

2017

Review of Elena del Río Parra, *Materia médica: rareza, singularidad y accidente en la España temprano-moderna*

Patricia W. Manning
University of Kansas, andavis@astate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Manning, Patricia W. (2017) "Review of Elena del Río Parra, *Materia médica: rareza, singularidad y accidente en la España temprano-moderna*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1265>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol42/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Río Parra, Elena del. *Materia médica: rareza, singularidad y accidente en la España temprano-moderna*. North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 266 pp. + 12 ill.

In her introduction, Elena del Río Parra asserts that Spanish medical texts generally have been studied through the scientific criteria of “avance,” “progreso,” and “efectividad,” without employing “las herramientas propias de las humanidades” (13). Her volume eloquently proves the value of a humanistic approach that moves beyond the disciplinary commonplaces that can circumscribe scholarship about early modern Spanish medical texts. By eschewing the trope of the failure of seventeenth-century Spanish science that prevails in both the history of medicine and the literary studies’ approach, which is often conditioned by Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas and Juan del Valle y Caviedes’ satires of medical professionals in the early modern Hispanic worlds, Río Parra bases her analysis on the texts themselves. This methodology is especially useful in moving past generalizations about the impact of the Spanish Inquisition on medical practices. In point of fact, as Río Parra illustrates, medical discourse problematizes the idea that the Inquisition prohibited astrological predictions and other attempts to foresee the future. Predictions based on “natural causes” were acceptable, particularly in the purview of medicine. Moreover, Río Parra also establishes that even medical works by non-Spanish authors that were prohibited by the Inquisition were known in Spain; however, Spanish medical writers were shrewd about the manner in which they cited banned authorities.

As Río Parra specifies, she limits her study to mainstream medical texts, thus more convincingly demonstrating the significant role that unusual and extraordinary cases played in the therapeutic discourse of the day. As Chapter 1 shows, medical practitioners debated whether their texts should be directed toward fellow specialists in Latin or available to surgeons and a wider public in Spanish. Although some physicians preferred to circulate their texts in Latin, and Francisco Arceo disseminated texts in vernacular languages other than Spanish, others like Antonio Pérez maintained that these resources should be available in abbreviated form in Spanish. Sometimes medical cases were printed and sold as broadsheets, as was surgeon Pedro Cachapero de Arévalo’s account of his treatment of a patient with a large tumor on his leg. The narrative techniques employed in medical texts are the focus of Chapter 2. Medical writers, such as the surgeon Juan Bautista Ramírez de Arellano y Almansa recounted incidents from their practices, without drawing conclusions, for the delectation of their readers. Chapter 3 concerns the aforementioned manner in which medical practice incorporated predictive methods.

Chapter 4 broadly examines the relationship between religion and medicine. The topics analyzed range widely from Juan Eulogio Pérez Fadrique’s attempt to market his embalming services beyond the upper classes to mummies and biblical medical rarities. Whereas other European countries used mummified remains in medicines, these preserved cadavers were objects of study in the Hispanic worlds. At times, when medical practitioners attempted to alter long-standing religious practices because of health concerns, their advice was soundly rejected. When Juan Bautista Manzaneda Molina encouraged Capuchin friars to change their everyday habits and bed linens in times of sickness, his ideas caused a vehement reaction, including the prohibition of a text by the

Inquisition. Despite this example, as Río Parra's volume amply demonstrates, many men of the cloth were extremely interested in medical issues. As a result, the plumbing of biblical texts for examples of medical oddities became a common practice.

By transcribing selections of early modern imprints and manuscripts in four appendices, Río Parra depicts the breadth of medical-surgical discourse during the era. The first appendix transcribes Cachapero de Arévalo's broadsheet concerning his patient with an unusual growth on his leg. Although these short texts generally did not contain many illustrations, this massive horn-shaped tumor was depicted visually, and Río Parra's volume reproduces the image. The second set of documents concerns the case of Roque Martínez, a shepherd whose body began to grow branches after a fall into a blackthorn shrub. In the third appendix, Francisco Salado Garcés relates several unusual occurrences in an outbreak of epidemic disease in the Seville area. Finally, the fourth excerpts Francisco de Godoy's observations about why certain cadavers do not decay.

Materia médica demonstrates that these scientific texts, which are infrequently studied by scholars of the humanities, have deep connections to humanistic narrative techniques. According to Río Parra's research, physicians routinely include details about their patients, like their places of residence and professions, not because they are relevant to medical analyses, but because they create narrative interest. Even the orthodox medical texts this volume studies incorporate legends. Moreover, these works moved beyond medical circles to become reading material for the public at large. No doubt Río Parra's work, along with Enrique García Santo-Tomás' 2014 *La musa refractada: literatura y óptica en la España del Barroco*, will help bring medical and scientific discourses into the canon of texts analyzed in early modern Spanish historical, cultural and literary studies.

Patricia W. Manning
University of Kansas