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Review of Ruth MacKay, *Life in a Time of Pestilence: The Great Castilian Plague of 1596-1601*

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MacKay, Ruth. *Life in a Time of Pestilence: The Great Castilian Plague of 1596-1601*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xiv + 275 pp.

When I agreed to review this book, I had no idea how timely and relevant it would be. Neither, I'm sure, did the author when she wrote it. But reading this brilliant description of a society in crisis was a profoundly moving experience. We are reminded once again that, although the past is a foreign country, it is also populated with human beings much like us, muddling through as best they can, sometimes rising to the occasion, and sometimes behaving in disappointing or shocking ways. The book is also surprisingly heartening. Beset with a terrifying plague, early modern Castilian society did not collapse; instead, MacKay argues, "practices and assumptions continued working as they had for many years" (1). Unlike Europe during the fourteenth-century Black Death, late sixteenth-century Castile did not experience a general breakdown, or an upsurge in fanatical religious practices. Political structures, social institutions, and traditional ways of life remained intact, if strained to the limit. As MacKay writes, "if we watch how exhausted people took care of one another, or didn't, under exceptional circumstances, we can grasp the power of the rules and laws and customs that bound them" (11). MacKay does not seek to explain why the reaction to this plague was so different from the one that hit two hundred years earlier. Her stated goal is to bring to life what it was like to be in northern Castile at this fraught moment, and she succeeds magnificently.

In order to provide a window into this world, MacKay relies on a wide variety of documentary sources, particularly the minutes of city council meetings, as local governments tried to impose strict social controls to combat the plague, as well as various lawsuits, as individuals and/or towns sought to protect their rights and privileges. Indeed, one of the ongoing (and all too familiar) themes of the book is the constant struggle between public health concerns weighed against individual rights and the necessity of keeping the economy afloat. MacKay notes that "authorities... at times showed considerable common sense and flexibility regarding [quarantine laws], recognizing that people had to be fed and had to move around" (105). Movement through geographical and symbolic space is another theme of the book. The seven main chapters are each organized around a specific "site": the palace, the road, walls, markets, streets, the town hall, and the sickbed. MacKay uses each site to frame the many individual stories and mini-dramas she relates, as the plague struck and perhaps half a million people died.

MacKay begins at the top with the royal palace. As it happened, this plague coincided with a period of transition caused by the death of Philip II in 1598. The new king, Philip III, had to learn how to rule in an unsettled time, when

even the location of the royal court was uncertain, as Madrid became a plague city. Nonetheless, the crown remained an important symbol of unifying government; as MacKay writes, the plague “did not destroy Castilian reverence for the machinery of justice and politics” (48). At the same time, MacKay argues that most of the real decisions about how to grapple with the plague happened at the level of individual cities and towns. Local officials worked with *corregidores* (royal governors) to regulate travel and commerce between cities, preventing contagion as long as possible and dealing with the sick and the dead when plague did appear. Municipalities did their best to isolate themselves, but MacKay also illustrates the surprising amount of traffic that still flowed between, in, and around the cities. Food, goods, and services still had to be provided, and travelers also provided vital intelligence about the progress of the plague. As she writes, “roads brought information, but also uncertainty,” as every visitor represented a possible existential threat (51).

MacKay vividly describes how the plague disrupted daily life in myriad ways, and how life also went on, because it had to. Cities and towns built walls, locked gates, posted guards, and passed strict quarantine laws in desperate attempts to keep out the plague. And yet, people being people, rules were often negotiated, contested, or flouted. Citizens cut their own doors in walls, because they could not be bothered to walk all the way around to the gate; clergy refused to pay special taxes (intended to defray the costs of extra guards and walls), claiming age-old rights and privileges. People also sometimes lied, with dreadful consequences. MacKay describes, for example, a “deadly game of deceit and false hope” that occurred between the cities of Bilbao and Burgos (140-141). For centuries, these two cities had depended on each other for their economic well-being. In early 1598, the plague struck Bilbao, but city officials decided to hide the truth from their counterparts in Burgos, in order to protect their businesses and sell their goods. Burgos did not detect the deception for months, by which time many merchants from Bilbao had passed through the city gates, perhaps bringing the plague with them. The following year, Burgos itself would conceal the extent of the plague inside its walls. So it goes.

Overall, however, MacKay presents a positive message about how Castilian society survived, largely through institutions and customs. The plague, after all, had struck many times before, and people could consult both living memory and city records for instructions on what to do in an emergency. As she writes, “The repetition, the circularity, gave people tools” (246). MacKay also provides us with some stories of individual heroism. In July 1599, the Council of Castile sent an envoy, whose name we do not know, to Alcalá de Henares, to help the town fight the plague. He stayed until October, during which time, with the assistance of local citizens and clergy, the envoy organized guards, cleaned the

streets, isolated the sick, and buried the dead. When he left, the town was free of plague. As MacKay states, “this was government as it should be” (32). We should all be so lucky.

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