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Reading the Real Biblioteca del Escorial: Dangerous Books, Readers, and Populations

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Toward a Better Understanding of...

Reading the Real Biblioteca del Escorial: Dangerous Books, Readers, and Populations

Sophia Nuñez

Mentor: Stephanie Kirk

Amid an atmosphere of increasing censorship and intolerance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, the apparent anomaly of a royal, religious library accepting Hebrew, Arabic, and forbidden books presents a unique window onto aspects of early modern Spain’s political, cultural, and intellectual life. Moreover, since various kinds of people and books converge in the Real Biblioteca del Escorial, founded by King Philip II in 1559, the library is a useful place to compare the treatment of books (themselves a kind of body) and that of bodies. In fact, I believe that the symbolic significance of textual incorporation and exclusion within the library parallels the human processes occurring with corresponding readers and populations. Reading the library entails an examination of early modern attitudes towards libraries, books, and readers, along with attendant views on censorship, intolerance, and destruction. Additionally, I consider the political-historical context of Spain’s powerful empire and ambivalent attitudes towards Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and their converted but stigmatized descendants. Given these contexts, I examine published and archival Inquisition licenses, catalogues, constitutions, descriptions, histories, and letters regarding the Escorial library in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for an understanding of its policies, readers, and book acquisition—paying particular attention to the treatment of suspect books and their readers. From the historical context and documentary evidence, I suggest that keeping “dangerous” books in this library expressed power over the conquered, showed royal pride and prestige through a universal and valuable library, and minimized the risks that the books present by isolating them from all but trustworthy readers. Indeed, although the library was ostensibly open to “all men of letters who wished to come and read,” in the words of Philip II, it appears that only those most trusted readers enjoyed an unusual, potentially dangerous freedom of reading at the Escorial.