

SUSPECT AILMENTS: ILLNESS AND MORAL WEAKNESS IN LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY NEW SPAIN WRITINGS ON WOMEN

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Then the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: on your belly shall you crawl and *dirt shall you eat* all the days of your life."

Genesis 3:14

The argument of this essay centers on a close reading of two late sixteenth century texts written in Colonial Mexico. One was authored by Juan de Cárdenas (1563-1609), an influential physician associated with the then newly founded University of Mexico, and the other by Agustín Farfán (1532-1604), an Augustinian friar and also a doctor of the period. Both Cárdenas and Farfán expressed great concern over the problem of the "vicious women" in New Spain who were jeopardizing the health of the colony at large by consuming excessive amounts of chocolate, soil and "other rubbish." I will argue that their writings participated in and advanced a certain modality in early foundational discourses in America that masked opinions about the proper place of women in New World society (among other colonial subjects) within the language of science. I contend that scientific, and in particular medical discourse of the time "identified" and/or furthered biological and physiological imperatives regarding the nature and peoples in the New World that in turn supported the gender hierarchies and incipient social classification systems being espoused by other colonial and criollo discourses. A close reading of Cárdenas and Farfán

reveals just how actively medicine participated in the gendering of colonial female subjects in New Spain, legitimizing social and religious codes of behavior for women, and mapping the extent to which they were physically (meaning also mentally and morally) apt to participate in the governing spheres of New Spain society.

European women first arrived in the New World around 1521, and by mid-century they already comprised a significant portion of the colonizing population. In fact, the rate of immigration of Spanish women during the second half of the sixteenth century “reached a high point of 28 to 40 percent of all immigrants...declining slightly by the seventeenth century” (Socolow 54). This change in the male to female ratio was reflected in the medicinal texts of the time, which began to highlight women’s health concerns in herbals and compendia.¹ Their increased presence during this time was part of a larger venture for laying the foundations of the American colonies. Considered more stable purveyors of culture, women were encouraged by the Spanish Crown to relocate to the newly discovered lands. Though there was not a consistently enforced policy, many efforts were indeed made by the Spanish authorities to force husbands to bring their abandoned wives to the New World or face losing wealth and military rank. “Women,” Susan Migden Socolow reminds us, “were seen as ‘civilizers’; it was they who would teach proper behavior and social forms to their menfolk...Indeed, [they] were a metaphor for rootedness” (53).

Thus discussions on women’s health (biological as well as moral well-being) had larger implications, as not only were they an important and highly valued tool for the procreation and continuation of New Spain society, but the very success and stability of the colonial enterprise itself depended, to a certain degree, on their carrying out their required roles as pillars of European value systems. The combination of these factors may explain why Farfán and Cárdenas formulated such impassioned denunciations of the “vicio de comer tierra,” or dirt-eating illness among Spanish-born women in New Spain. At face value, it was a problem that threatened their patients’ health (and lives). Yet on a deeper level, as we shall see, they were very much concerned with how this distinctively female behavior was undermining the social order

they were attempting to enforce.

The Early Modern era in many regards heralded the revival of Greco-Roman authors, forms and ideas. Health practices were no exception, and the work of writers like Galen, Hippocrates, Pliny, and even more obscure physicians like Discorides, were transcribed and/or translated into the vernacular, becoming common currency among academic circles. The treatment of female patients relied on Classical categories used to organize nature, where sexual identity in humans was not the product of an essential or radical difference between males and females, but rather the result of a developmental failure during the gestation period. Women were indeed the “sex which is not one,” imperfect men, whose reproductive structures had remained hidden inside the body due to a lack of heat during fetal development (Laqueur 4). This one-sex model professed that men and women did possess analogous structures (ovaries as testes, the vaginal canal as an inverted inner penis), but their temperaments and the functioning of their humors were at odds: men were dry and hot, and thus enjoyed a stronger constitution, while women were wet and cold, hence frail and more susceptible to their surroundings. In Greco-Roman ethics, this vulnerability rendered women suspect, as their “state of nonresistance with regard to the force of pleasures” created a need for their submission and monitoring (Foucault 84). Modes of gendering females, males and homosexuals assumed the inferiority of this “passive” stance before pleasure, which was seen as the opposite of the virile ideal.³

However even within the one-sex model, there was one distinctively female structure outside the system of correspondences, and that was the womb.⁴ According to Plato’s *Timæus*, it was a separate organism within women, “an animal desirous of procreating children” which, if left unfertilized beyond youth, would “suffer the restraint with difficulty...wandering every way through the body, obstruct[ing] the passage of breath...and caus[ing] all-various diseases” (222).⁵ As many Classical historians have documented, women’s health in general was centered on their reproductive function, and ailments elsewhere in the body were seen as symptoms of a “suffocated” or “dislocated” uterus. The so-called *furor uterinus* was a condition resulting both from the

unstable nature of their bodies and from the excessive sexual appetite of this animal entity within them which longed for copulation, a 'fact' that placed virgins, widows, and married women who abstained from sex at particular risk. Therapeutic cures were designed to 'lure' the womb back into place and often entailed increased sexual activity, if possible, as well as "fumigating the vagina with sweet-smelling vapors...or, conversely, inhaling foul-smelling substances...to repel the organ and drive it from the upper parts of the body" (Dixon 16). Though the notion of the "wandering womb" had been superseded in medical circles in most of Europe by the sixteenth century, the remedies used to treat female ailments remained largely unchanged. But more importantly, the idea that they were weaker and given to excess grew stronger as it acquired other lowly resonances within the Judco-Christian tradition, both in the Old World and the New. Women's less resilient, womb-driven bodies made them *physically* more prone not just to illness but to sin, and thus more needful of societal (and masculine) control.

In New Spain there was a strong link between the religious and the scientific sectors, as evidenced by the volume in which medicinal texts were bought and housed at monastery libraries. The small-pox and *cocoliztle* epidemics of the 1540's and 1570's as well as the frequent outbreaks of typhoid fever and syphilis perhaps contributed to the fact that in 1576, medicine was the best-selling category among books imports on science in New Spain (Leonard 201).⁶ For instance, the *Tractado brebe de anathomia y chirurgia* (1579), one of the more interesting medical texts of the time from a literary standpoint, was written by an Augustinian friar, Farfán. Also known as Maestro Quoquim, Agustín Farfán was born in Seville and first trained not in religious studies but in medicine. In Spain he enjoyed considerable professional success and almost became Phillip II's personal physician, were it not for an acute hearing impairment that would plague him for the rest of his life (Somolinos d'Ardois 219-220). Upon his move to the New World he continued studying medicine at the University of Mexico, and it is only later in life, after the death of his wife, that he entered the Order of Saint Augustine. Farfán's work is worth

considering because in it he attempted to create a practical text, to be primarily used not by academics but by practitioners who lacked a mastery of Latin. The *Tractado* brought together and summarized precepts from Classical medicine, explicitly juxtaposing well-known European remedies with more available, less costly American alternatives, often brought in from Aztec medicinal practices.

Farfán's observations about women were consistent with the scientific view of the time previously outlined. What is striking about his writing, however, is how closely the text resembles other non-scientific works in the European literary tradition, primarily those in the vein of Capellanus, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Jean de Meun. Farfán writes:

Estas dos cosas hacen muy bien las mugeres de la Nueva España, porque a todas las horas del día y a muchas de la noche las verán comer golosinas. Mayormente el cacao comido y bebido, y este no les ha de faltar. Otras se hartan de chocolate, que es una bebida hecha de cosas entre sí muy contraries, gruesas y malas de digerir. Comen frutas verdes y mal maduras todo el año. Otras no se ven hartas de limas y sal de naranjas agrias y dulces.

Otras comen tierra de adobes, y no dejan tapadera de jarro colorado y aún el jarro que no tragan. Y si esto que digo hicieren solas las mozas; no me espantara tanto, mas las que tienen las cabezas llenas de canas, son más viciosas, y más desarregladas.... Y aunque les jure que las mata (como ellas lo ven) no hayan enmendarse, ni reparan las pobres que pecan mortalmente. Alumbre Dios sus entendimientos, porque no tomen la muerte con sus manos. (First book, fol. 34)

Notice how the passage begins with the promise of a positive evaluation: things that New Spain women do “very well,” only to reduce the scope of the observation to a commentary on snacking habits. Rhetorically, the author leads his reader along an ascending, expository line, introducing each new example in the same way (“otras se hartan,” “otras no se ven,” “otras comen”) and moves toward a conclusion that, in a variation of the *brevitatis formulae*, suggests that the problem is common not just to the cases he has observed but to *all* women in New Spain. Rather than ingest, they “gorge themselves,” not in moderation but “at all hours of the day and [...] night,” not only young girls but elderly women too, and swallowing not just the adobe soil, but its earthenware container as well. Further, the register of verbs and especially of the superlatives in the passage serves a comic effect that is deployed from the same literary tropes found in the misogynist tradition, particularly in the fabliaux. Women in their folly pay no heed to the wise counsel Farfán gives them, and only divine intervention would be able to change the course of their otherwise lost cause. In this sense, Farfán’s discussion of female geophagy mirrored the kinds of literary elaborations of the subject taking place in Spanish Golden Age drama, as dirt-eating women characters can be found in the works of several canonical writers, such as Tirso, Quevedo, Góngora and Lope, to name a few.⁷

Though it seems that geophagy was not exclusive to Spain, according to Alfred Morel-Fatio: “Ce qui toutefois distingue à cet regard l’Espagne des autres pays, c’est non l’usage mais l’abus de ce genre de nourriture” (43). As for why Spanish women were given to consuming soil, there are several possible reasons: modern approximations suggest perhaps a mineral deficiency or, from a comparative history point of view, maybe a form of self-inflicted violence, in light that dirt-eating would later become a form of suicide, particularly among slave populations in Brazil. Covarrubias, however, suggests a different possibility in his well-known seventeenth century *Tesoro*, one that probably comes closer to the ideas of the period at hand. He explains that mud was either a vicious delicacy (“golosina viciosa”) or a cosmetic method used to lighten the skin (“por amortiguar

la color") (239). This is an interesting point indeed, given the changing racial attitudes in some parts of Spain during the sixteenth century, particularly in frontier zones and port cities, not only in terms of Moorish populations but in reference to Africans too. As Mary Elizabeth Perry notes: "At the end of the sixteenth century slaves accounted for nearly 30 percent of the population of the Archbishopric of Seville, and many of these were of mixed blood, the progeny of slave mothers and unnamed white fathers or masters who expected the sexual services of these women" (79). As we shall see, this explanation would be consistent with the treatment that Juan de Cárdenas affords the problem in his own text, though perhaps his is more poignant given the proliferation of human taxonomical systems in New Spain during the century that followed.

Cárdenas was born in Spain but came to the New World while still very young. He was a physician and university professor in New Spain and New Galicia, and his writings display a wide-ranging knowledge of Classical sources. In his ambitious *Primera parte de los problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias* (1591) he set out to dispel what were, in his view, unfortunate misconceptions regarding the evaluation of the New World that understood it to be a radically different place. Cárdenas maintained that such arguments were the product of inaccurate observations that incorrectly assessed the essential qualities of the American landscape, such as which parts were hot, cold, humid or dry, and how that in turn affected the constitution of the flora and fauna, and the temperaments of the human populations.

Cárdenas was part of what can be called a second generation, a group that without necessarily having been born in New Spain, already began to show allegiance with its new home. Feeling more and more authorized at the economic and political level, this group now sought the intellectual legitimacy of the colony, as Alfonso Reyes explains:

Cincuenta años después de la conquista española
[...] encontramos ya en México un modo
de ser americano: bajo las influencias del nuevo
ambiente, la nueva instalación económica,
los roces con la sensibilidad del indio y el instinto

de propiedad que nace de la ocupación
anterior, aparece entre los mismos españoles de
México un sentimiento de aristocracia
Indiana, que se entiende ya muy mal con el impulso
arribista de los españoles recién
venidos. Abundan al efecto los testimonios
literarios: ya en la poesía satírica y popular de
la época, ya en las observaciones sutiles de los
sabios peninsulares, como Juan de
Cárdenas. (304)

On the surface, Cárdenas's treatment of dirt-eating women is very similar to Farfán's:

[L]a primera causa es el ser todas las mugeres y
señoras de las Indias, mayormente las de
Nueva España, dadas a este vicio de comer tierra,
barro, cacao y semejantes
immundicias[...][P]odría alguno preguntar por qué
causa, más las mugeres desta tierra que
otras de diferentes provincias fuessen dadas a
comer tierra y cacao, respondo que muchas
lo hacen de puro vicio, pretendiendo solamente con
esto, traer quebrado el color, que
llaman color de damas. (248)

Again we see the same all-inclusive and totalizing statements as well as the same reasons: all women, though mostly those in New Spain, eat these substances either out of vice or to lighten their complexion. But Cárdenas goes further than Farfán, and intimates the possibility of a scientific explanation that recuperates the Galenic tradition and re-contextualizes its parameters for the needs of New Spain's environment. To quote Cárdenas: "La segunda causa es el temple de las Indias en esta forma: como en las Indias abunda tanta suma de humedad flemática y fría, y la matriz de su naturaleza sea de la mesma complexión, acuden todos los excrementos y humores gruesos, lentos y fríos a las mesmas venas y vasos de la dicha matriz" (249).

Notice that this model represents a new problem. While in Europe the land enjoyed more temperate degrees of heat and dryness, the New World with its abundant cold and phlegmatic humidity mirrored women's inner hodies, being of "la mesma complexión," which further aggravated their vulnerability before illness. I would argue that women's own nature, cold and humid, was seen as conspiring against them in the New World, rendering New Spain's female subjects even more weak and inadequate, in essence, less fit to actively participate in the decision-making arena of the viceroyalty.

In conclusion, the kinds of textual mediations proposed by Farfán, Cárdenas and several other authors in the late sixteenth century prefigured later debates around key elements of New World ideologies on social taxonomies, gender difference and race. This new generation of criollo and radicado intellectuals fostered the idea of New Spain not as the barbaric and exotic land of discovery period writings, but as an orderly continuation of the civilized world and its value systems. More study is needed on the topic of dirt-eating in New Spain and its ramifications: whether it was merely a cosmetic trend brought over from Europe, a pleasurable activity associated with the rise in popularity of cocoa and its derivatives, or perhaps a palliative pointing to the anxiety over miscegenation, not only in America but in Spain as well. What we can say with certainty is that the "vicio de comer tierra" was seen by these intellectuals as undermining a larger project for the institutional and ideological consolidation of Mexico, and thus elicited strong denunciations and censure. Though seemingly limited to the scope of medicine and science, at the core of these assessments lay the vision of a foundational plan that did not provide for the active participation of women in the leadership of New Spain and its political or cultural institutions. It remains to be seen to what extent these turn-of-the-century medical modes of observation played a role in crafting or enforcing the control mechanisms for women in what has been called the "lettered city" of the following century.

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NOTES

¹ A good example of this trend is Alonso López de Hinojosos' *Summa y reeopilación de chirurgia*, first published in 1578, whose second 1595 edition added new sections solely on women's medicine and childcare.

² Luce Irigaray's well-known feminist treatise.

³ Foucault writes: "In the eyes of the Greeks, what constituted ethical negativity par excellence was clearly not the loving of both sexes, not was it the preferring of one's own sex over the other; it consisted in being passive in regard to the pleasures" (85-86).

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of period notions on female sex structures, particularly in the context of France, see Katharine Park's "The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570-1620" in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Routledge, 1997: 170-193.

⁵ For a more detailed examination of the various illnesses caused by the "wandering womb" see Dixon's book (Works Cited) as well as *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. Trans. Monica Green. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001.

⁶ As is well known, the majority of natural histories that have come down to us were written by Jesuits or by figures associated with their bibliographical collections.

⁷ Morcl-Fatio's article chronicles in a more detailed fashion the presence of dirt-caters in the Golden Age stage, p. 41-49.