

## **Maria M. Portuondo, *The Spanish Disquiet: The Biblical Natural Philosophy of Benito Arias Montano***

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Among the lingering effects of mid-twentieth-century historiography of the Scientific Revolution, the effective exclusion of early modern Iberian science from the wider narrative has been one of the most persistent. The blinkeredness, not to say the basic implausibility, of such accounts has been pointed out often enough that they should by now have been thoroughly discredited. Alongside a rich vein of Iberian scholarship in English that has demonstrated beyond doubt the emergence of a robust tradition of empiricism in Spain, Portugal and their empires in the sixteenth century, there is also a growing literature analysing the origins and durability of such exclusion. With *The Spanish Disquiet*, Maria Portuondo makes a fresh and vital contribution to both fields. This is an intellectual biography of the Spanish philologist and biblical scholar Benito Arias Montano that reads his philosophy of nature and his biblical scholarship together, with fascinating results.

The disquiet of the title refers to the difficulty of reconciling existing philosophical systems with the early emergence of empirical approaches to knowledge that characterized the century of discovery and the exploitation of the Spanish Empire's newly acquired territories. What made the disquiet distinctively Spanish was the strong natural-theological tradition in which this tension was embedded, and the commitment to Catholic universalism and doctrinal orthodoxy of those who grappled with it. Arias Montano's concern, as Portuondo brilliantly draws out, was to develop a natural philosophy that had no need of scholastic systems and was consistent with empirical observation while remaining ultimately grounded in biblical exegesis – specifically philological exegesis.

In that respect Arias Montano's philosophical preoccupations mirrored his theological ones. As the editorial overseer of Christophe Plantin's polyglot Bible, he sought as much as possible to emphasize the need to study the sacred scriptures from 'the purest original sources' – even if that meant in practice an implicit challenge to the authority of the Vulgate. His approach was predicated on the notion that the study of Hebrew afforded access to a more essential connection between signs and signifiers, and the study of Hebrew etymologies a more essential one still. The language that brought mankind closer to God through an immutable relation between words and things necessarily implied an immutable nature (p. 114).

The heart of Portuondo's book is her documentation of Arias Montano's exegetical strategy, by which a commitment to unswerving biblical literalism nevertheless afforded a surprisingly considerable interpretive latitude (because of the variety of possibilities that each Hebrew root contained). The first three chapters respectively offer an incisive guide to recent scholarship on Arias Montano and to the intellectual context of the Spanish disquiet, and an account of the exegetical and natural-theological tradition to which Arias Montano was responding. Chapter 4 details his work on the Antwerp polyglot and develops examples of his philological method, and Chapter 5 traces the controversies he faced in the context of Counter-Reformation Europe – notably savage anti-Semitic

opposition to any scholarly activity that could be spun as Judaizing. Chapter 6 documents Arias Montano's considerable activity as a collector of books (on his own behalf and on that of Philip II, whose library at El Escorial he supervised and curated), his evident familiarity with contemporary geography and botany, and his role as a broker helping friends and colleagues to acquire philosophical books and instruments.

The second half of the book traces Arias Montano's efforts, during the last years of his life, to extend his methodological commitments into the epistemological realm by using the same principles to develop a biblical natural philosophy, independent of existing philosophical systems and perfectly reconciled to Scripture. This *magnum opus*, as Arias Montano himself referred to it, consisted of the *Anima* (1593), the posthumous and incomplete *Corpus* (1601), and the projected but unknown *Vestis*. Portuondo draws out with great care and patience the intellectual distinctiveness of her biblist's project, in particular its mingling of humanistic and theological genres, tenets and approaches. For instance, Arias Montano elected to cast his natural philosophy in the form of humanistic *historiae*, yet uniquely 'refused to consult – or acknowledge in print – any authority other than the Bible' (p. 192). Equally, he was capable of reading the Pentateuch within a humanistic frame, treating its composition as a historically specific process that was informed by the historical specifics of Moses' own life and surroundings (pp. 193–4). He followed the Church Fathers in not regarding the biblical account of Creation as a systematic treatise on the workings of nature, but took it as axiomatic that with its help forms of prelapsarian knowledge would be recoverable. And, crucially, he was prepared to use scriptural etymologies and the experience of empirical observation to verify one another – so the evidence of the senses could be used, he maintained, to choose correctly among the variety of possible meanings of the Hebrew text of the Bible. At the same time he maintained his total rejection of reason as a speculative instrument.

As Portuondo shows, Arias Montano's quarrel with existing natural philosophies was a disagreement of principle and methodology, not a wholesale rejection of all scholastic thought. It was perfectly possible to arrive at similar conceptions by a different route (or root). For instance, the four metaphysical principles Arias Montano found in the account of creation echoed the four Aristotelian causes (p. 232). Yet his explanation of the operation of these metaphysical principles – especially of ELOHIM, the spirit of God that was 'the designer and overseer of Creation' (p. 229), and of MAIM, the dual liquid that was its raw material – became the basis of distinctive accounts of cosmology, matter theory and mechanics, and natural history (the subjects of Chapters 8, 9 and 10). Portuondo's contention that Arias Montano was developing an original and distinctive hermeneutics of nature gains weight from her observation that even his acolytes and champions had difficulty following him, reintroducing into explanations of his work philosophical terminology that Arias Montano had been careful to avoid (Chapter 11). This, coupled with the fact that the great work was never finished, helps explain why Arias Montano's natural philosophy did not enjoy an afterlife equal to his contemporary stature. Yet Portuondo's final chapter offers a beautiful twist in the tale of his efforts to create a new epistemology that would resolve the Spanish disquiet. Arias Montano's work ended up in the hands of Roberto Bellarmino for expurgation, who is best known to historians of science for his role in the Galilean controversies. The instrument of Galileo's censure was the same type of biblical literalism on which Arias Montano sought to ground a new natural philosophy, yet Portuondo is able to show how Bellarmino's cosmological concerns were also informed by a desire for empirical explanations consistent with such literalism. The intention, I think, is not so much to argue for the specific influence of Montanian ideas on Bellarmino as to show just how seriously empiricism was taken as an intellectual tool even among the guardians of Catholic orthodoxy. This move neatly allows her account of Iberian science to connect to the grand narratives of Western

historiography of science while undercutting some of their more obviously chauvinistic assumptions. This superb book is able to show how connected Spanish thinkers were to the currents of European natural-philosophical thought in the sixteenth century, the distinctiveness and originality with which they could respond, and their efforts (and resistances) towards integrating empiricism into new natural-philosophical frameworks. It is a work of enormous scope and outstanding scholarship, all the more impressive for being on entirely new terrain for the author yet developing the insights of her previous monograph. It should be required reading for intellectual historians of early modern Europe.

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## **Elizabeth A. Williams, *Appetite and Its Discontents: Science, Medicine and the Urge to Eat, 1750–1950***

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In her introduction, Elizabeth Williams explains that the chosen focus of her book is based upon twin assumptions: that ‘troubles of appetite’ are involved in our current widespread ‘nutritional disarray’ and that thinking about appetite in society has been shaped by scientists and doctors. Unfortunately, however, in the 269 pages of text and sixty-two pages of notes that she devotes to exploring ‘appetite’ in science and medicine from 1750 to 1950, she amply demonstrates that, among most of the disparate actors she discusses, ‘appetite’ has not been a subject for prolonged and focused research and theorizing. Given the ‘appetite study disarray’ that she illustrates, it may be asked whether, had Williams studied the question of what ‘appetite’ in wider culture owes to science and medicine, she might have come up with a different answer to the assumption that forms part of the rationale for the book. ‘Appetite research findings’ have made no impact upon modern food cultures comparable, for example, to the impact of vitamin science or research on energy requirements.

It is clear from Williams’s account that there was no community of appetite scholars closely engaged with one another and therefore no clear and sustained paradigm shifts, as a result of which Williams is left with inventing arbitrary fifty-year blocks of time to order her material, which correspond to four parts of the book. However, the material is not so easily disciplined: in Section Two, for example, covering 1800–1850, she spends the first chapter discussing appetite in the thought of Erasmus Darwin and Xavier Bichat, both of whom died in 1802.

But Williams displays remarkable skill and encyclopedic knowledge in mining the output of scholars and practitioners in a wide range of fields for their thought and research on appetite. Sometimes she has to rely on what amounts to passing remarks on appetite in large bodies of writing. She covers physiology, clinical medicine, psychiatry, psychology, psychoanalysis, natural history, ethology and anthropology (some in more detail than others). Except in, for example, the discussion of the work of Jacob Moleschott,