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**William G. Naphy**, *Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps c. 1530-1640*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. xiv + 242 pp. Maps, tables, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7190-4641-6.

Review by Matthew Vester, West Virginia University.

In one of the lists of popular attitudes regarding health compiled by the sixteenth-century medical writer Laurent Joubert, one finds between the entries “Why is it that one sings better after having drunk?” and “Whosoever eats, shits, and sleeps well does not need to fear death,” the following question: “Whether it is true that the plague is caught or transmitted by money and by bread.”[1] Despite Joubert’s suggestion to the contrary, William Naphy’s new book demonstrates convincingly that the plague was, in a manner of speaking, spread by money—or at least by a desire for money. Naphy carefully examines the fascinating phenomenon of conspiracies to spread the plague in and around the city of Geneva between 1530 and 1640, and in so doing he sheds light on a variety of topics, from municipal and confessional politics to witchcraft and from criminality and torture to late renaissance public health systems. Naphy has written an accessible book rooted in primary sources (mainly criminal records) to offer a fresh perspective on a problem of central importance to the social history of this period: the bubonic plague and how communities responded to it.

Naphy’s topic could fit into a number of historiographical contexts, but he chooses to frame it within the literature on early modern witchcraft. Despite the distinction drawn by William Monter between plague spreading and witchcraft, Brian Levack and others who have relied on Monter’s work have collapsed the difference, treating plague spreaders (*engraisseurs*) as “indistinguishable from witches.”[2] Naphy’s goal is to reconstruct and fortify this distinction, emphasizing less glamorous motives for plague-spreading activity and demystifying what might be called the public policy goals of authorities who prosecuted plague spreaders. To achieve this Naphy relies heavily on criminal records in which torture played a key role. Thus an important assumption of his book is that the use of torture, or indeed the mere reaching of guilty verdicts by sixteenth-century courts, does not invalidate the courts’ findings. In other words, evidence derived from trial records, even after torture was applied, can reliably represent *what really happened*.

There are six chapters in Naphy’s book, five of which focus on Geneva, documenting municipal responses to the epidemic and three moments of plague-spreading activity (in 1530, 1545, and 1571). The first chapter describes the kinds of steps taken by the city over the course of the fifteenth century to keep itself clean and safe from infection, demonstrating that by 1530 Genevans had had considerable experience dealing with plague crises without any sign of “hysteria, paranoia or scapegoating” (p. 14). Since the sources for this section were city council minutes, one wonders whether the absence of references to public hysteria might be due to the nature of the source. Would diaries, correspondence, or other kinds of sources corroborate this image of a cool, collected Genevan response to plague? Perhaps the most extreme step taken by Genevan authorities was to set aside significant sums of money for the payment of plague workers—hospital personnel, guards at city gates, *cureurs* and *cureuses* who disinfected

the houses of the afflicted, gravediggers, and the like. The vast majority of these workers were poor and foreign-born, and their “fairly lucrative positions were wholly dependent on the presence of plague in Geneva” (p. 17). For Naphy, this dynamic is the key to deciphering the new phenomenon that first appeared in 1530: a conspiracy to spread plague intentionally.[3] The prosecution of a plague worker who was accused of potentially lethal carelessness in the performance of his duties led to an investigation of a large number of his colleagues allegedly involved in a plot to spread powders or greasy concoctions of infected matter on the doors and windows of homes (especially those of the wealthy) in the city. The goal of the conspirators was not only to prolong their employment but also to dispossess as they disinfected—to clean out as they cleaned up, etc. The chapter concludes with the crucial assessment that authorities identified no religious, political, or demonic intent on the part of the conspirators, who were motivated purely by profit.

Chapters two and three tell a story whose parameters do not change significantly from those established in 1530. When the plague resurfaced in 1542 the city sweetened the pot for plague cleaners, offering to pay wages owed them to their heirs should they die. In 1543 rumors of plague spreading began to circulate again, but the authorities focused on countering the threat of the disease rather than rounding up suspects. Then in January 1545 a report from the nearby town of Thonon implicated a Genevan plague worker named Lentille in a greasing conspiracy. Beginning with evidence provided by Lentille, who was immediately interrogated, an investigation uncovered a core group of conspiratorial plague workers and eventually resulted in the prosecution of sixty-five people and execution of at least nineteen.[4] Naphy carefully seeks to establish that the confessions of those interrogated—whether tortured or not—constitute trustworthy evidence. He shows how the judges [the Senate] identified inconsistencies in Lentille’s initial testimony, permitting the judges to apply the torture that resulted in a confession and the naming of accomplices. The confessions parallel those of 1530, with the exception that two persons confessed to crimes of heresy and/or witchcraft in addition to plotting to enrich themselves through greasing. Naphy emphasizes the Senate’s lack of interest in investigating the evidence of witchcraft, which the Senate presumably would have done had the entire process been driven by paranoia and scapegoating.

Naphy posits two possibilities concerning these trials: that the testimony gathered after torture was untrue and that the senators forced confessions of a sort that justified their own fears, or that the testimony was true and the magistrates uncovered a dastardly plot. This argument seems a bit reductive in its assessment of the motives of the Genevan authorities. Naphy establishes that plague workers were well paid and that paying them represented a significant drain on city revenues that shrank with the onset of disease—because of restrictions on commerce with other areas, because quarantined workers were not able to tend to their crops or go about their business, and so forth. It seems likely that the city was not always able to pay their plague workers on time and that the city was frequently in debt to these workers as a result. An investigation of the state of city finances at the time of the conspiracy trials and of the accounts of the hospital and plague-related expenses—did the city owe the workers large amounts in back wages?—would be helpful either in strengthening Naphy’s argument or in qualifying it. The possibility that the municipality had a significant interest in seeing debts owed to plague workers erased calls for a reevaluation of the claim that forced confessions could only have been the result of hysteria. If it is plausible that *the bottom line* motivated conspirators, could it not also have motivated city authorities? To me, both seem possible, particularly since the conspirators were invariable foreign and/or poor—in either case, not well connected in Genevan political circles. The evidence presented here does not unequivocally rule out the possibility of a magisterial conspiracy to banish or execute creditors of the municipality.

Chapters four and five discuss a new round of plague outbreaks from 1567 to 1572 and a third set of *engraisseur* trials in 1571. New rumors that plague workers were greasing appeared in 1568, but they were not investigated by the city council. Rather, when the plague abated at the end of that year the city “sacked as many health workers as possible to save money” (p. 113). In the following years the plague

returned, and the city was increasingly cash-strapped. But the greasing trials of summer 1571 differed from those of 1530 and 1545 in several ways. First, they were administered by ordinary criminal judges rather than by the chief administrative authority (the "Lieutenant," assisted by other judges, in 1530 and the Senate in 1545). Second, the number of those prosecuted (115) and executed (forty-four) in 1570-71 was far greater than in earlier outbreaks. Third, in these trials "plague spreading and witchcraft are melding much more strongly into an interconnected activity" (p. 142). The courts administering these trials were much more interested in witchcraft than in conspiracies to spread plague. Greasing was portrayed as an activity in which individual witches engaged because of pacts with the devil rather than as a conspiratorial profit-making venture. Nor were the 1571 greasers concentrated among plague workers.

The last chapter briefly examines the plague-spreading phenomenon in other parts of present-day French-speaking Switzerland, in Lyon, in the Savoyard lands, and in Milan. In Lausanne and Neuchâtel, "plague spreading was almost wholly conflated with witchcraft" (pp. 160-61), a fact rendering the "the Genevan refusal [of 1530 and 1545] to classify plague spreading as a type of witchcraft...even more striking" (p. 163). Naphy makes the important point that "most states, regardless of their political, religious, economic or military circumstances, chose to deal with the plague not only in a similar manner but also in a co-operative way with their neighbours" (p. 166), even when neighbors were on hostile terms, such as the city of Geneva and the duke of Savoy. Naphy's investigation of the Savoyard archives reveals only one case of conspiratorial plague spreading, in 1600. Like Geneva, the city of Lyon brought in highly paid foreign plague experts to disinfect dwellings. Occasional criticism of these foreigners was transformed in 1567 by Claude de Rubys into a polemic against supposed Protestant attempts to spread plague in the city--an argument that few found convincing, according to Naphy, but one whose rhetorical force depended on widespread familiarity with the Geneva conspiracies. The final eight pages or so of this chapter describe plague spreading in Milan during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Naphy makes the point that although prosecutors referred to these activities as "demonic," the demonic was understood here as a broad category within which witchcraft and the diabolical arts could form separate sub-categories.

Naphy concludes that authorities were likely to associate greasing with witchcraft when they were dealing with a single defendant, but when facing a large number of accused persons they tended to find conspiratorial activity whose link to witchcraft was tangential at best. The different interpretations given by judges to plague spreading could stem from the simple fact that the cases provided them with different bodies of evidence. Another possibility is that the magistrates' interpretive framework changed over time, resulting in new assumptions about plague and witchcraft that caused them to solicit certain kinds of information from the accused (to which the accused obliged as soon as they figured out what their torturers wanted).<sup>[5]</sup> Naphy leans toward the first explanation, adding that the kind of evidence that kicked off a given prosecution likely determined whether or not plague spreading and witchcraft would become conflated. But attentiveness to differences between judicial processes should also point to the fact that the 1530 and 1545 conspiracies were investigated by tribunals whose authority and jurisdiction were quite different from those investigating later cases. The implications of these differences should be carefully considered, along with evidence about the tribunals that discovered the other conspiracies mentioned in the book but not examined in detail.

Naphy seeks to minimize explanations of these trials based on the social status of the accused, since "citizens were arrested and executed as well as foreigners and *bourgeois*," though he admits that "poor foreigners predominated," since they were highly represented among plague workers (p. 199). He also argues that information produced by trials administered independently of each other "in Thonon, Syon [sic] and Geneva in 1545 was consistent and could not have been the result of collusion or 'leading questions' from the bench" (p. 200). This conclusion does not seem entirely justified--it is not clear why magistrates in these towns along the Lac Léman and the upper Rhône valley could not have circulated sets of questions to pose to groups of plague workers, especially if they had much to gain. That being

said, Naphy's arguments that criminal investigations involving torture *could* uncover actual criminal activity (such as attempts to spread plague), and that trials prosecuting such conspiracies were clearly not motivated by hysteria or panic, are quite convincing.

Despite its title, this book is really about plague-spreading conspiracies in Geneva, with a few examples from nearby areas and a few pages on Milan. It does not engage the scholarship on Alpine history and says nothing about responses to the plague in rural mountain areas, where different contexts might permit better comparative analysis in a way that sheds light on the Genevan phenomenon.[6] Naphy's argument that these conspiracy trials were not politically motivated and that Genevan and Savoyard authorities cooperated in plague-prevention measures is refreshing, given the polemical tone of so much of the scholarship dealing with relations between the city and the House of Savoy. That said, the text contains a few imprecisions: the tribunal established by the French in Chambéry was called by them a *Parlement*, not a Senate (p. 166); the treaty of Lausanne was negotiated in 1564, not in the 1570s (p. 166); Faucigny was a region south of the Chablais, not a village (p. 179), and so on.

By and large, however, Naphy has written a readable book that would be useful in undergraduate courses on the Renaissance/Reformation, medicine and/or public health, criminality and social control, or urban history. The fact that Naphy's argument leaves the door open for debate could make it a fun book for students to read and discuss.

## NOTES

[1] Laurent Joubert, *The Second Part of the Popular Errors*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1995), p. 162.

[2] Naphy, p. 3, citing Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 122.

[3] Naphy indicates that accusing marginal groups of plague-spreading conspiracy was not a new phenomenon in Europe as a whole, or even in the western Alps [see, among other authors, Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991)], but does not develop a discussion of the cultural history of the phenomenon prior to 1530.

[4] On pp. 69-72 Naphy provides tables identifying those tried for conspiracy and the sentences assigned to them. Unfortunately the information represented in the tables does not correspond to the analysis in the text: according to the tables there were forty-two people arrested between January and March 1545 and eighteen were sentenced to be executed; according to the text forty-four people were arrested during this period and thirty were executed (pp. 69-70).

[5] Naphy gives credit to Ginzburg's work on the *benandanti* for this sort of interpretation.

[6] For an introduction to this literature, see Jon Mathieu, *Geschichte der Alpen 1500-1900: Umwelt, Entwicklung, Gesellschaft* (Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1998), also in Italian, *Storia delle Alpi 1500-1900: Ambiente, sviluppo e società*, trans. Gian Primo Falappi (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 2000); see also work by Laurence Fontaine, Dionigi Albera, and Pier Paolo Viazzo. Naphy's references to poor migrants from Alpine valleys (p. 173) seem to rely on a Braudelian view of Alpine emigration that has been largely superseded by more recent scholarship.

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