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Doctor vs. Priest: Urban Planning and Reform in *Vetusta*. Leopoldo Alas's *La Regenta*

Anne W. Gilfoil

At the end of the eighteenth century, new theories about disease transmission would have an enormous effect on city planning. The miasma theory challenged the old contact infection model of contagion. Disease transmission was no longer direct as in person-to-person contagion; it was, rather, the result of exposure to certain conditions in the atmosphere. Emanations from the earth produced by decomposing bodies and excrement poisoned the air and transmitted disease (Corbin 13–32). The miasma theory left a deep imprint on popular imagination. In a study of Madrid, published as late as 1902, the public health expert Philip Hauser spoke of a longstanding belief in “la gran importancia atribuida al acceso del aire de la alcantarilla al interior de la casa” (1: 195). The miasma theory’s effect on the professional class would be profound as well. Scientists reasoned that if environmental conditions were the cause of disease, then these circumstances need only be modified in order to eradicate it.¹ During the nineteenth century, three epidemics of cholera devastated Spain, the last one occurring in 1885 while Leopoldo Alas was writing *La Regenta* (Valis 208). Because cholera struck mainly the urban poor, it was considered a disease of the city (Briggs 76–78; Rosenberg 133). Hence, an ideal urban organization promised to eliminate disease (Stevenson 5). A traditional fatalism in the face of disease began to give way to rhetoric of reform, a reform to be enacted on the urban landscape.

Critics have long recognized that the symbolic resonances of a text represent the way in which the concerns of a particular historical period express themselves through the work of an individual writer (Labanyi, “City” 53). In the case of Leopoldo Alas’s novel, *La Regenta* expresses the cultural anxieties produced by the great epidemics of the nineteenth century and the breakdown of social, economic, and political boundaries that occurred in the wake of the revolution of 1868. This revolution, known as “La Gloriosa,” launched the nation on an uneven and an uneasy transition to modernity (Sieburth 4–5). Metaphoric and metonymic extensions to the Church and to the nineteenth-century’s discourse on hygiene and its obsessive concern with contagious diseases inform the associative and imagistic rhetoric of this novel (see Gilfoil). The persistence of significant structures feeds the mythic undercurrents of the descriptions of *Vetusta*.² Thus, place becomes alive as a motivating influence in the minds of its characters (Furst, *Realism* 112).

In his initial detailed description of Vetusta, Alas precisely locates the struggle between Church and science within the old city of the Encimada. In this article, I will examine the spatial development of this conflict between Church and science in Alas's novel and its implications regarding the possibility of reform in Restoration Spain.³

In the opening chapter of *La Regenta*, the Magistral, Don Fermín, gazes at the coveted city from the vantage point of the cathedral tower. His *catalejo* rests alternately on different sections of the city. The one constant revealed in his sustained scrutiny is that of a reality-in-flux. In the Encimada, “el primitivo recinto de Vetusta,” ruins of the old wall, the defining and cohesive element of the medieval city, now only separate gardens and “corrales” (1: 110).⁴ The Campo del Sol, a euphemism for the new industrial quarter located on the outskirts of the city, reflects the politics of urban planning during the Restoration, a zoning of the population based on social class and function—industrial areas as opposed to residential areas (Bahamonde and Martínez 445). This zeal for reform segregated high-risk populations, in this case the working class, from the bourgeoisie (Sazatornil Ruiz 238). Due to the disentanglement of much of the Church's property, the State has appropriated three of its installations in the Encimada: San Vicente is now a military barracks, San Benito is a prison, and the Convent of Las Clarisas serves bureaucratic ends, as offices.⁵ As the Church once occupied half of the Encimada, the Magistral laments these changes, but he does not despair, because he notices graphic signs of “la fe rediviva en los alrededores de Vetusta,” where new convents are being constructed (1: 112). The Church, as represented by the Magistral, is adjusting to the new utilitarian spirit in urban planning, as an archetype of liberal ideology.

The obvious zoning of the city is accompanied by a shift in wealth from center to periphery. This relocation is best exemplified by the *Colonia*, “el barrio nuevo de americanos y comerciantes del reino” (1: 112). *Indianos* who once colonized the New World have returned to conquer their origins with their newly-acquired wealth, and merchants and money-lenders live side by side in the new suburb.⁶ In addition to the reference to the colonization of the New World, the nomenclature *Colonia* refers to a new colonization of urban space with its houses perfectly aligned in city blocks. The latest design in urban planning called for a geometrical layout of city streets in order to promote ventilation.⁷ This “perfection” notwithstanding, the urban design of “la Vetusta novísima” reveals a sense of monotony “tirada a cordel” and ostentation “solidez afectada.” The ascendancy of the bourgeoisie has not safeguarded the community from the bad taste of the *nuevo rico* described in the text as “anarquía cromática” or from its pomposity described as “fastuosidad ridícula” (1: 114).

Wealth may have shifted from the center (the Encimada) to the periphery (the Colonia), but the spiritual center remains in the Encimada, because the inhabitants of the Colonia scrupulously imitate “las costumbres *distinguidas*” of the old families of the Encimada (1: 114). As the spiritual center of Vetusta, the Encimada remains the object of the Magistral's desire. It is also the quintessential medieval city: “su historia anda escrita en los cronicones de la Reconquista” (1: 116). The history of the city is identified with that of its privileged classes “contada por piedras y adobes en el recinto viejo de Vetusta” (1: 111). In his study of the spatial component in urban history, Álvarez Mora speaks of the

medieval city as the product of internal colonization by these privileged classes and notes that landowners, most notably the Church and the nobility, parceled off the land they possessed, the land around monasteries and castles that would eventually form a city's center. No plan was imposed upon the city; it was in essence an aggregate. Expediency alone dictated its development (37–38). The compact, heterogeneous nature of the Encimada reflects this conquest in its “calles [. . .] estrechas, tortuosas” and its “tugurios donde se amontonaba la plebe vetustense” (1: 110). More importantly for our purposes, in this description the medieval city is associated with disease. In his discussion of the contributing factors of the cholera epidemics that swept Spain in the nineteenth century, Hauser mentions the deficiencies of the streets and houses of Madrid “inherentes al sistema antiguo de urbanización, cuando la higiene urbana era poco conocida y no había entrado aún en la vida práctica de los pueblos: tales son las calles irregulares, tortuosas y estrechas, y las casas más altas que el ancho de la calle, inaccesibles al aire y a los rayos solares” (1: 336). The Encimada's streets are described as “húmedas y sin sol” (1: 110). The lack of sunlight and filth were believed to be contributing causes of cholera (Donaldson-Evans 154).

The current state of the Encimada's streets leaves much to be desired. The source of its infection, however, is the convent of Las Salesas temporarily located “cerca de los vertederos de la Encimada, casi sepultadas en las cloacas” (1: 113). Again, as with the Encimada itself, the spatial element is associated with a spiritual aspect. In this case, the spiritual aspect has to do with the convent's education of young women, a euphemism for “la iniciación del eterno femenino en la eterna idolatría” (2: 202). The implication is that the physical and spiritual corruption of the convent, through its education of young women, infects the whole of society, much like the all-pervasive humidity (“la humedad sucia”) that blackens the city's buildings and poisons its atmosphere (2: 83).

Another source of infection located within the Encimada and associated with the Church is *La Cruz Roja*, “el bazar de artículos de iglesia, al que por fas o por nefas todos los curas de todas las parroquias del obispado han de venir *velis nolis* a comprar lo que necesitan y lo que no necesitan” (1: 393). Although the owner “ante el público y el derecho mercantil” is Froilán Zapico, the real owners of the most prosperous shop in Vetusta are Doña Paula and her son, the Magistral, whose house communicates with the shop via the basement (1: 562). All the money of the diocese find its way there, and in the words of the narrator, “Allí lo serio era el dinero. . . . En aquella casa el recuento de la moneda era un culto.” Here the counting of money is itself a religion. In an instinctive rejection of his mother's avarice, Don Fermín recognizes the shop's ability to infect society when he describes it as “un gran foco de podredumbre, aguas sucias estancadas” (1: 564). The shop not only infects society economically by ruining individual members like Don Santos Barinaga, the owner of *La Cruz Roja's* competition, it also affects society spiritually by residing within the body of the Church.⁸ Don Santos, once a believer and now embittered by his economic and spiritual ruin, refuses the last rites on his deathbed, a source of much scandal in Vetusta.

Needless to say, locating disease within ecclesiastical confines sets the stage for the conflict between Church and science in the novel, because hygiene as an ideology justified urban reform. In an effort “to police” disease, medical geographies that mapped the distribution

of deaths proliferated (Casco Solís 228). When applied to the city, these geographies yielded the general principles of urban planning (Urteaga 17). As a form of medical policing, hygiene's imperative was the regulation of biological and social relations, and its champions were the members of the medical profession. In the novel, the conflict between priest and doctor unfolds on two fronts, both in the Encimada: the Carraspique household and the very body of Ana Ozores, the Regenta.

The Carraspiques are a fanatically religious family, one of the Encimada's finest, and they live totally in the grip of the Magistral due to the influence he exercises over Carraspique's wife Doña Lucía. As a member of the upper class, Doña Lucía most assuredly has been educated at the convent. Since Carraspique is one of the Church's largest contributors, Don Fermín cannot afford to lose this member of the Junta Carlista. Fermín's influence is such that two of the eldest daughters have entered convents, and one, Rosita, is gravely ill in her cell that has become a "nicho" (i.e. burial vault) at Las Salesas. It is at the Carraspiques' that the confrontation between Don Fermín and Dr. Robustiano Somoza takes place.

Described as "un doctor de buen trato social," Dr. Somoza has been the aristocracy's physician for many years (1: 427). He remains faithful to the older view of the medical practitioner as "missionary to the bedside" (Furst, *Medical Progress* 19), because he cures "con buenas palabras" and with little science: "por él nadie sabía que se iba a morir" (1: 427). He may be a political reactionary, but when it comes to religion, he considers himself "una persona ilustrada" and therefore "volteriano" (1: 426–28). In truth, science's ascendancy over religion had begun in the Enlightenment. The narrator, however, questions the efficacy of Somoza's "enlightened" professional diagnosis: "Años atrás, para él todo era *flato*; ahora todo era *cuestión de nervios*" (1: 427). It would seem that Somoza adheres to the latest fashionable theory, one that describes but never addresses the cause of disease. In a similar fashion Somoza approaches the problem of Rosita's illness. He defines the problem quite eloquently when he confronts Don Fermín. Rosita is sick due to the lack of hygienic conditions at the convent. In a dizzying display of substitutions, the convent is alternately described as *cloaca*, *letrina*, *inodoro*, *matadero*, and *pocilga*, to name but a few. Somoza surprises even Don Fermín with his grasp of the underlying problems. He suspects the influence of a priest in the household. During the religious revival that took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century, family priests exercised much power through their control over the women in a household (Zeldin 14–15). Somoza also discourses quite lucidly on the education of young women in this environment. However, he falls short of openly accusing the Magistral and ultimately defers to tradition. The convent's doctor will make the final decision concerning Rosita. Somoza's deference to political and social expediency places in question the objectivity of science, which he purports to represent in his capacity as the town's official hygienist.

For his part, the Magistral also avoids confrontation by admitting the unhealthy conditions at the convent: the humidity that seeps through its walls and its putrid odors. However, he assures the Carraspiques that Rosita's condition is not so grave and that the situation is temporary. After all, the convent is building new installations outside the city; things will change. Above all, scandal that could reflect negatively on the Church must be avoided at all costs.

Medical and religious discourses again converge and contest control of the female body in the person of Ana Ozores. Jo Labanyi, in her insightful study of *La Regenta*, indicates that the ideal of reforming the nation via the individual necessitated the invention of privacy, which ultimately recasts social and economic problems in moral terms (*Gender* 213). Thus, social regulators constructed the individual as sick. In an article dedicated to the social construction of disease in the nineteenth century, the social historian Karl Figlio writes: “Medicine recast social norms into the form of health. The physician’s marginality supported an exaggerated normativeness of the middle-class values, now medically reformulated” (176). As the defender of the private realm, the home, the woman and her body became the “site of unresolvable social anxieties” (Labanyi, *Gender* 215). As the town’s model of virtue, “la perfecta casada,” Ana becomes the object of Vetusta’s intense scrutiny (1: 182). Therefore, the various prescriptions offered by priests and doctors in Ana’s case project onto her body competing social discourses related to the city’s social, political, and economic life (219).

As Ana’s confessor, the Magistral devises a plan to control Ana’s body through her mind: “Lo principal era no violentar el espíritu indisciplinado de la Regenta, había que hacerla subir la cuesta de la penitencia sin que ella lo notase” (2: 20). As a form of brainwashing, Ana’s “education” by Fermín mimics the Church’s conversion of young girls into symbols of “fanatismo sentimental” (2: 292). Fermín explains his course of action to Ana in the following terms: “No debía ella acudir allí, sólo a pedir la absolución de sus pecados; el alma tiene, como el cuerpo, su terapéutica y su higiene; el confesor es médico higienista” (1: 343). The absolution of sins is no longer sufficient. The prevention of disease was the core of the discourse of hygiene. In this manner, hygiene controlled all aspects of the individual’s life, public (urban reform) and private (daily habits, matrimony, education, sexual relations, etc.).⁹ By appropriating hygiene as his model, Fermín is not only admitting science’s ascendancy over religion, he is also making a bid for absolute control over Ana’s life, because he is recognizing hygiene’s ability to refer to every aspect of an individual’s life. Reinforced by science, its power is superior, indeed, to that of the traditional confessional.

Not surprisingly, then, when Ana falls ill, Somoza, the town hygienist, is called in, and he promptly diagnoses her problem as “La Primavera médica” (2: 110). According to the medical notions of the day, women were at the mercy of their bodies, their reproductive cycles, and their susceptibility to climactic influences (Jago 321–22). The hygienist Pedro Monlau described woman as a being who “está sujeta a una función periódica que es capaz de modificar todo su ser moral” (13). The predisposition of women to mental instability made the regulation of their bodies a priority. Indeed, female instability threatened the very bastion of civilization, the bourgeois household. Accordingly, Somoza begins an incessant monitoring of Ana’s body during the prescribed rest cure.

When the monitoring proves ineffective, Somoza sends for his young assistant who represents the latest fashion as a professional. The bedside missionary is about to be replaced by the medical authority or “médico oráculo” (2: 124). Unlike Somoza, Benítez, an educated man, does not like to use common names for illnesses, but prefers scientific terms. His approach is much more detached and clinical than Somoza’s; Ana sees him as “preocupado con el *tronco*” and not much attuned to her emotional side (2: 119). Like the

Magistral, he too has a plan for Ana, but his is based on notions of hygiene: food, exercise, baths, and above all distractions in the open air. Ana must spend some time in the country “a hacer vida de aldeana” (2: 388).

As time passes, Benítez displaces Fermín and becomes Ana’s confessor. In her diary, Ana writes: “Yo le he dicho secretos de mi vida interior como quién revela síntomas de una enfermedad. Conocía yo cuando le hablaba de estas cosas, que él a pesar de su rostro impasible, me estaba aprendiendo de memoria” (2: 383). Discourse on sex was coming out of the closet/confessional and passing into the hands of a new breed of specialists. Casco Solís cites the success that the biological sciences were having as the factor that contributed to the ascendancy of science (236). Fashion notwithstanding, Ana’s improvement will prove temporary. The hygienists cannot help, because they upheld the Church’s idea of “domesticating” sexual pleasure by containing it within the bourgeois institution of marriage (Casco Solís 226–36). Public health issues fuelled this championing of marriage as a means of social control. Women’s reproductive cycles were not only menacing to women, they were menacing to men as well. Women’s vascular systems, characterized by the passing of polluted blood during their menses, contained the sewers that operated as the breeding ground for syphilis, and syphilis was contracted in an extramarital economy (Valis 201). With the goal of containing sex within the marriage, then, Benítez advises Victor of Ana’s need for “un estímulo fuerte,” because she is “extremosa” by temperament (2: 404). Only the constant sluicing of internal drains would ensure that a woman did not retain within her the disruptive forces of sexual energy that could throw her into a state of hysteria (Shuttleworth 56–64). The implication is that there can be no real solution for Ana as long as she is unable to satisfy her sexual desires, which she is unable to do with her husband Víctor. Interestingly, during Ana’s illness, Victor recognizes the operative metaphor when he confuses bodily functions with those of a city’s waterworks (2: 117).¹⁰

The ascendancy of science, represented by Ana’s falling under the influence of the specialist, replicates itself again in the secularization of urban space. In the novel, this process of secularization is evident in the Espolón. Traditionally the Espolón had been the *paseo* of Vetusta’s clergy. Described as “estrecho, sin árboles, abrigado de los vientos del Nordeste, que son los más fríos en Vetusta, por una muralla” (2: 520), it has already suffered an attempt at the architectural embellishment characteristic of urban renewal during the eighteenth century, the addition of two fountains (Álvarez Mora 42–47).¹¹ More recently, the changes are less decorative but more threatening:

Era aquél un lugar, a más de abrigado, solitario y lo que llamaban allí *recogido*, pero esto cuando la Colonia no existía. Ahora lo mejor de la población, el ensanche de Vetusta iba por aquel lado, y si bien el Espolón y sus inmediaciones se respetaron, a pocos pasos comenzaba el ruido, el movimiento y la animación de los hoteles que se construían, de la *barriada colonial* que se levantaba como por encanto. (1: 520)

Ensanche or enlargement is the term that best describes the thrust of development of Spanish cities during the nineteenth century. After the *Ley de Ensanche* was passed in 1864, urban renewal became the order of the day. Old city walls were torn down, and

planners imposed upon cities geometrical plans adapted to the demands of an industrial economy and a new bourgeoisie with leisure time (Sazatornil Ruiz 237–39). Urban intervention was no longer to be exclusively for the beautification of the private reserve of the privileged; it was, rather, to be motivated by a sense of public utility and profit (Álvarez Mora 35).¹² The city became a canvas for reform, and urban projects were associated with the idea of progress, the motto of the rising middle class (Curtis 197).

The two characters who represent the tension between tradition and reform *vis-à-vis* the city in the novel are the Marqués de Vegallana and Don Saturnino Bermúdez, “el primer anticuario de la provincia” (2: 121). As town historian, Saturnino protects every wall from possible demolition: “ponía por las nubes el mérito arqueológico de cada tabique y si se trataba de una pared maestra demostraba que era todo un monumento” (1: 117). On his part, representing a “progressive” aristocracy, the Marqués wants everything “alineado” and dreams about the streets of New York. Since true inequality “está en la sangre,” or so the Marqués reasons, one need not fear standardization in urban planning (1: 304–05).

In any case, change has arrived, and the narrator notes the reaction of the Vetustan clergy:

Preciso es declarar que el clero vetustense, aunque famoso por su intransigencia en cuestiones dogmáticas, morales y hasta disciplinarias, y si se quiere políticas, no había puesto nunca malos ojos a la proximidad del progreso urbano, y antes se felicitaba de que Vetusta *se transformase de día en día*, de modo que a la vuelta de veinte años *no hubiera quien la conociese*. Lo cual demuestra que la civilización bien entendida no la rechazaba el clero, así parroquial como catedral de la *Vetusta católica* de Bermúdez. (1: 521)

If the clergy has been recalcitrant politically and socially, it has supported urban reform, and as the official hygienist of Vetusta, Somoza also defends the bourgeois appropriation of the Espolón. Once again, as in their defense of the institution of marriage, Church and science are in accord. In this instance, they jointly support reform. In recognition of this mutual sympathy, Somoza declares his “ciencia” to be his “religión” (2: 235).

Upon closer examination, however, the apparent victory of science over religion is undermined at the end of the novel when Somoza, the dubious “man of science,” accompanies Don Álvaro, the representative of the aristocracy, to the duel. The implication is that there will be no reform. Somoza’s position has never changed; he is, as ever, allied with the aristocracy, an aristocracy that is adapting to and benefiting from middle-class values. Science has simply replaced religion. After all, the real sources of infection in the Encimada were never addressed, for instance, the Church’s preparation of young women at the Convent and Doña Paula’s store. Science or hygiene, whose morality coincided with that of the Church, simply dictated a cosmetic removal from the urban center, a displacement that resolved nothing. As a commentary on urban reform, Alas’s text is prophetic. Urban historians have noted that the disarticulation of the traditional city’s center that occurred during the nineteenth century converted urban centers into ghettos and contributed to a more rigid segregation of the social classes (Álvarez Mora 58; Bahamonde 445). Readers of *La Regenta* who search for some sign of

hope must look elsewhere—to Benítez who accompanies Don Víctor to the duel. He is one character who does change—from the objective man of science to a person who can “hear” Ana’s confession, “lo que decía y lo que callaba” (2: 523). In *La Regenta*, Leopoldo Alas suggests the need for another kind of science, one more attuned to the problems of the human soul.

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Notes

- ¹ It is important to remember that disease was a flexible concept in the early-nineteenth century. Doctors presumed that moral and mental factors played a role in causing disease. Conjectures regarding ultimate causes were considered superfluous, however, and physicians were discouraged from investigations that would bring ridicule on the profession and adversely affect the advance of science (Rosenberg 74, 175).
- ² By the time Alas was writing the novel, the germ theory of disease transmission had replaced the miasma theory (Corbin 223). His use of the miasma theory is another indication of Vetusta's backwardness as a provincial capital.
- ³ Casco Solís describes the official discourse of science as represented by the medical profession of the time as "el proceso de sacralización de la Ciencia" (239).
- ⁴ The ruin of the old wall in a very real sense represents the breakdown in the *ancien régime* that took place after "La Gloriosa."
- ⁵ For more information on the disentailment of Church property in the nineteenth century, see Bahamonde (218–26, 441–42).
- ⁶ Alas's depiction of Oviedo's social transformation in the nineteenth century is factual according to Alvargonzález, Fernández, and Tomé. According to these urban historians, at the century's end the original aristocracy, consisting of a dozen or more titles, had been assimilated by a bourgeoisie whose ascent was founded on "propiedades desamortizadas, capitales ultramarinos y concesiones mineras" (150). The authors affirm that this same bourgeoisie was very influential in urban planning, since several of the city's new developments were financed privately by "un indiano y un banquero, entre otros" (155).
- ⁷ Pure air was considered the best antiseptic, and since bodily emanations constituted the threat of disease, ventilating, draining off refuse, and preventing individuals from crowding together constituted *disinfection*. *Disinfection* was as ambiguous a term as *infection*, which referred to "the morbid nature and the stench of vitiated air, the preeminence of one type of contamination, and the disruption of organic equilibrium" (Corbin 102).
- ⁸ According to Ignacio Elizalde, Fermín de Pas is a priest with "una concepción puramente utilitarista" of religion, and his success in Vetusta is due to his presenting salvation "como un negocio" (66).
- ⁹ On the first page of his *Elementos de Higiene Privada o Arte de Conservar la Salud del Individuo* (1864), Pedro Monlau defines hygiene as the art of conserving one's health. Its first mission is to "precaver las enfermedades" (1).
- ¹⁰ Vernon Chamberlin highlights the fact that Galdós's narrator makes a similar comparison between Maximiliano Rubín's impotence and a poorly functioning windmill on the newly constructed Canal de Isabel II and its attached Depósito de Aguas. Both constructions formed part of the "ensanche" of the city and transformed the lives of its inhabitants (429).
- ¹¹ Some attempt at urban planning was made during the eighteenth century. Jovellanos proposed one of the first plans for the urban renewal of Madrid, but for that century the city was conceived as a "coto privado" of the aristocracy. "Hacer ciudad" was equated with "hacer arquitectura" (Bahamonde 443).
- ¹² Lloyd G. Stevenson highlights the fact that Dr. Southwood Smith, an intellectual juggernaut in the development of the public health movement in Great Britain, was

an associate of Jeremy Bentham. Economic and social policies were among the non-medical factors most effective in the genesis of the hygienist movement (1).

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