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Madness and Hysteria: Social Control in Early Modern Spain

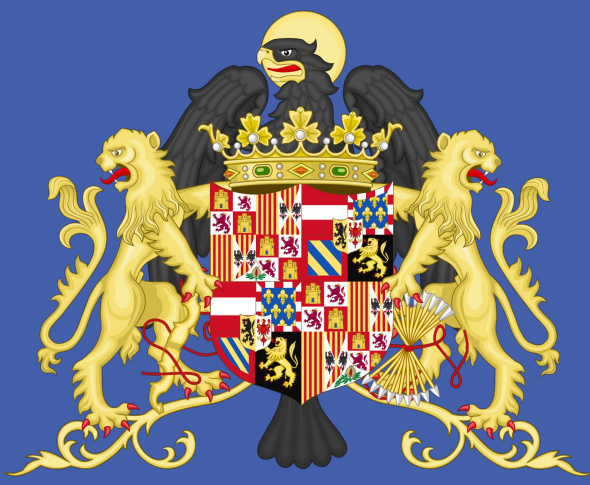
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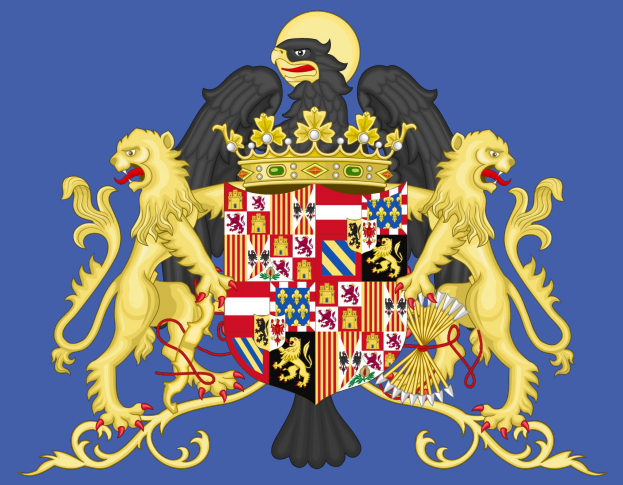
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Madness and Hysteria:

Social Control in Early Modern Spain



Thesis

I propose that “hysteria” and the related madness melancholia serve as examples of gendering health and as a means for social control in Early Modern Spain. In this way, madness as a vague concept allowed men to decide what behaviors were socially acceptable, as well as facilitate manipulation of power and authority. Although Juana I was situated in a social status of immense authority and influence, she was consistently subjugated to have no real control over her life for the majority of its duration.

Hysteria In History

- Described as early as 1900 BCE
- Hippocrates and the wandering womb
- The Four Humors
 - Blood
 - Yellow Bile
 - Black Bile
 - Phlegm
- Men and women associated with different aspects. Men were tied to the hot and dry end, making them rational and strong
 - Women were associated with the cold and wet, making them emotional, irrational, and susceptible to illness
- Hysteria characterized differently throughout history
- Treatment dealt with balancing out the humors



Melancholia

- Also a vaguely defined type of madness
- Associated with excess of black bile
- Not considered strictly women-specific
 - But women were thought to be more easily and detrimentally affected
- Expressed in physical or emotional symptoms
 - Unwarranted fear, sadness, or irrationality

Juana I, Queen of Castile 1479-1555

- Daughter of Isabel and Ferdinand the Catholics
- Married to Felipe of Austria when she was 16
- Became heir to the throne after the deaths of her two older siblings and her infant nephew
- Had 6 children within 9 years
- Suffered from tensions between her parents and her husband
- Mistreated by Felipe
- Isolated when living in the Netherlands
- Inherited Queenship of Castile and declared unfit to rule
- Despondent at the death of Felipe
- Confined in Tordesillas as her father ruled Castile in her stead
- Remained constrained for the rest of her life, her son Carlos V taking over after Ferdinand died



Ferdinand described Juana as “being very far from undertaking the government or rule of kingdoms,” as “lacking the disposition convenient for such a task,” because of her “illnesses and passions,” which, despite its vagueness, allowed her close male relatives to rule in her name for 50 years.(11)

“The legal cases referring to madmen and the therapeutic texts regarding madwoman **reflect battles for authority** among different individuals with distinct interpretative frameworks.”(11)

Dona Isabel de Albornoz

- Lady in waiting to Queen Juana
- 1530 Suffered from attacks of “frenesia,” translated as “frenzy”
 - Similar symptoms to hysteria
 - Numbness, spasms, uterine problems, “fury”
- Various treatments suggested, including:
 - Shaving the head and bloodletting
 - Applying an old rooster to the head overnight
 - Cooking 3 male puppies in their mother’s milk and applying to the head

“Such bloodletting, a standard treatment for fury, would at least weaken the patient and enable others to dominate her.”(11)

Conclusions

- Madness was understood and treated in a gendered way
- Physical problems such as spasms and excess urination could be considered madness
- Acting out in response to lack of control over one’s life was labeled madness
- Madness could be used to manipulate power and authority
 - Especially due to vague definitions

“Relatives established the legal incompetence of queen Joanna in her absence.”(11)

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