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### Review of Elena Del Río Parra, *Exceptional Crime in Early Modern Spain: Taxonomic and Intellectual Perspective*

Marta V. Vicente

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**Del Río Parra, Elena. *Exceptional Crime in Early Modern Spain: Taxonomic and Intellectual Perspectives*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019. xii + 218 pp.**

*Exceptional Crime in Early Modern Spain* delights us with its wealth of sources from literature on crime in early modern Spain. Elena del Río Parra recreates a society obsessed with crime. As in a movie by the Spanish director Alex de la Iglesia, with his emphasis on the grotesque and the macabre that offers a poignant depiction of Spanish society's desires, nightmares, and anxieties, the stories that Professor del Río Parra retells reveal the fears and hopes of early modern Spaniards. Crime stories fascinated audiences then, as they do today, because of their exceptionality and ability to represent "the other" from a safe distance.

*Exceptional Crime* is divided into five chapters, each studying an array of primary sources from legal and medical treatises to private correspondence and diaries, *relaciones*, gazettes, chapbooks and *causes célèbres*, all connected by the main theme of the book: the efforts to classify "cosas raras y peregrinas" (odd and outlandish things). This classificatory effort revealed that "crime is not a sin but a disruption of the social order to be unraveled, if possible, by authorities and society itself" (7). *Exceptional Crime* reveals a world where authorities and the rest of society eagerly sought to understand crime and its causes.

The first part of the book (Chapters 1 through 3) focuses on the shifting categories of "the mad," "the monster," and "the suicidal," and seeks to make sense of the tension between the singular and the serial. Chapter 1, "The Taxonomic Axis of Fatality: From Series of Monsters to Serial Murderers," traces the "taxonomic" changes that replaced late-medieval accounts of monstrous people with the early modern interest in the exceptional individual: the criminal. The early modern category of the criminal is the exceptional individual who "as portent or prodigy" is in fact recomposing the idea of the monstrous race into a new more familiar, civil category (20). By making them a "human subgroup," criminals, unlike monsters, share this human component that makes them both familiar and difficult to identify: "physical clues exist but only as subtle disproportions that indicate a pattern of sinister behavior" (32). Chapter 2, "Sketching the Face of Evil: Pioneering Serial Killers," examines the marketability and consumption of the narrative of the murderer drama. The chapter analyzes dramas and novels that use the highly marketable archetype of the "good bandit," who becomes the anti-hero, a "living oxymoron" acting against their own role. The structure of these narratives, loosely based on actual crimes, disregards the veracity of its tales to focus on parts of the plot that will appeal to their audience. Moreover, their commercial success ensured the repetition of the stereotype of the good bandit thus creating the "paradox of achieving singularity by multiplication" (66). Chapter 3, "On the Edge: Living between Suicide and

Madness,” explores the difficulties in distinguishing suicide from madness. Both the insane and the suicidal are people “on the edge” of society, but the efforts to tell them apart leads to referring to the suicidal as “an exception in the field of madness” (93).

The second part of *Exceptional Crime* (Chapters 4 and 5) explores thematic commonalities among the categories described in the first part of the book. Chapter 4, “Expressing Criminal Behavior,” studies texts that claim factuality but in fact disregard it in order to turn attention instead to the “the weight of the source’s impressions” (4). These texts also muddy authorship, since in some of them murderers become the narrators of their own crimes. As Professor del Río Parra establishes, the line between fictional and factual is always blurred, revealing multiple layers of fictional accounts, shaping each other, and “in the end, fact, fiction, truth and lie seems to belong to an irrelevant classification”(112). Chapter 5: “Dying in Parts: Criminography and the Cult of Excess,” takes Roland Barthes’ concept of *fait-divers* (various facts), short descriptions of crimes sometimes as short as three lines that lure the reader with its “shocking touch” that transforms the rudimentary into something appalling (154). Thus, del Río Parra ends the chapter referring to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject and the feminist author’s emphasis on the “transgression of the corporal unity, characteristic of a culture that has transformed the abject into the valuable” (186). The fascination with murder and the human body, turns into “artistic material. Authors and readers, the educated and the illiterate, embrace the unexplainable to construct criminal modernity” (186).

With *Exceptional Crime* Prof. del Río Parra brings together the history of crime and the history of taxonomy, proving that the classificatory obsession was not the exclusive domain of early modern natural philosophers or the Enlightenment. The craze for classifying lies in the depths of the human psyche as reflected centuries before in Alfonso X’s thirteenth-century *Siete Partidas*’ effort to classify “the desperate” into five types, with subclassifications depending on the severity of the type. This taxonomic enthusiasm was shared by ordinary people for whom classifications offered the possibility of finding order in the world. As del Río Parra notes, our present society shares the desire of classifying to find order; what changes are the classifications. *Exceptional Crime* also shows that crime literature can also be approached from the perspective of the transmission of knowledge in early modern Europe, not only of how knowledge circulates among people, but also how this knowledge is equally found in the courtroom, the dissection theater, and the streets of European cities. This book may also inspire further research into areas such as the gendered component of crime narrative as well as its authorship by comparing the Iberian case to its counterparts elsewhere in the world.

**Marta V. Vicente**  
**University of Kansas**