

Rebecca Totaro, ed. *The Plague Epic in Early Modern England: Heroic Measures, 1603–1721*.

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Rebecca Totaro offers readers her second edited collection of plague writing, *The Plague Epic in Early Modern England: Heroic Measures, 1603–1721*. The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 is a lengthy introduction that justifies the collection, and part two is a collection of ten chronologically arranged plague poems by William Muggins, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, John Davies, Richard Milton, John Taylor, Abraham Holland, George Wither, William Austin, Thomas Clark, and Christopher Pitt. Two of the poems, Wither's *Britain's Remembrancer* and Austin's *Epiloimia Epē*, are represented by excerpts. The editor has a light touch when it comes to changing the typography of her sources. Totaro preserves the idiosyncratic capitalization, contraction, and italicization that was common in the texts of the time. Original printed marginal notes are included as footnotes. This approach offers scholars and students the best of both worlds; Totaro has made these texts more accessible while preserving much of their authenticity. Most auxiliary material (dedications, etc.) is excluded, but the exclusions are noted in a brief introduction to each poem. Some of this material, such as the prose preface to *The Fearful Summer* or "Tee Epistle Dedicatory," to *News from Graves-end* could justifiably have been included.

Heroic Measures follows Totaro's previous edited collection of primary source material, *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603*, published

in 2009. One reviewer of that book complained that it appeared to impose a strict subgenre on works that defy easy classification. *Heroic Measures* seems to present readers with a similar quandary. The book's introduction is dedicated to making a case for grouping the book's poems under the genre of plague epic, but the definition of plague epic is unsatisfyingly loose. Although any individual poem may possess certain qualities of epic poetry, those qualities are not consistent among the poems in the book, and the poems are missing many of the *sine quibus non* of epic: the central figure or figures, machinery, and a narrative, for example. The back cover claims that the book will be "of great value for Milton studies and scholarly research into the epic." While the book's introduction successfully shows how the poems allude to epic, it is less successful in showing that they were conceived or received as epic poems à la *Paradise Lost*, or that they represent proto-epics that directly influenced Milton.

Howsoever they are framed, these poems are important in their own right as part of plague history; they need to be published because of the statement they make about the relationship between disaster and artistic expression, and each contributes to our understanding of the English plague experience between 1603 and 1721. Several of the poems shed light on women's roles during a plague epidemic. In *London's Mourning Garment*, Muggins directly addresses the women of London, and the poem offers insight into plague-time constructions of femininity, motherhood, and marital relationships. Richard Milton's *London's Misery* details the role and function of searchers, who were typically (perhaps always) women. In counterpoint to Milton's relatively neutral stance on the searchers, Austin complains bitterly about them and other plague-time workers such as nurses and watchmen in *Epiloimia Epē*. Many of these poems also address the plague's impact on the English economy and the plague-time economies that arose out of the conditions that plague created. Taylor recounts in *The Fearful Summer* the impact of the plague on London's tradesmen and the wild inflation and deflation that racked the country during the 1625 epidemic. The excellent index ensures that readers will be able to track such topics with ease and serves as a key to the major themes and topics in the poems.

The poems vary in scope, tone, style, rhyme, and meter, but most seem to belong to the genre of lyric complaint. Canto 4 from *Britain's Remembrancer* is remarkable for the quality and simplicity of the verse, but the verse in most of the poems is utilitarian. *The Triumph of Death* by Davies and *The Plague of Marseilles* by Pitt are the most potentially epic of the lot, with heightened diction and scope and a kind of narrative. Holland's poem *A Description of the Great, Fearful, and Prodigious Plague* is interestingly expressionistic in places, and Austin employs a highly allusive style in *Epiloimia Epē*.

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