokes images that can deceptively omit the experiences and endeavours leading to its discovery. This is particularly a truth in the case of physician Thomas Beddoes and his revolutionary vision of a pneumatic institute for the treatment of the sick, particularly those who could not afford many of the existing treatments.

The scene is set in late eighteenth-century Britain: an era on the verge of medical and scientific discoveries that paved the way to our

proudest and most important historical advances. But this too was a period in our history when scientific and medical discovery, though posing real and exciting opportunities, also had an element of haphazard, and often an unethical or even dangerous approach of trial and error to those brave enough not to shun or shy away from the prospects.

From the opening paragraph in the Bastille Day prologue, the reader is engaged and drawn into the social, political and idealistic ambitions and realities of Beddoes and his circle of friends and colleagues. Our not-so-gentle introduction to the story starts with descriptions of a 'great mob' and their destructive rampage through Fair Hill, on the outskirts of Birmingham, with their very next target being Joseph Priestley – experimental chemist, philosopher and dissenting clergyman.

Beddoes, at this point, was a Reader in chemistry at Oxford University, whose political views and opinions on the French Revolution sat rather uncomfortably alongside his role as an academic and lecturer, and after the account of the Bastille Day riots, an air of dread surrounds Jay's description of the tribulations Beddoes faced as a result of his own political views.

Jay leads us descriptively and methodically through Beddoes' conflicts and aspirations, his visions and their limitations. As an introduction to the life of Thomas Beddoes, a very sympathetic and detailed picture is assembled, of a philanthropist and idealist, but one that the reader will, through subtly suggestive story telling, be willing throughout to succeed.

It doesn't take long into this read, or even a furtive glance at the bibliography, to begin to appreciate and understand the scope of research and careful assembling of all that could be gathered and transferred, from biographies, papers, books, notes, letters and other sources; and Jay's ability to compile all of this into an engrossing yet informative, emotive and yet pragmatic account of one person, who before this is little mentioned next to his more renowned circle of friends, is both