



PROJECT MUSE®

*¿Entre el fiscal y el verdugo?: Mateu Orfila i Rotger
(1787–1853) y la toxicología del siglo XIX* by José
Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez (review)

Isabelle Renaudet

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 94, Number 3, Fall 2020, pp.
526–527 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2020.0062>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/775998>

José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez. *¿Entre el fiscal y el verdugo?: Mateu Orfila i Rotger (1787–1853) y la toxicología del siglo XIX*. Història, 186. València: Universitat de València, 2019. 388 pp. €23.50 (978-84-9134-487-2).

As a specialist in the history of toxicology, science historian José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez has devoted a new work to one of the founders of this discipline, Mathieu Orfila, whose work has interested him for several years. Much of the available bibliography on Orfila, however, has relied on local erudition or hagiography. Against this trend, Bertomeu Sánchez has explored the life of Orfila through his correspondence. His first book (2011) on the formative years in Paris (1808–1815) was followed by a second (2015) devoted to his career.¹

This new study is in line with recent contributions from historiography concerning the biographical genre (Burdiet and Foster) applied to the field of the history of science (Söderqvist).² It also takes into account the Spatial Turn while examining the places where knowledge is produced (laboratories, academies).

Taking up a series of articles published in scientific journals, Bertomeu Sánchez attempts to answer a major question: how does Orfila's work allow us to question the relationship among science, justice, and power in nineteenth-century Europe? The title of the book suggests the answer. Orfila's work is said to have made the court medical expert a mere auxiliary to the prosecution, whose interests he served. His place would therefore have been reduced to between the prosecutor and executioner. Bertomeu Sánchez shows how Orfila gave probative value to chemical analysis in the courts. A turning point in his career came when he introduced a new process that made it possible to detect minute doses of poison using the highly sensitive Marsh method. Judged superior to other methods used in toxicology (clinical symptoms of intoxication, autopsy results), the materiality of the chemical evidence is elevated by Orfila to the rank of infallible proof. However, this infallibility is not achieved, as the controversies that punctuate the course of the trials show. Orfila's main opponents accuse him of having distorted the work of medical experts and of having condemned sometimes innocent victims to the scaffold.

If Orfila succeeds in imposing this concept of forensic expertise based primarily on the chemical analysis of poisons, it is because he is an authority in the field of toxicology. The modalities by which this authority was constructed are at the heart of the work. Bertomeu Sánchez describes with great precision the mechanisms that led Orfila to climb the rungs of a prestigious career. The author's objective

1. José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez and Josep Miquel Vidal Hernández, eds., *Mateu Orfila: Autobiografía i correspondència, 1808–1815* (Maó, Spain: Institut Menorquí d'Estudis, 2011); José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez, *Venenos, ciencia y justicia: Mateu Orfila y su epistolario, 1816–1853* (Alicante, Spain: Universidad de Alicante, 2015).

2. Isabel Burdiet and Roy Foster, eds., *La historia biográfica en Europa: Nuevas perspectivas* (Zaragoza, Spain: Prensas Universitarias, 2015); Thomas Söderqvist, ed., *The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007).

of reconstructing the life course of the man of science is, from this point of view, a complete success. Orfila's success is part of a dynamic based first and foremost on personal aptitude: a pronounced taste for experimental research and rhetorical and pedagogical qualities that he manifests in the transmission of knowledge. The wise management of his professional life also contributes to Orfila's rise: the publication of his work gives rise to real editorial strategies; the academic positions he holds are intelligently used to his advantage. Orfila has created a network of social relations made up of friends who frequent his salon and those who are indebted to him. His proximity to the political power under the *Monarchie de Juillet* (1830–1848) remains one of the keystones on which his influence rests, founding his legitimacy in the society of his time.

The book lives up to its promises, in spite of some repetitions. It would have benefited from citing the work of Anne Carol, a specialist in the history of capital punishment, and that of Jonathan Barbier, author of a thesis on François-Vincent Raspail, one of Orfila's main opponents.³

Isabelle Renaudet

Aix Marseille University, CNRS, TELEM

Maria Böhmer. *The Man Who Crucified Himself: Readings of a Medical Case in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. *Clio Medica*, vol. 97. Leiden: Brill, 2019. x + 303 pp. Ill. (978-90-04-35359-6).

One morning in Venice in July 1805, a shoemaker was found hanging out of the window of his room, nailed to a wooden cross. Mattio Lovat was taken down by passersby and admitted to a hospital. He died a year later in a mental asylum. This book traces how Lovat's story became a widely cited case history in nineteenth-century Europe through close analyses of texts referring to Lovat that were published in Italian, French, German, and English. The publications and publication strategy of Cesare Ruggieri, a surgeon who treated Lovat, were central to the diffusion of the case. Ruggieri's narrative first appeared in Italian in 1806 as a twelve-page illustrated text within a compilation. An expanded French edition was published in the same year as a stand-alone text, a German translation in 1807, and another Italian edition in 1814. These narratives discussed Lovat's behavior before and after the events of July 1805, including his self-castration in 1802, another attempted self-crucifixion in 1803, and his refusal of food and "excessive" sunbathing while in the mental asylum of San Servolo.

3. Anne Carol, *Au pied de l'échafaud: Une histoire sensible de l'exécution* (Paris: Belin, 2017); Jonathan Barbier, *Les républiques de François-Vincent Raspail: entre mythes et réalités* (Université d'Avignon, 2016).