The history of psychiatry’s birth has long been told as rooted in western Europe, with the Enlightenment delineating barbaric, on the one hand, and moral and rational, on the other, approaches in treating those warranting confinement. Although religious figures were often considered antithetical to the ideals of the Enlightenment, historian Christina Ramos demonstrates how, during the Hispanic Enlightenment, a key role was played in the proliferation of scientific modernity as madness came to be understood in increasingly medicalized terms.

Bedlam in the New World: A Mexican Madhouse in the Age of Enlightenment is a social and micro-history of the Hospital de San Hipólito, the first hospital established in the Western Hemisphere to specialize in the care of those encountering mental disorders and madness. During its centuries-long tenure, San Hipólito functioned as a tool for legitimizing the charitable practices and ideas propagated by the church and the Spanish Crown. By tracing the history of this institution within the context of the medicalization of madness, Ramos illustrates how the hospital functioned as a “microcosm and laboratory of the world beyond its walls” (p. 3).

This book will appeal to academics who specialize in the histories of colonial Latin America, psychiatry, and medicine, but the author’s concise and clear presentation of the material also makes this work accessible to nonacademics. Through five chronological and thematically organized chapters, Ramos traces the evolution of the hospital from the sixteenth century through 1910. San Hipólito was founded in 1567 when reformed conquistador Bernardino Alvarez experienced a spiritual awakening. As he embarked on a charitable mission, he hoped that his altruistic offering would inspire other conquistadors to practice the virtues of caridad and hospitalidad and, like him, serve as models of ideal Christian conduct toward the recently converted natives. According to Ramos, San Hipólito then “functioned as a limited tool of colonial governance whose utility resided less in the forceful confinement of vulnerable colonial subjects than in the reproduction of charit-
able practices and ideas that lent legitimacy to the Church and Crown” (p. 27).

Drawing on a wealth of largely untapped archival sources, Ramos illustrates how the act of confinement was “a product of complex—albeit uneven—local exchanges among a variety of participants,” including medical practitioners, clergy, inquisitors, legal experts, prison guards, laypeople, and patients (p. 14). In this laboratory within a laboratory, Ramos places San Hipólito in conversation with lay and elite groups and argues how their evolving views toward madness were related to the Enlightenment and Bourbon reforms. In the late seventeenth century, San Hipólito experienced a period of financial decline and deterioration of its infrastructure, leading administrators to temporarily close the facility. When the hospital reopened in the 1770s, administrators revamped both its facilities and its institutional mission, shifting from charitable to utilitarian in scope. This event coincided with the founding of the Hospicio de Pobres (Poor House), another initiative that represented the Crown’s investment in overhauling traditional forms of charity and, taken together, projected benevolent colonial rule.

During this period, Ramos argues, San Hipólito became a “site of care, confinement, and knowledge production” and gained prominence among secular and ecclesiastical authorities “as an institutional strategy for managing disordered mental states,” marking an increase in the medicalization of madness (p. 84). The Inquisition, long considered a backward and anti-rational institution, became a driving agent for this process in the eighteenth century and was used to decipher who was mad and who was heretical. With medical experts often testifying in inquisitorial cases, physicians themselves functioned as secondary actors in carrying out the mission propelled by the Inquisition. According to Ramos, the Holy Office unwittingly devised new modes “to understand the complexities of human reasoning and nuances of intent,” which ultimately led to a spike in the number of incarcerations at San Hipólito (pp. 18–19).

This trend of categorizing the mad would play a significant role in the early nineteenth century when San Hipólito shifted from a place of custodial shelter to one intended to incarcerate criminals, especially those with violent tendencies. According to Ramos, unlike their inquisitorial counterparts, secular magistrates were “far less invested in tethering verdicts to the nuances and accuracies of medical diagnoses” (p. 155). In their view, the Hospital de San Hipólito presented an obvious and convenient answer to a pernicious dilemma—how to punish violent offenders whose diagnosis of madness precluded their incarceration among the general prison population. In 1861, President Benito Juárez created the Beneficencia Pública, an agency to centralize and modernize public welfare and health care. This signaled what would become a new—and final—phase for the hospital before it was formally closed and replaced in 1910 by La Castañeda, Mexico’s first modernized psychiatric facility.

*Bedlam in the New World* is a well-researched and fascinating study that not only builds on existing scholarship on the histories of madness and psychiatry but also brings this history of colonial Mexico City into the conversation. By tracing how the medicalization of madness took place through a collective effort on the part of secular and religious authorities as well as through a multitude of actors, Ramos has convincingly reconstructed the world of San Hipólito and its broader environs on both the micro and meta levels.