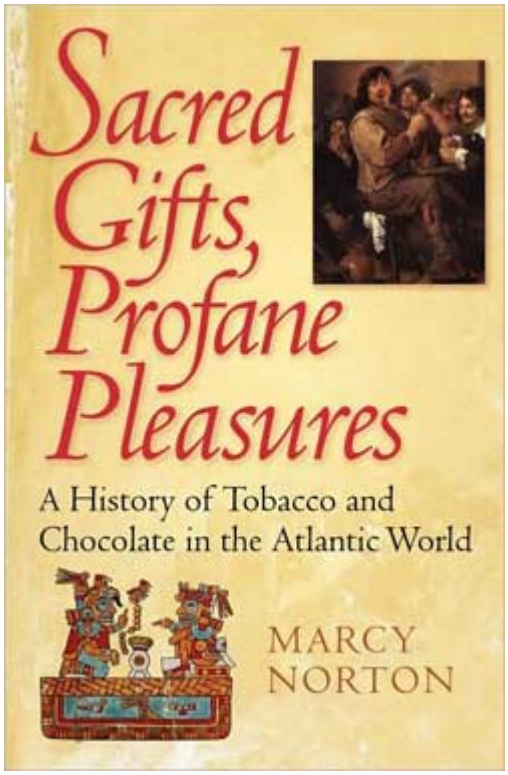
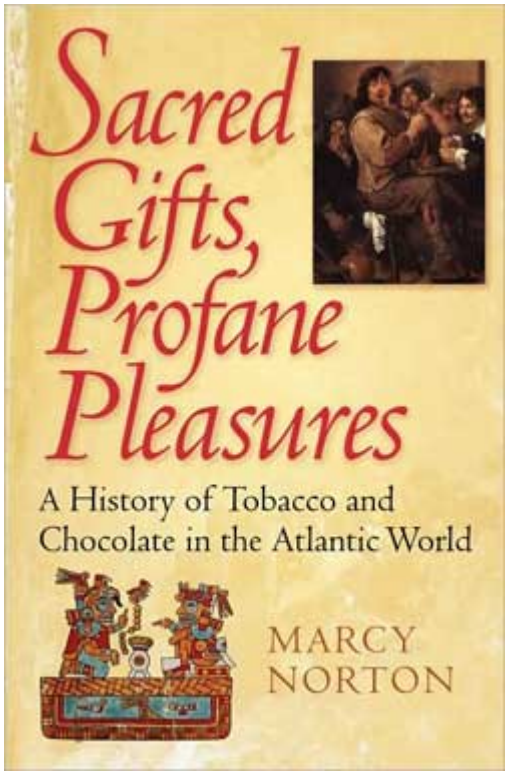
Smoke on the Water



Marcy Norton's marvelous, prize-winning book brilliantly investigates the cultural meanings of two related comestibles that would eventually become hugely profitable industries in Europe: tobacco and chocolate. She first illuminates what they meant in their original contexts of the Caribbean and Mesoamerica, and then in their transplanted context of Europe, which in this case mainly means Spain (more on this below). "What, exactly, did it mean," Norton asks, "for Europeans—bound as they were to an ideology that insisted on their religious and cultural supremacy—to become consumers of goods that they knew were so enmeshed in the religious practices of the pagan 'savages' whom they had conquered?" (3). The answers (and there are many) to this question lead Norton to upend the conventional understanding of the relations between the Old and New Worlds. Or as Norton puts it: "In asking this question, I am reframing the history of the Atlantic World" (3).

The conventional narrative is that the encounter between the Old and the New Worlds was an entirely one-sided affair in which European soldiers and explorers devastated native American people and cultures. Norton demonstrates that this narrative seriously mistakes what actually happened, and in its place, Norton proposes that the Atlantic World (note that the phrase collapses the Old and New Worlds into one entity) is characterized by "syncretism," meaning the "amalgamation of beliefs and practices emerging from different cultural traditions" (9). The reception of chocolate and tobacco, Norton argues, "exemplified the process of syncretism that was going on everywhere" (10).



Marcy Norton, Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Chocolate and Tobacco in the Atlantic World. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008. 352 pages, $24.95.

But to understand the reception of chocolate and tobacco in Europe, we first have to understand their original cultural and material meanings, which is Norton's project for approximately the first third of this book. Using a variety of primary sources, including traveler reports and illustrations from the Florentine Codex and from one of the few surviving pre-Columbian Mixtec books, Norton shows how tobacco and chocolate had both social and sacred meanings for the Aztecs. They were "essential accoutrements to courtly society" (27) and they "served to create and symbolize [social] bonds" (29). They also functioned as political tribute and tribute "expected by and hankered after" by the gods (31). Chocolate was seen as a "blood surrogate" and tobacco "was identified with the act of creation itself" (35, 36), which sounds lovely until one realizes that sipping chocolate and smoking a pipe also formed part of human sacrifice: the victim, physically perfect, was forced to circulate through the streets while "playing the flute [and] sucking [the smoking tube]" until he ended by having his heart ripped out (32).

Given such a lineage, one would imagine that Europeans would reject chocolate and tobacco as irrevocably tainted, but that, Norton shows, is not at all what happened. Or rather, initially, that is exactly what happened. In his*General History of the Indies* (1535), Gonzalo de Oviedo mentions tobacco as "the material embodiment of 'bad' Indian culture" (56), and while chocolate had an easier time being accepted, for some it was still a "disgusting drink of barbarians" (60). Spanish culture very quickly appropriated both chocolate and tobacco for purposes that, fascinatingly, continued some of their original

uses. Europeans embraced tobacco's healing properties, just as the Aztec did, and the consumption of chocolate in European culture "simultaneously served to fortify social bonds and underscore, or even confer, distinction" (174). The European understanding of chocolate and tobacco's cultural meanings built upon and transformed their original usages, demonstrating syncretism rather than an absolute break. Thus a 1710 tile painting from Barcelona showing aristocrats consuming chocolate, among other diversions, echoes "the *Florentine Codex*, [which also] depicts ritualized chocolate consumption within its broader social context" (178).

Another example of how the European understanding of tobacco continued rather than replaced its original meanings: in 1571, the Spanish physician and merchant, Nicolás Monardes, published the second edition of his*Two Books [concerning] those things brought from our West Indies that are useful to medicine*. In this work, Monardes brought together his two careers: medicine, and trans-Atlantic trade (which included trade in human beings; the man sold slaves as well as other goods). Relying on "indigenous expertise for their knowledge about useful medicaments" (113), Monardes gave tobacco pride of place in this work (the first edition does not mention tobacco at all, and his "understanding of tobacco's physiological effects largely derived from Amerindian knowledge that migrated through colonial and Atlantic information networks and that were confirmed and tested through direct experimentation by Monardes and others in his milieu" [115, 116]). Monardes' interest in native remedies also posed an interesting challenge to his humanist ambition to imitate the botanist, Dioscorides, whose *De material medica*"brought him more fame than if he had conquered many cities with his military arms" (quoted on p. 113). But Monardes' project led him away from humanist *imitatio*and toward the nascent discourses of what we today call science, meaning, he paid attention to empirical observation rather than previous authorities, and anticipating Francis Bacon by about fifty years, he declared: "If someone had the motivation to investigate and experiment with all of the kinds of the medicines such as are sold by the Indians in their markets, it would be a thing of great utility and benefit" (quoted on p. 114). Thus, as Norton writes, Monardes' "entry on tobacco exemplified the syncretism that resulted from the encounter between two long-autonomous traditions" (115), i.e., European humanism and native medical lore.

Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures is far too rich a book to adequately summarize within the confines of a short review. The examples culled above represent only a small fraction of the many moments in this book when one pauses to say, "I didn't know that" and "I didn't know*that*" (such as the fascinating fact that the Portuguese Marranos, whose religion was an unstable mixture of Catholicism and Judaism, were central figures in the importation of tobacco [212-23]). The book also has the added virtue of being as lucid as it is learned.

Yet, ironically, Norton's encyclopedic knowledge of her subject leads me to my one semi-criticism of this book: its exclusive focus on Spain and the Aztecs. I can't help but wonder if the same complex mélange of cultures also occurred

when Europeans collided with native cultures and civilizations less urban, less developed, than the Aztecs, such as the native tribes in New England. The reception of tobacco in England, for example, seems to have followed a different course even as tobacco consumption rocketed. King James VI/I, for example, tried to dissuade his subjects from consuming tobacco by asking them to "consider what honor or policy can move us to imitate the barbarous and beastly manners of the wild, godless and slavish Indians" (*A Counterblaste to Tobacco,* 1604). Also, Norton notes that in Spain, "women, of the highest as well as the lowest social classes, were habitual consumers" of tobacco (161). Yet in early modern England, smoking constituted a male privilege, forbidden to women. Hence the frontispiece for Dekker and Middleton's wonderful play, *The Roaring Girl* (1611) about a cross-dressing heroine named Moll who upends all social customs, shows her with a pipe in her mouth. Given how much Norton has given us, it might seem captious to ask for more, but an acknowledgement of European diversity of reception, even in a note, would have been nice. I also can't help but wonder how the Aztec uses of tobacco and chocolate came into being. Who had the brilliant idea of stuffing the dried leaves into a tube, setting them on fire, and inhaling the smoke? And how did chocolate drinks come to be "frothy"? And why?

More seriously, no discussion of tobacco today takes place without explicitly acknowledging its addictiveness and terrible cost in disease and death, but Norton argues that nicotine does not account for tobacco's phenomenal popularity in Europe. She dismisses the "Big Fix" theory of tobacco's spread. She may be right. Yet nicotine's insidious qualities manifested themselves in seventeenth-century Spain. A Cordoban apothecary confessed that "friends of mine (not once but many times) have diligently renounced [tobacco], thrown out their snuff boxes with the intention of never returning to it; but it has such a hold on their hearts, that later they return, seeking its forgiveness" (238). Even more chilling is the story of how the Dominican friar, Tomás Ramón, thought he had persuaded some "learned men" to quit, but they quickly returned to their habit: "when [Ramón] asked them why, they responded that they could not help it" (238).

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