

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Gansen, *Natural Designs: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and the Invention of New World Nature*

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Literary scholar Elizabeth Gansen spotlights the changing structures of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's natural history in 1526, 1535 and 1535–41 to reveal an iterative learning process. Throughout his life, Oviedo produced a dizzying array of printed and unpublished texts, including natural histories, woodcuts, chivalric poetry, drawings and gossipy dialogues on elites. Gansen argues that Oviedo's natural history must be read within this larger corpus and kept separate from the parts of his *Historia* that do not deal with flora and fauna, such as information on conquest, colonial administration and Indigenous customs (pp. 5, 167). How to separate Oviedo's role as natural historian from his political offices as *escribano mayor de minas, del crimen, y juzgado del herrar los indios* (chief scribe of the mines, crime and Court that Brands the Indians) and, later, chronicler of the Indies and overseer of goldworks, is the book's core provocation (p. 11).

Chapter 1 shows how Oviedo fashioned himself as Pliny's heir: natural historian and man of lettered leisure in Italy, studying country gardens. There are brief overviews of botanical histories beyond Italy, such as the Islamic gardens and water management systems of southern Spain that 'likely informed' Oviedo's perspective and Afro-Indigenous technologies of maize agriculture, which Oviedo described 'having cultivated the crop himself' and supported with citations from 'Virgil, Herrera, and Pliny to lend credence to the agricultural techniques colonists have learned from the natives' (pp. 30, 26).

The influence of Italian visual culture and natural history on the Hispano-Flemish art that dominated the court of Oviedo's patrons is the subject of Chapter 2. Following Pliny and Petrarch, Oviedo's 'alter egos' in the *Batallas y quinquagenas* dialogue about the inability of written and visual forms to convey reality (p. 36). The tactile immediacy and communication of 'moral character' in medallions offer a solution to the problem of representation – one seemingly divorced from questions of value and extraction, which are not discussed (p. 58).

Guided by this material turn, Chapter 3 studies flora and fauna in Oviedo's *Sumario* (1526), which has been overlooked by scholars who 'conflate' it with his *Historia* (1535) (p. 62). Those scholars published in 1975, 1989 and 2004–9, so historians of science might wish for engagement with work by Pablo Gómez on medicine (*The Experiential Caribbean* (2017)), Marcy Norton on technology ('Subaltern technologies and early modernity in the Atlantic world', *Colonial Latin American Review* (2017) 26(1)), and, specific to the *Sumario*, Mauro José Caraccioli's political theory of Spanish natural history (*Writing the New World* (2021)).

Chapter 4 sets up the remaining sections of the book, all of which focus on the *Historia* (1535). Whereas the *Sumario* followed Pliny, Oviedo reorders chapters in the *Historia* to emphasize ‘his firsthand experiences’ and downplay information from sources that ‘range from indigenous inhabitants, sailors, doctors, and pharmacists’ (pp. 83, 93). Because ‘Oviedo understands the natives to have been the first to domesticate this wilderness’, most botanical information comes from Indigenous experts, blurring the line between secondary citation and first-hand observation (p. 93). The only distance between the two comes from Oviedo’s dismissive remarks about what Gansen calls ‘the natives’ ignorance’ of fish behaviour, in an instance where he misunderstands Taíno philosophies of animal–human relationships (p. 95).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the relationship between word and image and Oviedo’s access to information. Chapter 5 explores visual similarities with German physicians Otto Brunfels (1530) and Leonhart Fuchs (1542). Oviedo did not know their books, but the *Historia*’s approach to pairing lettered descriptions and visual accounts suggests ‘a shared cultural framework’ that emerged between 1526 and 1535 (p. 112). Case studies focus on loose illustrations in the *Sumario*, the use of images to reinforce arguments in the *Historia*, and novel depictions of roots and internal plant features, suggesting Oviedo’s ongoing search for ‘visual comprehensiveness’ (p. 137). Because many of the images depict ‘flawless specimens’ and ‘idealized versions of the phenomena they represent’, it is not clear whether they reflect changing ideas of scientific communication or fantastic projections of colonial wealth (p. 125).

Chapter 6 analyses colonialism as an impediment to scientific knowledge. When the owner of a state-sponsored monopoly on balsam prevents Oviedo from studying it, he explains the episode in detail rather than staying silent. At other times, intellectual blockages are of Oviedo’s own making. His early attempts to classify cactus by function are thwarted by the plant’s adaptative capabilities, which result in changing numbers and sizes of leaves. Oviedo must therefore study entire specimens, rather than the isolated leaves and branches that dominate his visual language. His similarly vexed attempts to classify the iguana as fish or meat, a key distinction during Lent, would have made for excellent comparison with research on how Tupi, African, Spanish and Portuguese communities approached the same question (Nina Vieira and Cristina Brito, ‘Brazilian manatees (re)discovered’, *International Journal of Maritime History* (2017) 29(3)).

Natural Designs concludes with book 12 of the Monserrat manuscript, which is not publicly available but was shared by a collector. Gansen argues that reliance on published editions has led to persistent misunderstandings of Oviedo. This is sure to be true, because book 12 adds thirty-two chapters and nine images, but since ‘a relatively small number of these chapters are “new”’, it is not entirely clear how our knowledge would change (p. 166). The Monserrat manuscript’s contribution seems to be its arrangement of information, rather than the information itself. For these reasons, *Natural Designs* will interest students and scholars of early modern book history and the history of communication, especially in Spain and Italy.