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‘Off Dropped the Sympathetic Snout’: Shame, Sympathy, and Plastic Surgery at the Beginning of the Long Eighteenth Century

Emily Cock

1 Introduction

This paper explores the intersection of two facets of sympathy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The first is the concept of medical sympathy that posited a system of physical communication between like matter, which rose to prominence in the seventeenth century. As this idea of medical sympathy waned, the discourse of sympathy as an authentic moral sentiment was on the rise. I examine the interplay of these two discourses within medical and literary treatments of rhinoplasty, a treatment popularly associated with repairing damage to the nose caused by syphilis and its customary mercury treatment. This brought the procedure under fire for enabling the syphilitic patient to pass as healthy, thus avoiding the shame that onlookers considered rightly due to the sexual transgressor. The satirising of rhinoplasty through the story of the ‘sympathetic snout’ formed a means of shaming the procedure, the doctors, and the patients, and uniting the reading public into a community separate from those under attack. The association of the procedure with medical sympathy arose through the misapprehension that skin or flesh for the reconstructed nose would be taken from a different person; it was believed that unable to supersede the more authentic attachment to its original body, the graft would fail to adhere to the new one. This was the effect of medical sympathy which, as I shall discuss in relation to the poetic account given by Lady Hester Pulter, could be directly antithetical to any sympathetic feelings and desires of the doctor or the graft’s donor.
In *De curtorum chirurgia per insitionem* (Venice, 1597), Bolognese surgeon Gaspare Tagliacozzi (1545–97) explained in detail how a skin flap from the arm could be used to reconstruct a patient’s nose, lip, or ear. Despite this variety, Tagliacozzi became synonymous with the reconstruction of the nose. By far the single most frequently cited example of the popular myth around Tagliacozzi and the sympathetic snout – from which I take the phrase itself – is Samuel Butler’s great comic-epic poem *Hudibras* (1662–63). Butler describes the ‘learned Taliacotius’, who

…from
The brawny part of porter’s bum,
Cut supplemental noses which
Would last as long as parent breech,
But when the date of nock was out,
Off dropped the sympathetic snout.¹

Throughout the eighteenth century, these lines glossed almost all English references to Tagliacozzi, and served to bring rhinoplasty and the communicative effects of medical sympathy into general knowledge and ridicule.

At its base, the story of the sympathetic snout relates a failed nasal reconstruction. It thus occupies an important place in the history of plastic surgery. Yet it also represents an as yet unexplored satirical representation of sympathy’s troubling intersubjective potential. In the first part of this paper, I shall outline the importance of the nose in the late seventeenth century, and the state of medical discussion around Taliacotian rhinoplasty. I shall then examine the role of sympathy in this narrative, considering the manner in which the medical and emotional discourses of sympathy are entwined in these sources. As in later surgeons’s glossing of references to Tagliacozzi with *Hudibras*, medical and ‘literary’ treatments of rhinoplasty and sympathy were in dialogue throughout this period, and each offers interesting mediations of the discourse.

2 The significance of the nose

By the early eighteenth century, any missing nose was suspected to be the effect of venereal disease – specifically ‘the pox’ (syphilis), although this was often conflated with ‘the clap’ (gonorrhoea).² The pox had appeared suddenly in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, and rapidly became endemic. While there is some debate as to the level