

Introduction

Mention the bubonic plague and the response might very well be, “Bring out your dead!”—a line from the plague scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* that turned the horror of the Black Death into humor for movie audiences of the 1970s and established a quasi-medieval context for the film. However appealing or humorous Camelot appears in film and in legend, life in fourteenth century England was difficult and the bubonic plague pandemic that by some accounts killed as much as half of the world’s population made it worse. England’s last major outbreak, now known as the “Great Plague” of 1665–66, figures as the subject of Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). There were many outbreaks of the plague in the years between 1348 and 1666. *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603*, performs the important function of revealing in primary documents the power of plague in these years. Well after the Black Death and before the Great Plague, plague writing became a stable, distinct, and popular genre. More specifically, it was in Elizabethan England that plague writing first unfolded fully into recognizable subgenres that addressed religious, medical, civic, social, and individual needs.

The Plague in Print is the only edited collection of this distinct, influential, and provocative writing. The works in this volume merit sustained reading. Each is an engaging product of complex rhetorical strategies intended to alter the thoughts and actions of readers, and each either was widely disseminated and reprinted with little variation in consecutive plague years or is representative of the more ephemeral writing that addressed the needs of a

particular plague year. In addition, each work represents a sub-genre of plague writing: plague remedy, plague prayer, plague order, plague literature, and plague bill. These categories of plague writing would remain stable through the 1660s and in some cases into and far beyond the eighteenth century, when England feared that the plague that was raging on the continent would again cross the channel.

William Bullein's *A Dialogue both pleasant and pietyful* (1564) is the exemplary piece of plague writing in this collection. Printed in 1564, expanded for publication in 1573, and reprinted in 1578, Bullein's dialogue is an original narrative, written specifically and entirely to address the threat of the bubonic plague. Literary depictions of plague prior to this were limited in scope, like the frame story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* or the appearance of plague in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, neither of which takes the plague as its primary subject. Bullein crafted a multilayered, lengthy dialogue to bring comfort to readers by offering them a sourcebook of medical and theological advice, replete with a useful index. The opening and closing letters, including another complete and previously untranslated plague remedy in Latin, reinforce these messages, as does its full 1564 title: *A Dialogue both pleasant and pietyful, wherein is a goodly regiment against the fever Pestilence, with a consolation and comfort against death*. Bullein secured a large readership for his plague dialogue not by focusing only on the bleak reality of visitations but by supplying "pleasant" literary entertainment, with morality tales, travel accounts, humorous husband-wife banter, and satire built into the dialogue. This single source exemplifies the interdisciplinary, overlapping approaches early modern men and women took as they attempted to understand, prevent, and recover from the plague.

The 1578 *Orders thought meet* of Queen Elizabeth I is another highlight of the collection, similarly addressing several concerns and serving multiple functions. Intended to manage local government response to the plague throughout England, *Orders* covers everything from charity for the poor who are afflicted to the spe-

cific responsibilities of local officials charged to monitor plague and to quarantine those who were found to be infected. Among the orders are statements intended to ensure that local community leaders would find them fair and flexible enough to allow for modification both over time and in the case of special circumstances. In addition, the orders include an extensive plague remedy appended at the end, intended to supply medical information free of charge to the public. The full title of the orders reveals its multiple functions: *Orders, thought meet by her Majesty, and her privy Council, to be executed throughout the Counties of this Realm, in such Towns, Villages, and other places, as are, or may be hereafter infected with the plague, for the stay of further increase of the same. Also, an advice set down upon her Majesty's express commandment by the best learned in Physic within this Realm, containing sundry good rules and easy medicines, without charge to the meaner sort of people, as well for the preservation of her good Subjects from the plague before infection as for the curing and ordering of them after they shall be infected.*

By the end of the sixteenth century, English plague writing had emerged fully formed to endure for generations. Under the Stuarts, it would increase in volume, with changes that were subtle and primarily content-specific, as can be seen in Thomas Dekker's approach to plague literature in *The Wonderful Year* (1603), which concludes this collection. Chronologically, thematically, and structurally, Dekker's prose narrative remains true to Elizabethan efforts to grapple with the plague, and it hints at what would be found during the Stuart years: government instituted corporal punishment for breaking quarantine; hope for relief from the plague ceasing to compensate for the increase in its virulence; and disciplinary specialization increasing and limiting the number of texts that attempted to serve multiple purposes. *The Wonderful Year* is more strictly literary than theological or medical in content and purpose, and it comes already tainted with a tone of bitter resolve, if not outright outrage, which would compete with a qualified hope in the form of Puritan providentialism.

The works in this collection also point up the current void in the emerging canon of popularly known plague writing from Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Camus's *The Plague* and Kushner's *Angels in America*. The most essential English plague writing is often left out of consideration largely due to the interdisciplinarity that gave it viability in the early modern marketplace of print. William Bullein was a physician but his dialogue doubles as a learned Protestant theological treatise, for example. Thomas Moulton was a Dominican friar, but he is known to us because of his popular and influential plague remedy. These authors display knowledge in their professional subject areas but they speak with equal conviction and accuracy from alternative disciplinary vantage points—in all cases, employing an array of period and discipline specific terms that are utterly foreign to most readers now. This collection significantly reduces if not eliminates these difficulties while remaining true to the original words of the authors, from dedicatory materials and indices to closing remarks and printing house identification. By reading a plague entertainment such as Bullein's *A Dialogue both pleasant and pietyful* or Dekker's *The Wonderful Year* in full and side-by-side with plague orders, plague bills, plague prayers, and plague remedies, we gain unique access to the thoughts and practices—literary, religious, medical, social, and civic—of early modern men and women.

These representative writings also cohere around themes that we can now identify as particular to early modern English plague writing: among them, that the plague threatens utter annihilation on a biblical scale; nature is made unnatural as parents abandon their children; the opportunities for selfish gain increase in plague-time; city dwellers may carry the plague with them into the country when they flee, and the country is not always a safe haven; the plague is a shape shifter; mirth is as important to health as bloodletting; one should not only pray but also be careful to avoid bad air; and the harmful effects of the plague are exacerbated by rumor. By reading these collected sources together, we hear the repetition of beliefs and anxieties that bear the marks

of prolonged and shared suffering. Furthermore, when these themes emerge in texts with which we are already more familiar, such as Spenser's poetry, Marlowe's plays, Donne's sermons, Milton's epics, Defoe's novels, or Swift's satirical travel account, we are in a better position to engage with them in fresh ways. By attending to plague writing, our ears become more attuned to early modern literature as a repository of cultural meaning wrought in the furnace of crisis and its attendant trauma.

These essential Elizabethan sources grant us unusual access to the lives of early modern men and women, even those we think we know best. Once we realize, for example, that the first encounter that Queen Elizabeth I had with the plague during her reign occurred only months following her nearly fatal battle with smallpox, we are in a better position to understand the forces that shaped her approach to leadership and the degree to which her Privy Council members were motivated to protect her and see that she produce an heir. William Shakespeare was born during an unusually intense plague visitation in Stratford-upon-Avon, and some speculate that were it not for the theater-closings of the 1590s and early 1600s, we would not have Shakespeare's poetry, perhaps not even some of his plays. John Milton and Margaret Cavendish were among the many writers who penned their most famous works while the plague raged in London in 1665–66. Highlighting the complexity of a period that contained the most gruesome of physical afflictions and some of the greatest of human achievements at once, the works in this volume provide what Thomas Dekker might have called a "wonderful" entry point not only into early modern literature but also into English lives, disrupted at their most basic levels and in such a manner as to permit an unusual degree of observation, record-keeping, and new thinking about what it meant to be alive and to die. Through these texts we see a heightened appreciation of the materials and practices of life once taken for granted—those crucial to everyday experience and survival as well as to the creation of individual and cultural memory.

These essential sources also give original voice to current thoughts about the relationship between disease and human populations, as the world braces for the next pandemic, and even as the revival of the Monty Python film in musical format suggests. Now on tour throughout England, Canada, and the United States, *Spamalot* won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2005, and it is no surprise that one of its most celebrated new song and dance numbers is an expansion of the popular plague scene from the 1975 film. In “He’s Not Dead Yet,” plague victims sing,

Oh we’re off to war
Because we’re not yet dead
We will all enlist
As the Knights that Arthur led.

Thumbing their noses both at the plague and at those who would tell them that the best thing they can do in plague-time is stay in bed, the plague victims form not only a chorus but a chorus line, celebrating life in Pythonesque style. They comment on history and on current politics in order to elicit from the audience a cathartic laugh. To elicit this change from suffering to relief, from despair to hope, and from complacency to action is the fundamental purpose of plague writing—a genre that is clearly “not dead yet.”