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CONVENTIONAL BOTANY OR UNORTHODOX
ORGANICS?: ON THE *MEOLLO/CORTEZA*
METAPHOR IN *ADMIRACIÓN OPERUM DEY*
OF TERESA DE CARTAGENA

JOHN K. MOORE, JR.

THIS article investigates the intra- and extra-textual implications of the *meollo/corteza* dichotomy in Teresa de Cartagena's *Admiración operum Dey*, a letter from the first half of the fifteenth century that the Castilian nun wrote in defense of her intelligence and ability to write. The particular image of the pith and bark is an indirect offshoot of Adam von Sankt Viktor's twelfth-century *Nux est Christus* metaphor, which aligns the nut's inner meat (analogous to the *meollo*) with Christ's divinity, and the external parts of the nut (analogous to the *corteza*) with His perishable body. The metaphor can also be understood within the broader context of plant imagery present in Teresa's letter, in which the author assigns the *meollo* to women and the *corteza* to men. Seidenspinner-Núñez observes that this spatial designation is a reversal of the gendered interiority and exteriority found in traditional medieval hermeneutics. Furthermore, before, during and after Teresa's day, *meollo* had a range of meanings beyond "pith," meanings that were probably well known and that definitely were linked with intelligence, the regulation of mental functions, and marrow, or essential matter. It is only on the surface, then, that Lewis Joseph Hutton, the principal modern editor of Teresa's texts, is right to claim of her that "no hay nada en su obra que no sea católico y ortodoxo" (27)¹ because this view does not take into account

¹ Deyermond reaffirms this position, apparently based on Hutton's observation (26). He even goes as far as to say that "She was not a rebel in any sense" (28); yet he does acknowledge the exceptionality of her condition as a woman writer during the medieval period.

what is possibly happening at the core of Teresa's apparently traditional and conservative views. By understanding the complete array of *meollo*'s meanings, it seems highly probable that linking women with such characteristics as *seso* is in keeping with Teresa's goal of justifying herself as a woman of intelligence. Additionally, Teresa's application of this term underscores the tension between external and internal space in her writing, areas whose boundaries are continually being pushed, condensed and tested in both her imagery and in the act itself of writing as a woman during the first half of the fifteenth century.

This article first establishes the social context of Teresa writing as a female during the first half of the fifteenth century and then discusses her imagery in relation to conventional medieval interpretations. Subsequently, it analyzes the nut-as-Christ metaphor in relation to the tree imagery that Teresa uses. The article then defines *meollo* and *corteza* using Corominas's etymological dictionary and shows applications of these definitions in various texts of the medieval period from the *ADMYTE* database. These texts include a variety of genres, ranging from the literary (Berceo) to the scientific (Bonium), and from the legal (Alfonso X) to the folk tale (a version of Aesop's fables). The examples cover a range of time periods as well, which bolsters the case that usages including and beyond plant imagery would have been widely known. After a final allusion to the relation between *Admiración operum Dey* and the preceding treatise *Arboleda de los enfermos*, the article ultimately concludes that the additional meanings of *meollo* and *corteza* broaden the range of implications behind Teresa's usage of the metaphor and increase the likelihood that this author is not as orthodox as some suspect.

Teresa was most likely born between 1415 and 1420 and was raised in Burgos. Her manuscript informs us that she became deaf after birth (most likely as a later teen), entered a convent, suffered continual health problems, and frequently meditated and read in solitude. Her two works are the *Arboleda de los enfermos*, which underscores the merits of patience and suffering, and *Admiración operum Dey*, which defends her ability to write (Seidenspinner-Núñez, "But I Suffer" 8-9). Teresa did, in fact, write and participate in religious discourse in renunciation of St. Paul's admonition against women's speech in I Timothy 2: 12 (Seidenspinner-Núñez, "But I Suffer" 1), a prohibition against women's learning that continued to be fostered during Teresa's lifetime.

It is therefore not surprising that male discourse maintained hegemony over the theory and practice of medieval letters (Seidenspinner-Núñez, ““But I Suffer”” 1). On the whole, the literature of the Spanish Middle Ages urges that women be kept from participating in scholarly activities. In spite of this hostile educational environment for women, many European nuns were successful writers and scribes, and many noblewomen, especially the daughters of kings, were avid readers (López Estrada 11-21). Particularly upon the advent of writing in the vernacular, there was increased but still limited opportunity for women to participate in literary activities. Among these few women of letters, Teresa de Cartagena’s arguments stand out as a unique exposition of interior spirituality in relation to femininity (López Estrada 36-7). In addition, the way she uses certain images is original and even unorthodox.

Teresa de Cartagena wrote *Admiración operum Dey* in her defense against those who claimed that the *Arboleda* was beyond a female’s ability to write and that Teresa must have therefore plagiarized male writers. These critics were firmly rooted in the basis of scholastic arguments that continued the Aristotelian tradition of portraying the inherent inferiority of women to men. Misogynists also found fertile ground in the writings of the Church Fathers that perpetuated the idea of females as inferior and duplicitous, an interpretation that largely stems from certain events of the creation story in Genesis. Out of this type of thinking, patristic theology created a male/female dualism that associated the interior virtuous soul with the masculine and the exterior corruptible body with the feminine. Medieval hermeneutics also heavily gendered the form and content of writing itself. While males were associated with acts of writing such as glossing and translating, females came to be identified with the external surfaces of writing, such as parchment and the text.² Teresa not only violates the dominant ideology by initially writing the *Arbo-*

² Given that women were thought to belong to the internal domestic realm (Teresa herself discusses women’s place as “ençeradas dentro en su casa [. . . confined to] obras domésticas” [117-8]), or spaces such as the convent in Teresa’s case, it may seem odd to consider internal space as a male domain. We must remember that this line of thinking participates in recondite scholarly theory and did not necessarily apply to quotidian circumstances. For an interesting perspective on house imagery and women in domestic spaces in the *Arboleda* and *Admiración*, including the permeability of inner and outer spaces, see Whitenack’s article.

leda, she also re-contextualizes and subverts the conventions of gendered imagery in the subsequent *Admiración* (Seidenspinner-Núñez, ““El solo”” 14-7). The chief example of this subversive recasting of a gender concept that concerns this article resides in Teresa’s use of plant imagery. Yet before examining the core of Teresa’s botanical metaphors, it is necessary to observe an analogy of the twelfth-century religious poet Adam von Sankt Viktor.

In the plant world, the nut is the origin of the deciduous tree. Likewise, Adam’s comparison of the nut with Christ, even if it does not directly influence, at the very least predates Teresa’s image of the bark and pith by approximately three centuries and participates in a similar valuation of inner and outer spaces. Let us now look at the most relevant stanza from Adam’s *Sequentia in nativitate Domini*:

Nux est Christus: cortex nucis
 Circa carnem poena crucis,
 Testa, corpus osseum.
 Carne tecta deitas,

Et Christi suavitas
 Signatur per nucleum. (46)³

The term *cortex*, or “husk,” is clearly etymologically related to *corteza* and is also a current botanical term used to mean bark. In the above passage, this outer space is associated with the least important part of Christ – His corruptible body. What is truly of value is Christ’s *deitas*, or divinity. Yet this deity remains hidden under His flesh just as the *nucleum*, or “kernel,” lies ensconced within the nut. The *nucleum* is the counterpart to the *meollo* because both depict the inside of their respective organisms. In the discussion that follows, it will be important to remember Adam’s privileging of this interior space.

³ A website (<<http://www.bu.edu/english/levine/splendor.htm>>) includes basically the same Latin text, together with an English translation:

The nut is Christ; the husk of the nut
 [I]s the crucifixion of his flesh[;]
 [T]he shell is the bony body[;]
 [D]eity covered with flesh[;]
 [A]nd the gentleness of Christ
 [I]s signified by the kernel.

The metaphor of the *meollo* and *corteza*, or pith and bark, is particularly fertile when seen in terms of gendered inner and outer spaces.⁴ The apparently orthodox point of Teresa's botanical analogy underscores the mutual benefit for which God created men and women:

E sy queredes bien mirar las plantas e árboles, veréys como las cortezas de fuera son muy rezias e fuertes e sofridoras de las [ten]pestades que los tienpos hazen, aguas e yelos e calores e fríos. Están así enxeridas he hechas por tal son que no paresçen syno vn gastón firme e rezio para conservar e ayudar el meollo qu'está en[cerc]ado de dentro. E así por tal horden e manera anda lo vno a lo ál, que la fortaleza e rezidunbre de las cortezas guardan e conservan el meollo, sufriendo esterioramente las tenpestades ya dichas. El meollo así como es flaco e delicado, estando yncluso, obra ynterioramente, da virtud e vigor a las cortezas e así lo vno con lo ál se conserva e ayuda e nos da cada año la diversidad o composidad de las frutas que vedes. E por este mismo respeto creo yo *quel* soberano e poderoso Señor quiso e quiere en la natura vmána obra[r] estas dos contraridades, conviene a saber: el estado varonil, fuerte e valiente, e el fimineo, flaco e delicado. (117)⁵

Teresa inverts the traditional patristic model by associating males with the deceptive surface-level reality of the *corteza*, which recalls images of the body and which is normally associated with woman. She then aligns females with the sacrosanct interior space of the *meollo*, which was a realm reserved for the masculine soul and which stood for a true and hidden meaning. Teresa's inversion therefore undercuts the idea of the Church Fathers that woman represents the false surface of the text which must be penetrated in order to arrive at the truth behind it, that is, its male spirit: "Teresa subverts conventional patristic paradigms of allegorical reading and associates woman with spirit and the higher truth, man with carnality and the letter" (Seidenspinner-Núñez, "'El solo'" 20). When seen in light of the *Nux est Christus* metaphor, Teresa's *meollo/corteza* analogy additionally aligns the gentle females with Christ's

⁴ Howe establishes a parallel between the *meollo*'s association with women on the one hand, and women's connection to internal spaces on the other. In turn, this critic links inner spaces with the concept of understanding: "[W]oman's very reclusion from worldly distractions allows her *entendimiento* to function as it should" (144). Teresa's apparently orthodox position regarding woman's place in society therefore takes women from a position of weakness to one of strength (Howe 144). Teresa probably employs a similarly subtle strategy of subversion in her use of the *meollo/corteza* analogy.

⁵ Howe notes that this passage marks an extension of the juxtaposition of internal and external spaces in the *Arboleda* (141). She is aware of Seidenspinner-Núñez's interpretation, as well (141 n23).

meekness and godliness and the weather-beaten males with His humanity and suffering. Both Teresa's women and Christ's divinity reside internally. The males, on the outside, withstand harsh storms just as Christ's flesh suffered terrible torments. Moreover, because *meollo* possessed an extended array of meanings known in Teresa's day (one of them related to the *virtud* cited above) there is a further set of implications behind her use of this particular image.

Corominas defines the *corteza* as the "parte exterior del árbol de algunas frutas, del pan, queso, etc." (2: 214). The first documented usage of this term as well as that of *meollo* occurs in the poetry of Gonzalo de Berceo, but *meollo* is "[d]e uso general en todas las épocas" (Corominas 4: 46). In Berceo's text, *El libro de Alexandre*, *meollo* means *seso*:

Bien leya e cantaua syn njnguna pereza,
Mas tenia en el seso toda su agudeza,
Ca sabia que en esso li yazia la proueza.
Non queria el meollo perder por la corteza.
(*Obras de Gonzalo de Berceo* fol. 68r)⁶

From the beginning, then, the general construction of this dichotomy has been clear: The *meollo* (as intelligence) is indispensable, while the *corteza* is disposable, even undesirable. Nebrija, in fact, defined *meollo* as "nucleus," or that that is central to any given being (i.e., the *nucleum* of Adam von Sankt Viktor's nut). In this regard, the term can also mean bone marrow (Corominas 4: 46), which is a substance essential to life.⁷

In other contexts *meollo* means the edible part of a dried fruit (Corominas 4: 46). Even in a literal botanical context the preference for *meollo* over *corteza* is evident: "Esta yerva ha meollo e corteza e simiente, pero el meollo es lo mejor para medicina e despues la

⁶ All quotations in Spanish from this and the following four paragraphs come from the *ADMYTE* database. For ease of reading, I modernize the punctuation and capitalization of these passages, as well as italicize the expansion of any abbreviations. *ADMYTE*'s transcription norms are based on Wisconsin's *Dictionary of the Old Spanish Language* project (see Mackenzie and Burrus), which place expanded abbreviations inside of carrots (< >) and indicate diacritical markers and column breaks, among other procedures.

⁷ Rabelais crystallized once and for all this concept of the *meollo* in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* in the early sixteenth century in his discussion of "la substantifique meulle," i.e., the marrow that the dog sucks diligently from the bone.

simiente, e la corteza es de pequeña o de ninguna virtud” (Bartolomé el Inglés, *Liber de proprietatibus rerum* fol. 220r). Not only is *meollo* preferable in this context, it is also the only thing of value. It has curative powers, while the *corteza* is essentially useless.

There are other examples of *meollo*’s association with intelligence in addition to the one found in the works of Berceo. The following example is from a scientific treatise that perhaps followed the first Castilian poet’s lead in its usage of the term: “El saber ha miembros. La su cabeça es mansedumbre e el su meollo, el saber las cosas” (Bonium, *Bocados de oro* fol. 45r). Because Teresa’s *Admiración* promotes the vision that certain women blessed by God possess legitimate intelligence, it logically follows that this foundational meaning of *meollo* as “saber” (a synonym of *seso*) feeds Teresa’s argument. If such is the case, this meaning is essential to her overall objective of justifying herself as a woman of intellect.

Particularly when *meollo* is used with regard to intelligence, it was officially seen to have a governing function in relation to other senses. The following example defines *meollo* as that part of the brain where *seso* resides:

E otrossi dio Dios al omne diez sentidos. E destos son los cinco de fuera del cuerpo e los cinco de dentro. E los de fuera son assi cuemo ueer, oyr, oler, gostar, e tanner. E de los de dentro el primero es el seso comunal *que* esta en la delantera parte del meollo de la cabeça, *que* es juyz sobre los cinco sesos sobredichos *que* son de fuera. (Alfonso X, *Siete Partidas I* fol. 107r)

This example is important because it was a matter of thirteenth century canon law that was still in effect in Teresa’s day. In fact, many parts of the legal code established by Alfonso “el Sabio” are implemented even today. If Teresa was aware of this concept of the *meollo* as a governing part of the brain that is strongly associated with intelligence, then the sense of probable subversion behind her usage of *meollo* is greatly increased. After all, it was the males who were supposed to govern, not the females.

Even if Teresa was unaware of the above usage of *meollo*, it seems highly unlikely that she would not have known of the term’s association with the honest and true because of its currency in popular culture. The following medieval version of one of Aesop’s folktales corroborates the conventional interpretive paradigm that associates interiority with truth

and exteriority with falsity: “E porque el valor dela mies se leuante de vil campillo, tu Dios todo poderoso llueue las palabras secas con tu rucio. E la breuedad delas fablas trahe carga honesta de costumbres, como la cascarrá seca cubre muchas vezes el buen meollo” (*Ysopete ystoriado* fol. 26r). If males are traditionally aligned with the *meollo*, then their space corresponds to a true and hidden meaning. We can only assume, then, that the conventionally regarded deceptiveness of women is embodied in the “cascarrá” (a term analogous to *corteza*) that conceals such truth. The fact that the above example comes from a folk tale in the vernacular underscores the accessibility of this usage of the *meollo* metaphor to the general population and increases the probability that such a meaning was widely circulated in medieval Castilian society. It also corroborates Seidenspinner-Núñez’s observation that Teresa’s usage of the *meollo/corteza* dichotomy is subversive.

While some may claim that Teresa de Cartagena was obsessed with defending womankind as intellectually capable (Vicente García 95), it is more accurate to state that she was mainly interested in defending herself both as a female writer and as a woman of intelligence. In the *Arboleda* and in *Admiración*, her defense of herself as a thinking female represents if not the first challenge (as suggested in Vicente García 96),⁸ then at least one of the first thrusts made against the mandates of the Church Fathers and others.⁹ For this reason, Seidenspinner-Núñez is right to contextualize the *Arboleda* in terms of Gilbert and Gubar’s well-known expression, the “anxiety of authorship.” Teresa’s treatise invests in rhetorical strategies of self-deprecation as well as ones that devalue femininity, betrays subservience to masculine models, and is marked by fear of the patriarchal artistic paradigm. In short, Teresa struggles in the *Arboleda* to establish herself as a woman writer in a world of letters that belongs to males, in which she is alienated from her masculine precursors as well as deprived of accessible female predecessors. As a result, she must cast herself as inferior in the attempt to define herself as an artist (Seidenspinner-Núñez, “‘But I Suffer’” 9-10). Teresa is aware that by writing as a woman she is transgressing the masculine norms of her

⁸ Christine de Pisan would be a more likely candidate for the first medieval scholarly woman actively engaged in pro-feminine discourse.

⁹ Recall Seidenspinner-Núñez’s observation that in addition to those who followed St. Paul, the scholastic neo-Aristotelians formed another branch of thought that stood against women’s learning (“‘El solo’” 14-7).

society, from which her anxiety as an author stems. We learn from *Admiración* that in the end, Teresa's concern was wholly justified due to the fact that the male readership reacted in a most hostile fashion and ultimately rejected Teresa's authorship of the *Arboleda* due to her gender (Seidenspinner-Núñez, "But I Suffer" 13-4). We also see that certain tensions initially laid out in the *Arboleda* are further developed in *Admiración*.¹⁰

In the *Arboleda*, Teresa forms image patterns in opposition to one another (interiority and exteriority, for example) and centers her attention above all on the boundary that lies between them. In some instances she portrays a fluid frontier, whereas in others movement from one space to another is prohibited (Surtz 302). As shown above, Teresa extends this play between inner and outer spaces in *Admiración*. For instance, her use of organic imagery reverses the spaces traditionally assigned to males and females. This newly configured opposition appears to be separated by a rigid frontier of masculine and feminine spaces. Yet the role reversal between inner and outer domains in relation to gender crosses the boundary that normally separates the two. Teresa partakes, therefore, in a subtle spatial transgression that must have echoed – or conflicted – with the viewpoints of her readers.

Teresa's use of the *meollo/corteza* metaphor was probably a calculated decision that had controversial ramifications. At the very least, her application of this specific terminology to describe men's and women's roles and spaces resonates beyond her text with Adam von Sankt Viktor's from the twelfth century, with folk tales from Teresa's own day, and with other medieval Castilian writings spanning centuries. By linking women with the extra-textual meanings of *meollo*, Teresa's cause of justifying her ability to write and be a godly woman of intelligence is furthered, whether or not she intended that to be the case.¹¹

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¹⁰ As a result of her "anxiety of authorship," Teresa employs what Josefina Ludmer calls "tretas del débil" in both works. In *Admiración*, her reversal of conventional gender implications behind the *meollo/corteza* metaphor is a perfect example of how Teresa gains the upper ideological hand while still appearing to be weak and humble.

¹¹ I would like to thank Frank Domínguez, Betsy Sandlin, and Jennifer Moore for their suggestions regarding content and style.

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