

Dr. Ignacio Fernández de Córdova (1777-1816): illustrated physician and the first American fabulist

Dr. Ignacio Fernández de Córdova (1777-1816): médico ilustrado y el primer fabulista de América

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Abstract

In this paper, we have tried to integrate a biography with the greatest data that we were able to obtain about the life of the Military Physician and Surgeon Ignacio Fernández de Córdova (1777-1816). For this purpose, we undertook the task of investigating the parish archives of the State of Guanajuato and Michoacán, as well as examining the bibliography on the subject. In the same way, it was possible to determine his degree of studies and the places where he did them. We know that he was briefly a member of Hidalgo's troops, and that in his native Valladolid/Morelia he was director of the San Juan de Dios Hospital. On the other hand, in short, an incomprehensible doubt has been elucidated: Fernández de Córdova was the first fabulist in Mexico, and the first formal one in the American Continent; for the glory of the New Hispanic guild of the times of the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Ignacio Fernández de Córdova. Novohispana Illustration. Surgeon. Military Physician. Hospital de San Juan de Dios. Fabulist. America.

Resumen

En el presente artículo hemos tratado de integrar una biografía con los mayores datos que nos fue posible obtener sobre la vida del médico y cirujano militar Ignacio Fernández de Córdova (1777-1816). Para tal efecto nos dimos a la tarea de indagar en archivos parroquiales del Estado de Guanajuato y Michoacán, así como examinar la bibliografía concerniente al tema. De igual manera, fue asequible determinar su grado de estudios y los lugares donde los efectuó. Sabemos que brevemente militó en las tropas de Hidalgo y que en su natal Valladolid/Morelia fue director del Hospital de San Juan de Dios. Por otra parte, en definitiva, se ha dilucidado una incomprensible duda: Fernández de Córdova fue el primer fabulista de México y el primero formal del Continente Americano, para gloria del gremio novohispano de los tiempos de la Ilustración.

Palabras clave: Ignacio Fernández de Córdova. Ilustración novohispana. Médico. Cirujano Militar. Hospital de San Juan de Dios. Fabulista. América.

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Introduction

The existence of this singular michoacano character who lived in the last few years of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century has basically been a mystery since, except for a few pieces of information gathered by Miguel Ruiz and Spain, and a few other by Mariano de Jesús Torres, we did not have any more information regarding Fernández de Córdova¹. He is basically known as one of the few Mexican literates who cultivated the fable genre, and possibly, the only one in the state of Michoacan². Until now, we did not have any confirmed information of personal or medical nature. In light of this, we deemed it necessary to resort to first hand information, such as parish documents, which, unfortunately, provide us with a few fragments of his life for now.

Life, studies, and medical activities

José Ignacio was born on July 31, 1777, and was baptized the following day in the Valladolid Cathedral (Morelia). His parents were José Manuel Fernández and Juana María Silva, both criollos, who lived in the city. He came from a family with high social and financial status³.

He studies Latin (Minor and Minimum studies) and Philosophy (Medium and Major studies) in Real Colegio de San Nicolás Obispo¹. In normal times, such studies were completed around 13 or 14 years of age, which must have taken place around 1780, that is, during the time Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla was teaching, and therefore, it is not absurd to believe he could have been one of his students⁴.

He moved to Mexico City to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in Arts. Why? A sufficiently experienced degree was required to enter the Surgery and Medicine Faculty of Real Colegio de Cirugía de San Carlos, in Madrid, whose headquarters was in the General Hospital of that city.

That college had just been founded in 1780 by Dr. Antonio Gimbernat and Arbós (1734-1816) with the approval of his majesty, Carlos III: It was inaugurated in 1787. In the beginning, it sought to be an institution independent from the Board of Hospitals and the Protomedicato. However, with time it became the Faculty of Medicine of the current Universidad Complutense.

This college was known for being a secular institution, that is, not religious, which implied not being part of the University and being at the forefront of scientific and medical thought of the time^{5,6}. These ideas were brought back by Dr. Fernández de Córdova and they

influenced the ideas of Dr. Juan Manuel González Urueña, founder of the first School of Medicine in the independent Mexico, in 1830. He finished his studies and was tested, by statutes, in the Spanish Protomedicato.

When he was around 19 or 20 years old he returned to the New Spain with a Bachelor's Degree in Medicine. What do we base this statement on? Basically, on personal information provided by Fernández de Córdova for his second marriage (if accurate). In addition, is it chronologically compatible, since this degree took four years to complete in Spanish universities in the 18th century⁷. The aforementioned biographer states that he validated his studies in Mexico city¹, and everything seems to point to the fact that he did not reside in Valladolid/Morelia until the first part of the 19th century, apparently in 1804 or 1805.

He married María Bárbara Aura Carrasco y Monterde in the city of Guanajuato, in Basilica Collegiate Church of Our Lady, on August 28, 1799, when he was almost 22. She was 21 years old (Guanajuato, 2-8-1778), a wealthy lady of good lineage in that city, daughter of Ramón Carrasco, deceased, who may have been, among other positions, a public defender for the poor in that city, and María Josefa Teresa Monterde y Antillón Guitiérrez⁸.

It must be noted that Ramón Francisco Carrasco de Herrero was born in Guanajuato (Nuestra Señora, b. 26-VI-1739), son of Manuel Carrasco and Francisca of Herrero and Palencia. María Josefa Teresa Monterde was the daughter of Dr. Jose Antonio Monterde y Antillon, who was married in Guanajuato (Our Lady, 14-IV-1759) to Manuela Antonia Gutierrez de Raya y Martinez, resident of the Irapuato congregation. Dr. A.S. Monterde and Antillon (ca. 1735) had been appointed by the Santo Oficio Tribunal, in 1769, "surgeon for the interventions that would arise, a mission that he had already fulfilled in Guanajuato"⁹.

Both on the *birth certificate* and *marriage information* we found more enlightening and unparalleled information regarding his life. Fernández de Córdova was a doctor and surgeon of the Army Battalion of the aforementioned city where he had been residing. From December of the previous year, or January of the current one, he had been living in Irapuato for three months, and moved to the city afterward. At that time he had been a widower for one year and three months, after his first wife, María Guadalupe Ramírez de España, had died approximately in May of 1798.

In the same documents, in the same way, his correct last name is recorded: Fernández de Córdova, where the name of one of his ancestors is taken on¹⁰.

From the aforementioned marital union, the following children are known (the list is incomplete): María Francisca Manuela (Guanajuato: 16-VI-1800), Juan Pablo Ignacio (Salamanca: 25-VI-1801), Agustín María Hipólito (Guanajuato: 10-VIII-1802), José María de Jesús (Irapuato: 6-IX-1803), Josefa Sabina (Valladolid: 30-XII-1805), Juan Antonio Francisco (Valladolid: 11-XII-1806) and José Francisco Felipe (Valladolid: 26-V-1812).

Reading the writings we have been able to find evidences the excellent social relationships he maintained with the oligarchy of Guanajuato and Valladolid, as well as the constant changes in residence because of his career as a military physician.

In this context, he served under the troops of Hidalgo¹, who he undoubtedly knew. However, it is not possible to establish, for now, whether he joined him when he arrived in Valladolid on October 17, 1810, most likely, as local Infantry physician, and if any previous link existed before these events. We have not been able to determine when and where he stayed by his side, or if he only served in Valladolid¹¹.

At any rate, it could not have happened later than March, 1811, as he returned to his land then, and that is when he probably started his civilian practice. The words of Torres apply when he says that in his homeland "he started to practice his profession quite successfully, which made him gain public respect."¹¹ In addition: "His obvious talent, his sincere treatment, clear and jovial, and his refined education granted him the appreciation of everyone who knew him."¹¹

In the Hospital Padre San Juan de Dios he was a physician and director for many years, until he died on September 8, 1816, at age 39, and his body was buried in the chapel of said hospital.

Literate and fabulist

He was fond of literature and several artistic expressions; he cultivated fables as his preferred genre, or at least, we only know of his works in this genre. In 1815 he published a volume *Fables*^{12,13}, but we ignore where the edition took place. A few years after his death, twelve to be exact, the young and intelligent Juan Manuel González Urueña, whom we have mentioned previously, was then a council member of the government of the Michoacán State, and Miguel Ruiz and Spain was an official of the General Commissioner, decided to edit them again, with a preface and a few addenda (Fig. 1)¹⁴. In 1830 (1832?) the third edition is published in the State of Guanajuato¹².

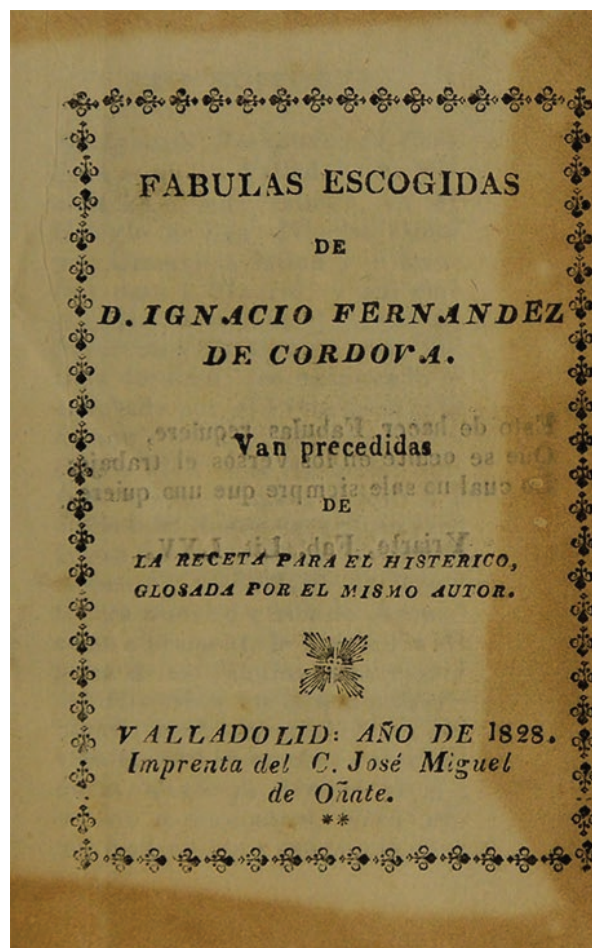


Figure 1. *Fábulas de Fernández de Córdoba: Edición de 1828.*

Conclusions

Fable is considered a literary genre with its own characteristics and elements that dates back to the origins of literature itself. It was already present in clay tablets from the region of Sumer, dating back to 2,000 A.D., and works and authors from the classic era up to this day are preserved.

Fable is a brief narrative, prose or verse, written in the third person, where the protagonists belong to the animal kingdom, or are diverse entities who behave like humans and even interact with them. The style is usually plain and the history is brief. Traditionally they have a moral, an ethical purpose, and their values are universal and imperishable, applicable for all times and places. The most common theme are the defects and errors of human nature. This circumstance allows, in some productions, with some precautions and reserves, to have some knowledge of the prevailing thought of the

time and place where they come from. It has been mistakenly thought that this genre is exclusive for children, although in many cases that was the intention.

It is necessary to ask ourselves why Fernández de Córdova has been relatively forgotten, and there are answers to this question. Until now, it was thought that he had never published anything while he was alive, and only after his death, in 1828. The distribution of that book was local and limited, although, perhaps more than the first and second editions¹¹. His highly respected grandson, Tirso R. Córdova, about fifty years later, at the peak of his fame as literate, attempted to compose a new edition, which would have been the fourth edition, with an extended biography. He died before he could achieve this goal¹.

In 1997, Ediciones Casa Natal de Morelos announce a libel without further consequences¹⁵. Shortly thereafter, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo (UMSNH) published a reduced facsimile edition that was completely overlooked¹⁶.

On the other hand, some circumstances that require immediate attention have been omitted, independently from the necessary formal literary and background analysis and the respective critique of Fernández de Córdova, and the novelty depends on that, both in Mexico and the rest of America.

Our protagonist was a contemporary of Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776-1827), who was the author of the first novel in the American continent. Although his work began publishing in 1816, *El Periquillo Sarniento* was not known in full until 1830-1831. In 1817, he brought to light his *Fábulas*, which are currently marginal in relation to the rest of his works¹⁷. Juan N. Torroscó (1779-1830), born in Veracruz, Published his works in 1819; currently, both the author and his works are completely unknown¹⁸. Despite all this, they were pioneers in their genre.

Regarding Dr. Fernández de Córdova, although ignominiously Torres and a few others pointed out that "versification is somewhat defective"¹, aspect that is not rigorously observed in this genre, his work is a rich laboratory for the study of social customs and impairments of the community where he lived, Valladolid/Morelia, which is where he writes, and where all the facts take place, because of their content, much earlier than the Grito de Dolores¹.

Culmination

From the medical standpoint, it is a clear and accurate record of the predominant ideology and tendencies of the authors, particularly from the point of

view of mental health. Very specifically, Fernández de Córdova refers to the then incorrectly name *hysteria*. He states: "The first cases in my profession were conditions in women who were treated by the wisest professors dedicated to this purpose, and since this conditions was almost endemic in this city [Valladolid/Morelia], I have frequently treated it [...]"¹⁹. He sharply points out at the beginning of his work: "To hysterical women: Acknowledgment"²⁰. This quote, as well as the body and structure of the text from 1828, clear any doubt that may exist regarding the printed text in 1815.

It is common for historians outside of medical science to identify characters from this era as followers of Brown (1735-1788) or Victor Broussais (1772-1838). The fables of Fernández de Córdova seem to follow the British author Sydenham (1624-1689), who stated that hysteria imitated all diseases, and *hypochondria* was the equivalent in males²¹. On the other hand, the moral standards, or in current terms, suggested mental health, inevitably point to Philippe Pinel (1745-1826), the great Bicêtre reformer.

Ethical disclosures

Protection of people and animals. The author declares that no experiments were carried out on humans or animals for this research.

Data confidentiality. The author declares that no patient data appears in this article.

Right to privacy and informed consent. The author declares that no patient data appears in this article.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares not to have any conflicts of interest.

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2. With the permission of Agustín de Castro (1730-1814), who Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo says translated to Spanish the fables of *Fedro* (First century A.D.) and brother Matías de Córdova (1766-1828), author of the fable *La tentativa del león y el éxito de su empresa* (1807). See: Camurati M. La fábula en Hispanoamérica. México: UNAM, 1978, p. 113. In the same way as the Argentinian Domingo de Azcuénaga y Basavilbaso (1758-1821), who published, between May 1801 and January 1802 in the *Telógrafo Mercantil* a fable per month (only seven out of nine are known). Its literary authenticity is doubtful, as it seems that the author "modified" some of them (or all?) as he saw fit, as they serve as model for other confirmed works.
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8. Archivo Parroquial de Santa Fe de Guanajuato (APSGF), bautismos de españoles, v. 65, años de 1778-1780, f. 32. 4^a de 11 hermanos. His parents got married in the aforementioned city of Guanajuato on July 26, 1773. His godfather was a clergyman related by blood to mining businessmen, such as Vicente Manuel de Sardaneta y Legaspi, first marquis of San Juan de Rayas, considered one of the wealthiest men in the area.
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17. Fábulas del Pensador Mexicano. México: M. Ontiveros; 1817. Illustrations by Joé Mariano Torreblanca, with a total of 41 productions.
18. Juan N. Troncoso. Fábulas. México: Mariano de Zúñiga y Ontiveros; 1819. Con 48 obras.
19. Surprisingly, he draws and illustrates in a brilliant and accurate manner the idiosyncrasy of the "ailing" and "sickening" society of Valladolid; perhaps this is its merit. Because he was a physician, he mocks doctors and their patients He describes the wealthy class, predominantly.
20. «Muy señoras mías: no solamente las drogas de la botica se han empleado en la enfermedad llamado Histérico; los remedios morales o de costumbre han tenido siempre en la medicina el mejor lugar. En la historia de esta ciencia, se encuentran muchísimos achaques curados por un buen método de vivir.» Fernández de Córdova I. Fábulas escogidas. Preceded by a prescription to hysteria with comments by the same author, and preface by Miguel Ruiz y España. Imprenta del C. José Miguel de Oñate. Valladolid/Morelia, México, 1828. pp. 217.
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