

WHO/WHAT IS “TROTULA”? by Monica H. Green

In only a few seconds, any of the major Web browsers will bring you hundreds of “hits” for a search with the keyword “Trotula.” The vast majority of these websites will tell you that “Trotula” was an eleventh- (or twelfth-) century physician (or midwife) who did (or did not) write the most important medieval text on women’s medicine and who did (or did not) teach at the medical school of the university of Salerno, perhaps even holding a professorial chair. She had (maybe) a husband and sons with whom she collaborated and even wrote a medical encyclopedia. You will find that there is a street in Salerno named after her and a women’s clinic in Vienna. You will even find a website showing where on the planet Venus the “Corona Trotula” is located. (This is a great site, by the way: all the major geographical features on Venus are named after Earth women, both historical and legendary.)

The subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) variations in these stories should be the first tip-off that something is seriously amiss with this scholarship. For most of these stories depend on generations of unsubstantiated inference and garbled data, culled together by amateur historians with modern axes to grind. This intrusion of modern politics into the construction of history is not unique to the story of “Trotula”—indeed, it is normative in history. Legends die very slowly and are surprisingly resistant to scholarly challenge. Nevertheless, modern investigations of the medieval evidence have produced a better understanding of the “Trotula” legend and how it came about. For those interested in the new versions of the “Trotula” story, here is a quick summary:

1) There was no historical woman named “Trotula.” Rather, there were numerous women in 12th-century Salerno with the name Trota (or, as it would have been spelled locally, Trocta). One of these was a healer and medical writer. More about her later.

2) “Trotula,” while not the name of a woman, is the documented name of a *group of texts* on women’s medicine that came out of 12th-century southern Italy, most probably Salerno. “Trotula,” therefore, should be understood as a *title* which refers to the three texts in this group:

- i. *Book on the Conditions of Women (Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum)*
- ii. *Treatments for Women (De curis mulierum)*
- iii. *Women’s Cosmetics (De ornatu mulierum)*

3) Who wrote the three *Trotula* texts? For the first and third, the works are anonymous though probably written by male authors. As for the second, it is attributed even in the earliest manuscripts to the healer Trota. Rather than having written it directly, however, Trota may have dictated parts of the work or somehow supervised its production.

4) What do we know about Trota? Virtually nothing. Claims about who her husband or children were are completely unsubstantiated. We can infer that she lived sometime in the early decades of the 12th century, but that’s as close as we can get. We do know, however, that besides her association with the *De curis mulierum*, she also wrote a *Practica* (Book of Practical Medicine) that collects her cures on a whole host of medical problems. Aside from surgery (which she does not mention), she seems to have been a general practitioner and was not confined strictly to gynecology or obstetrics.

5) Was Trota the only woman healer in Salerno? Not at all. We have over five dozen references in 12th- and early 13th-century sources to “the women of Salerno” (*mulieres Salernitane*) as medical practitioners. None besides Trota is credited with writing a medical book and none, certainly, held a “chair” at the university. (There was no university in the 12th century!)

6) How did the legend of “Trotula” as the “first female professor of medicine” come about? It’s a complicated story. Short encyclopedia entries can be found in Monica H. Green, “Trota of Salerno (and the Trotula),” *Dictionary of Medical Biography*, ed. William F. Bynum and Helen Bynum, 5 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), vol. 5, pp. 1235-1237; and Green, “Trota of Salerno,” in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 800-801. For further details, see Monica H. Green, “In Search of an ‘Authentic’ Women’s Medicine: The Strange Fates of Trota of Salerno and Hildegard of Bingen,” *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam* 19 (1999), 25-54; Green, ed. and trans., *The ‘Trotula’: A Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) [this is also available in a paperback edition, without the Latin text, under the title *The ‘Trotula’: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002)]; Green, “Reconstructing the *Oeuvre* of Trota of Salerno,” in *La Scuola medica Salernitana: Gli autori e i testi*, ed. Danielle Jacquart and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Edizione Nazionale ‘La Scuola medica Salernitana’, 1 (Florence: SISMEL/Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007), 183-233; and Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Premodern Gynaecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chapter 1.