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Review by Christopher Baker

Totaro, Rebecca. *Suffering in Paradise: The Bubonic Plague in English Literature from More to Milton*. Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2005. 251 pages.

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For much of its early modern history, Europe suffered from periodic and devastating attacks of the bubonic plague. An outbreak struck Wittenberg on August 2, 1527, prompting Martin Luther to respond to a pastor who had asked whether the proper Christian response was to flee or to stay. Luther replied that fleeing the plague should be done by those who could do so and who were not needed to care for those who could not escape; Christian care for one's neighbor was crucial. In addition to his theological observations, he also offered practical advice:

Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?

The plague evoked a variety of written reactions throughout the English Renaissance, works which combined literary methods with scientific paradigms in an attempt to understand and cope with a disease which afflicted England for well over three centuries, from 1348 to 1666. Rebecca Totaro engagingly discusses six works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which respond to this biological and cultural threat. Totaro seeks to define how the "limits of hope" were affected by the plague and portrayed in contemporary texts: "To what extent did the best practices prescribed for plague prevention increase or decrease the limits of hope?" (Totaro 20-21). Utopian works held out the possibility that new strategies of prevention were possible, while more realistic works underscored the corrosive effects that the plague had on the social fabric, implying that such idealistic hopes might be limited at best.

After an opening chapter surveying the extent of suffering caused by the plague, Totaro summarizes the dominant early modern conceptual models for understanding it. Galenic medicine saw disease as an imbalance in the body itself, so that remedies lay in altering the quality of one's food, air, water and other factors which might disrupt the harmony of bodily humours. The Paracelsian model of disease, however, saw it as a unique destructive agent which entered the body; therapy lay in seeking out the offending factor and eradicating it, rather than first manipulating one's external environment. But early literary utopias, like More's *Utopia*, were clearly Galenic in design. More's society is a place of peace, clean air, and pure water; it is not only *utopos* ("no place") but *eutopos* ("happy place"). More holds out a hope that his utopian hospitals, model health care facilities, might be replicated in his native England. Gold was believed by many to be a curative, but in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, "gold's poisonous nature overwhelms any medicinal quality it might possess" (Totaro 95). Gold is the epitome of false hopes, and the plague is both a literal disease and a metaphor for the incurably imperfect human nature against which Timon rails. Flight from the plague is the premise of Jonson's *Alchemist*, as the tricksters are driven by "utopian dreams of a golden future" (Totaro 111) to create an island of wealth amidst a city in decay. Mammon seeks a Paracelsian "elixir" which will deliver him from poverty forever, but the play itself functions in a Galenic way, offering to regulate its audience's humours through sanative laughter.

Francis Bacon addressed plague problems in seven of the ten chapters of his *Sylva Sylvarum: or The Natural History in Ten Centuries*. Bacon's approach is also Galenic, but his work is noteworthy in describing a vast number of plague indicators. His *New Atlantis*, following More, presents the utopian community of Bensalem, which, like Bacon's own England, faces the threat of plague but which benefits from a scientific community blending the ideas of Galen and Paracelsus, both of whom "play a role in Bacon's program for the ultimate restoration of the world" (Totaro 138). Plague references likewise appear in each of Margaret Cavendish's first three works, but more interesting is her 1666 volume which bound together *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* and *The Blazing World*. The first is a discussion of the plague as a "constitutive force of nature side by side with

fermentation and respiration” (Totaro 152), while the second is her Galenic utopia, which, significantly, “tells us more about what the plague is not than what it is” (Totaro 156). Totaro suggests that Cavendish here verges on creating a work of “science fiction” (Totaro 157), an insight that deserves fuller expansion in her next chapter, which critiques the literary styles of Cavendish and Bacon. The final chapter explores the implications of disease and sanctity in the air of *Paradise Lost*. Satan’s pollution of Adam and Eve is a spiritual plague of their respiratory process; their breaths are now corrupted and fallen from that divine breath of life first breathed into them by God.

Totaro’s book is a useful addition to recent works such as Christine Boeckl’s *Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology* (2000) and Byron Grigsby’s *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature* (2004) which also assess the plague’s broader cultural implications. Though she mentions Evelyn’s work on air quality *Fumifugium* (1661), a fuller commentary on his treatise would have enhanced the context of her chapter on Milton’s epic by setting before us a brief picture of the foul vapors Milton himself had to contend with as a Londoner. As Evelyn lamented, “[I]s ther under Heaven such Coughing and Snuffing to be heard, as in the London Churches and Assemblies of People, where the Barking and the Spitting is uncessant and most importunate: What shall I say?”

*Christopher Baker*