Caldwell on González Espitia, 'Sifilografía: A History of the Writerly Pox in the Eighteenth-Century Hispanic World'

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As Spanish conquistadors colonized the Americas, they brought with them biological warfare that introduced a new threat to local indigenous populations. While these diseases devastated native populations, they were unsuccessful in destroying them completely. Due to the elevated mortality of both natives and Europeans, the colonial administration implemented a series of health reforms and created a system of laws and institutions. These codes included building infirmaries, implementing dietary restrictions, and enforcing sanitary legislation during periods of epidemics. Despite its being one of the most prevalent of all afflictions, medical practitioners did not draw upon contemporary medical and scientific advancements to curtail the spread of syphilis.

Sifilografía: A History of the Writerly Pox in the Eighteenth-Century Hispanic World is a unique blend of cultural history and literary studies that reveals the underbelly of Spanish society and thought concerning syphilis, or gálico, as it was called. Employing the image of a tapestry as a guiding metaphor, associate professor of romance studies Juan Carlos González Espitia examines how gálico became a bridge between multiple worlds on several levels. The ways in which González Espitia masterfully weaves this metaphor throughout the narrative is part of what makes this book especially unique, and might I add, beautiful in its execution. This comprehensive study straddles multiple disciplines, namely, literature, medicine, public policy, and plastic arts. Highly original in scope, Sifilografía is part of an emerging scholarship that examines the intellectual transatlantic exchange of rich literary and scientific texts between Spain and its colonies.

The tapestry functions as the structure of the book. González Espitia employs the outer surface of the tapestry to compare the interplay and interactions between multiple levels of Spanish society in the eighteenth century, describing it as the "smooth" surface, or that which is meant to be seen by the world. It is the realm in which "overt serious discourses, such as aestheticized and didactic poetry" occur (p. 21). The unwoven threads on the back of the tapestry also serve an important function. According to González Espitia, it is here that rampant sexuality, sensuality, and venereal disease exist but are intentionally obscured by the viewer, or society. In Sifilografía, the author aims to recount the story of the "back of the tapestry," of Spanish society during the eighteenth through early nineteenth century, and connect the smooth surface of social behavior with the unwoven threads of meaning behind it.
While the tapestry serves as a model, *galício* represents the bridge between those multiple worlds. *Galício*, quite literally, penetrated all sectors of society. It spread among the wealthy and the poor alike, from the wealthy to the poor and vice versa, and from mother to infant. As González Espitia aptly describes, it was “as democratic and egalitarian as the American, French, and Latin American revolutions dreamed of being” (p. 25). While *galício* is described throughout the book as a grand equalizer in that suffering and death transgressed social lines and hierarchy, this relationship was in many ways paradoxical in nature. Power and influence played a central role in how treatments were rendered and perhaps more importantly, how one was viewed. Treatments varied depending on one’s social and economic position, and medical professionals believed that the disease manifested itself in different ways depending on one’s profession or occupation. The affliction, one could argue, was contracted during activities that might take place on either side of the tapestry—those regarded as either innocent or immoral.

While reading, I could not help but recall to mind *The Pasteurization of France*, in which Bruno Latour argues that science and technology involve a series of actors and agents and that in order “to make a sociology of bacteriology, one needs a society.”[1] In a similar vein, González Espitia reconstructs eighteenth-century Spanish society through a deep examination of literary essays, novels, poems, art, and medical documents, uncovering obscure details in order to fully elucidate the ways this disease impacted everyday life and thought. The author contends that even the act of naming this affliction had particular significance because of its pervasiveness: an “unmanageable scourge like syphilis was controlled, if only symbolically, by labelling it” (p. 14). The term *galício* was employed to describe the affliction and its sufferers alike. In a way, González Espitia’s method of using the disease to bridge the two worlds of the tapestry—the pure and the diseased—comes into play. By labeling the disease, the afflicted become known by their disease. Spanish literary authors employed *galício* as a trope to insult or offend a political enemy or label one’s fears, and in the case of the French, used “mal francés” as their favorite insult.

Once Philip V was crowned king of Spain, an influx of French political power and culture, particularly in the form of translated texts, took place. This rapid expansion of French influence provoked an uneasiness among Spaniards, who, according to González Espitia, connected it to the threat of spreading disease. Thus, the French people and culture—those born of it or even admiring of it—were either regarded as diseased or as vectors of disease.

Naming the disease also extended to Spain’s relationship with its colonies in the Americas, where *galício* is believed to have originated. The phrase *mal de las indias* came to signify that the colonies represented “a productive yet annoying appendage” for Spain (p. 134). Drawing on a number of canonical American authors, González Espitia illustrates how they sought to refute the notion that *galício* originated in the Americas as well as illustrate that the land produced a wealth of botanical plants that could cure otherwise untreatable ailments like syphilis. While the proliferation of *galício* had given the Americas a disreputable image in some respects, the dissemination and exchange of scientific and medical texts concerning its cure, he asserts, would eventually lead to a movement of self-definition. In his comparative analysis of the American, French, and Latin American revolutions, González Espitia seeks to upend the argument that the colonies in Spanish America suddenly banded together in revolt in 1810. In so doing, he joins a body of well-established historical scholarship which supports the notion that, much like in the American and French cases, a confluence of events, dissemination of knowledge, and active level of public (and private)
engagement had transpired in Latin America well before José Martí’s proclamation of “Nuestra América” of 1891. González Espitia’s contribution is original in that he stakes the claim that the movement for self-definition was already well underway by the end of the eighteenth century, and that it had appeared in scientific and medical texts a century prior.

_Sifilografía_ examines the interplay between the respectable realm and underbelly of Spanish society in the metropole and its colonies from the eighteenth through the early nineteenth century. This work is equally appropriate for audiences who specialize in Spanish history and literature, romance studies, and the history of medicine and science. A concise preface introduces the reader to the eighteenth-century Hispanic world and provides a brief overview of syphilis. As a historian, I was convinced by González Espitia’s argument that ideas of self-definition circulated in the Americas well before the nineteenth century, due in part to the influence of _tertulias_. However, some readers might wish to see more in-depth analysis of this argument from a historical standpoint, as scholars have argued that the revolutions were marked by more diversity than unity, as many civil wars were unleashed within the larger rebellions. Overall, this fascinating work is remarkable in its originality as well as the depth and breadth with which it examines how _gálico_ permeated nearly every aspect of Spanish society and the Americas.

**Note**


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