

Marlen Bidwell-Steiner, Universität Wien

Purity and Pollution - the Early Modern Discourse of Othering

in the Context of Venereal Diseases

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The Spanish invasion of the Americas not only colonized territories but also human bodies. The devastating effect, which the colonists' "gift" of swine fever and smallpox had for the pre-Columbian peoples was until recently only a footnote in European historiography. In contrast, the epidemical spread of the "nova aegritudo" (new disease), syphilis, in Europe during the first half of the 16th century had an enormous impact on medical, theological, and, not least, fictional writings. Although the etiology of the disease by now is well-known, its epidemic burst on the threshold to modernity is still a matter of debate. But the majority of researchers agree that soldiers from Christopher Columbus's crew brought it back to their homeland.

Quarrels over the "birth" of plagues mostly prove to be unproductive. Yet, they testify to the social treatments of anxieties and phantasies and are therefore a good lead to understand significant ruptures in the fabric of Early Modern culture. To trace the enormous bearing of the syphilis on European regulations and mentalities, I will confront medical treatises and colonial chronicles with literary texts from the first half of the 16th century. A central figure in my re-reading will be Francisco Delicado whose *Lozana Andaluza*, in tandem with his nonfictional texts are good examples for the shifting semiology of sickness between a batch of virility and a stigma of the impure female body.

I will point to the many explanations in Spanish, Italian and German writings, which are relying on well-established mythologies and prejudices such as Jews poisoning wells, astrological signs and divine ordeals. The plague affirms evil. Yet, it is an evil that inexorably sticks on the Other: Amerindian (and) women.