"A plague o' both your houses: Teaching the Literature of the Plague during the Covid-19 Pandemic, a Reflection"

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"A plague o' both your houses" (III:i). This line from *Romeo and Juliet* is delivered by a dying Mercutio, expressing his anger at the feud that has caused his untimely death. His fury is echoed in the closing moments of the play when the Prince indicts the leaders of the two families for the tragic deaths of their children: "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate" (V:iii). *Romeo and Juliet* is a play with which I am very familiar, having read, researched and taught it for many years and in many different contexts. However, until I was preparing it for class this year, I realise that I never fully reflected on the true meaning of these two lines. Obviously I knew what the plague was, but I interpreted these lines as a general curse or expression of anger. It was only in the shadow of our current experience of pandemic that I really understood the true horror of what Mercutio and the Prince are wishing upon the unruly families. Of course the Elizabethan audiences, who lived through regular outbreaks of plague and would have been familiar with the horrific suffering of the victims and the extraordinarily high death tolls, would have fully understand the depth of their anger, a lesson very much reinforced by the number of bodies littering the stage at the end of the play.

There is another reference to plague in the play, when the letter Friar Lawrence has sent to Romeo, explaining that Juliet is only pretending to be dead and will be waiting for him in her family's crypt, is prevented from reaching him because of travel restrictions:

> "the searchers of the town
> Suspecting that we were both in a house
> Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
> Seal'd up the doors, and would not let us forth,
> So that my speed to Mantua there was stay'd" (V:ii).

Again, on previous readings, I would have read this as one of a number of acts of unkind fate that propelled the star-crossed lovers towards their tragic ends. However, this year, with our own experience of lockdown, we had a much better understanding of the circumstances in which outbreaks of disease prevents the easy movement of people and services through society. In June 2020, Prof Daniel Carey of NUI Galway argued that the humanities had the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of how societies should deal with the upheavals caused by the pandemic. Historical and literary accounts of previous crises could assist us in mapping out the future course of our social responses, he explained, while understanding the behaviours and motivations that drive people to act in particular ways is cited by all public health experts as crucial to defeating the disease (quoted in Conrad et al 2020). By examining contemporaneous literary responses to the 16th century plague with my second year literature class, I hoped we could engage in a wider analysis of how societies deal with such times of crisis and what roles literary texts play in disseminating information and shaping public behaviour.

<u>What was plague?</u>

> Ring a ring o'roses
> A pocket full of posies
> Atishoo! Atishoo!
> We all fall down

This familiar children's rhyme is believed to be an early folk memory of plague. The "ring o'roses" is believed to refer to the lesions on victims' skin, and sneezing was one of the symptoms. The "pocket full of posies" referred to the belief that carrying strongly scented flowers and herbs would protect you from the infected air. The final line conveys the reality: that many victims of the plague did die.

According to Paul Slack, the word "plague" comes from the Greek and Latin, and means "a blow, something sudden and acute" (Slack 2011). It has often been used as a generic term to refer to almost any calamity, including pests (locusts) and disease in animals and humans. Over the centuries, it has been used to describe severe outbreaks of infectious disease, probably, although not definitely, linked to the same cause, a virus *Yersinia pestis.* Plague is distinguished from other outbreaks of disease in two main ways: it kills a huge proportion of the people it infects (it was not uncommon for a quarter of a population to die of plague within a year of outbreak) and people suffered hugely when infected. Slack lists delirium, extreme fever, painful tumours and pus leaking from mouths, noses and wounds as common symptoms (Slack 2011).

Charles Creighton's *A History of Epidemics in Britain* cites Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (664AD) as the first recorded instance of plague in Britain and Ireland. According to sources cited by Bede, the plague or Black Death killed about 60% of the population of Ireland. Although figures are hard to interpret, Creighton notes the *Annals of the Four Masters* does record a significant number of nobles who died of the disease, so prevalence and mortality levels are likely to have been significant (Creighton 1891, 8). Plague is transmitted to humans by flea bites, and the fleas are hosted mainly by rats (and when endemic by cats and dogs). An infected person can transmit the disease to other people – it is in fact highly transmissible. Because fleas are more numerous in warm weather, plague outbreaks were generally worse in the summer months, sometimes disappearing almost completely over the winter. Rats tend to hibernate during the winter which is another reason why transmission of the disease is less common. Because plague depends on rats to begin its spread, it is always preceded by a growth in rats. This gives rise to some of the most vivid imagery associated with plague, but also explains (partly) why poorer, more overcrowded and damp areas suffer more.

Since this first recorded outbreak, Britain like much of Europe suffered a series of epidemics. The first major recorded outbreak of plague occurred in the 6-7th centuries. It is estimated that it killed around half of Europe's population. Interestingly Anne Roberts suggests that Britain got away lightly during this epidemic as rats had not yet made their way across the sea (Roberts 1980). The second pandemic seems to have started in central Asia in 1347, and estimates suggest it killed as many as 100 million Europeans by 1400. The plague returned at intervals until the late 19th century, with several outbreaks leading to huge death tolls (John Frith, 2012).

The first major instance of plague in England was in 1348 (known as the Black Death). It is believed that a huge proportion of the population died but there are no accurate records from the period – Roberts notes that parish registers of births, marriages and deaths only begin in 1538, and many of these were subsequently lost (Roberts 1980). Between 1348 and 1565, Roberts notes that there were repeated plague epidemics in England, with very few years in which no plague-related deaths were recorded. She does caution that it is not always possible to be sure of the attributed cause of death recorded, as death tolls from other causes were also high. Famine, for example, is thought to have accounted for the deaths of 3% of the population

annually (the same proportion who died in the 1918 flu). In general, deaths recorded during summer are more likely to be plague, and those in the winter to be famine (Roberts 1980). The Elizabethan period saw a number of serious outbreaks of plague, most notably in 1563 and 1592-3. It is worth noting that Shakespeare was born in 1564 during a major outbreak of plague in Stratford-upon-Avon, which killed about a third of its population in that year. He wrote *Romeo and* Juliet in 1595 and it was performed a year or two later, meaning that the experience of the plague would have been immediate and personal for the playwright and his audiences, although interesting the plague does not feature as a key theme or context in any of his plays.

The Plague of 1563

The epidemic of summer and autumn 1563 was the most severe in the history of London. Estimates suggest that between a quarter and a third of the city's population died. A mild winter meant that the fleas did not die off as they usually might have, and the plague then spread to the surrounding countryside the following year. Creighton notes that this is the first instance of plague where accurate fatality records are available. The practice of recording the death toll dates back to the 1530s, when weekly "bills of mortality" were sent to the Secretary of State. These records indicate that 1372 deaths from plague were recorded in the week ending 24th September, 1563; while John Stow's *Annales*, published in state that: "In the same whole year, ie from the 1st January…. til the last of December 1563, there died in the city and liberties thereof, containing 108 parishes, of all diseases 20,372, and of the plague, being part of the number aforesaid, 17, 404" (quoted in Creighton 1891, 306). Around a quarter of Londoners died of plague, with the poorer areas being most affected. By 1563, the City of London and its surrounding areas (known as Liberties) were badly overcrowded, and lack of sanitation was a big issue in the containment of the disease.

John Stow ascribes the infection of the city of London by plague to the return of English troops from France in the summer of 1563. An interesting consequence of the plague was that the French post of Le Havre, which had been captured and held by Elizabeth 1st from 10 months, was surrendered in late July 1563. However, Creighton notes that the dates contradict Stow's claim as plague was already rife in London before this time. It is more likely, he suggests, that the resurgence of plague resulted from the relatively long gap since the previous infection, which left people's immunity compromised and had led to a relaxation of measures to mitigate the disease: "A clear interval of a dozen years without an epidemic, or a severe epidemic, was enough to make men forget the long tradition of plague domesticated upon English soil; while there was no scientific doctrine of epidemics then worked out, from which they might have known that the seeds of a disease may lie dormant for years, and that their periodic effectiveness depends upon a concurrence of favouring things, most of all upon extremes of dryness or wetness of ye seasons as affecting a soil full of corrupting animal matters" (Creighton 1891, 309).

Development of Preventative Practices

As it was evident that plague was worse during the summer months, attention began to focus on the unhealthy or infectious air of the city and fresh air began to be associated with maximizing one's chances of escaping the disease. Thus began the practice of leaving the city until the epidemic passed. In a letter to the Earl of Shrewsbury in 1516, for example, Cardinal Wolsey is said to have explained his escape from London as a desire to get "into clean air" (archive.org). It became customary when an outbreak became threatening, that the Parliament and Law Courts were suspended and that anyone who could afford it would flee to the countryside. Creighton notes that this raised certain questions about morality, specifically one's responsibility to one's neighbours: "Could flight from a plague-striken place be reconciled with

duty to one's neighbour? How ought a Christian man to demean himself in the plague?" (Creighton 1891, 311).

A big challenge and source of fear was the invisibility of the disease. Creighton quotes a contemporary source stating:

> For if it were in meat or drink, it might be eschewed; if it were an evil taste, it might be expelled with a sweet savour; if it were an evil wind, the chamber might with diligence be made close therefore; if it were a cloud or mist, it might be seen or avoided; if it were a rain, a man might cover himself for it. But now it is a secret misfortune that creepeth in priviliy, so that it can neither be seen nor heard, neither smelled or tasted, till it have done the harm (Creighton 1891, 311).

He notes that isolation and notification became part of public handling of the disease as early as 1518, when Thomas More ordered the mayor of Oxford: "that the inhabitants of those houses that be, and shall be infected, shall keep in, put out wispes, and bear white rods, as your Grace devised for Londoners" (Creighton 1891, 312)

The first plague-order of which the full text is still in existence was issued in 1543 under the authority of Henry VIII:

> "A precept issued to the aldermen: That they should cause their beadles to set the sign of the cross on every house which be afflicted with the plague, and there continue for forty days.
>
> That no person who was able to live by himself, and should be affected with the plague, should go abroad or into any company for one month after his sickness, and that all others who could not live without their daily labour should as much as in them refrain from going abroad, and should for forty days after and continually carry a white rod in their hand, two foot long.
>
> That every person whose house had been infected should, after a visitation, carry all the straw in the night privately into the fields and burn; they should also carry clothes of the infected in the fields to be cured" (Creighton 1891, 513-4).

The text of this plague-order really resonated with the class, who recognized the imposition of quarantining and social-distancing measures similar to those in use in the current context. The use of the two-foot long white rod as a physical method of ensuring the maintenance of social distancing was a particularly fascinating detail, as was the awareness of the importance of sanitation and hygiene measures. We were all struck by how sophisticated an understanding there was in the 16th century of these basic disease control and management measures, and how similar contemporary measures are.

The great London plague of 1563 revived the old practices and gave rise to some new ones. Elizabeth 1 ordered a number of preventative measures, which were coordinated through the church: infected people were ordered not to attend church services for several weeks after they recovered, crosses were painted on the houses of the infected and all stray dogs and cats were rounded up and killed. The Court adjourned to Windsor Castle and the Queen ordered the erection of a gallows so that anyone attempting to break their quarantine would be punished. In July of that year, Elizabeth I ordered that every householder in London should light a bonfire in the street outside their houses three evenings a week at 7pm to cleanse the infectious air, known as miasmas. The houses of the infected were to be boarded up completely for forty days – food was to be provided to them through church collections. Another significant decision was to close all theatres.

It is worth noting that plague-deniers were a feature of epidemics. Paul Slack notes that town authorities often initially reacted to an epidemic by denying it was plague until the evidence made it undeniable. This was done to prevent a mass exodus and disrupt local business. "Slandering a town with plague" was a powerful weapon in the hands of anyone with a grudge against a particular community. He notes that doctors were also subject to pressure from families not to declare an illness to be plague because of the social consequence and need for social isolation (Slack 2011).

London Plague of 1592-3

Plague continued to occur at frequent intervals in the second half of the 16th century, with some years suffering heavier death tolls than others. The most significant epidemic began to be felt in London in Autumn 1592, and was responsible for 2,000 deaths by the end of that year. It was an ominous sign that this epidemic of plague lasted through the winter, and contemporary letters describe: "a congregation of the unwholesome smells of the town, and the season contagious, so many have died of the plague" (Creighton 1891, 352). Parish records suggest that 15,000 people died of the plague between December 1592-3, with an additional 10,000 deaths in the surrounding towns.

Managing Public Behaviour During the Plague

As well as the rules enacted to prevent the transmission of plague, there was a concerted effort made to educate the public about what they could do to help. One of the most fascinating elements of the current pandemic for me was the extent to which, before science came to the rescue with treatments and vaccines, management of the disease was entirely based on effective messaging and the understanding of human behaviour. As Kathryn Conrad et al note, the methodologies and expertise associated with Humanities played a vital role in harnessing public support for lockdown measures: "Pathogens and people together make a pandemic, and we cannot eradicate the pathogen without understanding, respecting and working with people. Doing so takes the co-ordinated efforts of historians, anthropologists, artists, sociolinguists and writers, all of whom are experts in narrative and representation – in short, scholars and practitioners of the humanities" (Conrad et al 2020). The Elizabethan texts provide a fascinating overview the tactics used to persuade the population to follow the rules. What is also interesting is the insight they give us into the various struggles for dominance that were playing out as society transitioned from the medieval to the modern world. Particularly fascinating is the conflict between religion and science, prayer versus medicine, and the extent to which the plague was presented as a punishment from God for the increasingly materialistic, immoral way of life that characterized Elizabethan society. People, in other words, were blamed for the frequent outbreaks of plague, the only possible cure the return to a life of prayer, thrift and morality.

A Selection of Literary Responses to the Plague

A selection of sermons and prayers entitled "A Form of Notification to be Given by the Curates of London" was distributed to churches in 1563, designed to guide people's behaviour and tend to their spiritual needs. These were designed under the guidance of Edmund Grindal (1519 – 6 July 1583), a cleric of the Church of England. Grindal was nominated as Bishop of London during the reign of Edward VI, but had to flee to Europe when Mary I came to power. He returned after the coronation of Elizabeth I, and served under her Bishop of London, Archbishop of York, and Archbishop of Canterbury. Grindal was sympathetic to Calvinist Puritanism and in his 1641 text *O Reformation*, he is singled out by John Milton, who generally despised members of the church hierarchy as "the best of them" (Collinson 2004).

Acknowledging that public gatherings in churches is unwise during periods of disease, Grindal instead advocates for regular prayer within the home, in conjunction with "fasting and abstinence". The text begins with a letter from Elizabeth I, in which she exhorts her subjects to take heed of God's anger and turn to prayer in order to bring about the end of the plague:

> Considering the state of this present time, wherein in hath pleased the Most Highest, for the amendment of us and our people, to visit certain places of our realm with more contagious sickness than lately hath been, for remedy and mitigation thereof we think it both necessary and our bounden duty, that universal prayer and fasting be more effectively used in this our realm (Grindal 1563).

The daily ceremony was to start with the perfuming of the house with: "Frankincense, or some other wholesome thing, as Juniper, Rosemary, Rosewater and Vinegar", a reference to the widespread fear that the air itself was the source of contagion. The prayer begins with a reminder that God has visited plague and disease upon humanity at intervals throughout history, to express his anger at their disobedience:

> Among the rest of thy heavy curses, thou threatenest by name the plague, and the Pestilence, with other noisome and most painful diseases, to such as forsaking thee worship strange gods, and follow their own vain fantasies, instead of thy sacred ordinances (Grindal 1563).

This statement clearly links plague with spiritual decay, a theme that is reinforced several times during the text:

> All which causes, O Lord, for the which thou hast so afflicted thy people, are through the malice of Satan and our wilful consenting unto him grown so ripe in us, that were it not for the exceeding greatness of thy mercy and compassion, we should all presently perish, and that worthily, so horrible and outrageous are our iniquities (Grindal 1563).

Another popular and influential sermon was Andrewe Osiander's "How and whether a Christian man ought to flye the horrible plague of the Pestilence", published in English by Miles Coverdale in 1537, in which the Christian protagonist ponders on the morality of saving oneself instead of remaining to help one's neighbour. Osiander (1498-1552) was a German Lutheran theologian and reformer, who played a central role in the adoption of Protestantism by the city of Nuremberg in 1525. He was a controversial figure who, like Martin Luther, was vehemently opposed to Catholicism, but he was also a mystic which was at odds with the more rational basis to faith espoused by Protestants. He published a number of religious texts, including versions of the gospels (*Encylopedia Britannica).*

Osiander's text is clear that the plague is a punishment inflicted upon a sinful world by God. However his main concern is that Christian people conduct themselves as morally as they can in spite of the fear and chaos that surrounds them, resisting the temptation to save themselves by abandoning those might need their assistance. He begins by assuring his listeners that it is not wrong to be afraid nor to want to protect oneself from the disease, and that God would never expect people to avoid infectious areas or consult doctors for help, as long as these actions do not go against God's prescriptions or harm anyone else:

> your charity shall first know that it is not my meaning to forbid or inhibit any man to fly or to use physic, or to avoid dangerous and sick places in these fearful airs, so far as a man doth not therein against the belief, nor God's commandment, nor against his calling, nor against the love of his neighbour (Osiander 1537).

He also resists criticizing those whose interpretation of the causes of plague are, in his view, wrong:

> In like manner, I will not entreat against them, that speak naturally thereof, and say: Such plague cometh out of the influence of the stars, out of the working of the comets, out of the unseasonable weather and altering of the air, out of the South winds, out of stinking waters, or out of foul mists of the ground: For such wisdom of theirs will we leave unto them undespised, and not fight there against (Osiander 1537).

This is an interesting insight into the competing perspectives on the plague dominant at the time, with superstition and science offering different explanations. As a Christian, of course, Osiander knows the truth: that the plague is a weapon deployed by God to punish humanity for its sinfulness:

> But (as Christian men) we will hold us unto the word of God, the same will we suffer to be our most high wisdom, and give credence unto it, and follow it: and so shall we find much better and surer instruction: Namely, that this horrible plague of the pestilence cometh out of God's wrath, because of the despising and transgressing of his godly commandments…… And certainly this is the plain truth and the very origin of these plagues. No man ought to doubt thereon. For though the foresaid natural causes do somewhat also thereto, yet is it sure and undoubted, that the same causes be sent and stirred up out of God's wrath for our sin and unthankfulness (Osiander 1537).

The only solution, he concludes, is for humanity to atone, begging God for forgiveness and promising to live more moral lives in the hope that he will have pity and life the pestilence:

> Seeing then that out of the word of God we know the very cause of this horrible plague: Namely, that it is the fault of our sins, as unbelief, disobedience and unthankfulness; therefore before all things it shall be necessary, that we refrain from the same, repent, and amend our lives, if we will else be preserved and delivered from this horrible plague (Osiander 1537).

Perhaps the most significant attempt to cast the plague as God's punishment was William Bullein's "A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence" published in 1564. Bullein was a puritan cleric and a doctor, who was born sometime between 1520-1530 and died in 1575/6. He served as the rector in Blaxhall, Suffolk in 1550, and subsequently worked as a doctor, first in the north of England and later in London, where he was working by 1560. He wrote four books: *The Government of Health* (1558), *Bulwarke of Defence* (1562) and *A Comfortable Regiment Against Pleurisi* (1562), and *A Dialogue Against the Fever Pestilence*, which takes the form of a series of dialogues and published four times between 1564 and 1578 (Wallis 2004). Bullein's *Dialogue* is described by Laura Caroline Stevenson as: "an interesting combination of a colloquy, a morality play and a medical manual which contains several jest-book stories, remedies for disease, and a treatise on the art of dying". She notes that his book was deeply interested in the souls of Christians, and that it gives significant insight into the "social duties and obligations" and reveals the: "moral framework which surrounded Elizabethan social consciousness" (Stevenson 1984, 47).

The book was marketed as a medical guide to preventing and treating disease, but she notes that Bullein's other role as a cleric is evident in the allegorical structure of the text, which puts Civis (a citizen), his wife, servant and an Italian merchant into conflict with a range of characters such as Lying, Greed and even Death. Towards the end of the text when Civis himself contracts the plague, he is visited by Death who claims that it is humanity, and not God, who is responsible for the disease. The text suggests that the plague is a manifestation of the widespread spiritual corruption – people have forsaken morality for greed and lecherous

behaviour. Although on his deathbed, Civis is redeemed at the end of the book when he rejects the false promises of the physician for the spiritual absolution of the church.

R.W. Maslen summarizes the complex aims and structure of Bullein's *Dialogue* as follows:

> "*Fever Pestilence*, as a whole, then, has a tricksy, dual function: it masquerades as a conventional medicinal treatise – the work is filled with genuine medical prescriptions against the pestilence – but it finally dismisses the current obsession of English subjects with medicine as one of the many symptoms of the nation's sickness, that it, its loss of spiritual direction, under the influence of corrupt, self-seeking strangers. The dialgue's pose as a medical recipe book is a blind, designed to seduce its terror-stricken readers into a consideration of their spiritual rather than their physical welfare. And Bullein's text has a still more ambitious design besides this one: to reform and restore to health the nation of which its readers are citizens. It represents, then, (Bullein's aim) to fuse the notions of good governance and good health in an inviolable unity" (Maslen 2008, 129).

Bullein's text provides a wealth of information about conditions in a plague-stricken society. In the opening conversation, Mendicus, a man from the country, describes the scenes he has witnessed on the roads out of the cities:

> I met with wagons, cartes, and horses, full ladē with young barnes, for feare of the blacke Pestilence, with their boxes of medicines, and swete perfumes. O God, how fast did thei runne by hundredes, and wer afraied of eche other, for feare of smittyng (Bullein 1564).

Mendicus' description really evokes the panic of those who are attempting to flee the contagion and the fear that being in the company of other people now induces – a reaction that is very easily understood in the current context at the end of a year of warnings to maintain an appropriate social distance from each other. Civis admits that he has sent his own children to the safety of the country, but is resolute that he will stay himself, explaining that plague is not as dangerous to healthy adults, and moreover that it would not be good idea for the virtuous citizens to desert the cities and leave them to the mercy of the less upstanding. Nonetheless he is nervous that the plague cannot be contained and that it may soon affect the wealthy as well as the poor:

> I doe not intende to flee, notwith|stādyng I praie God of his mercie, deliuer vs from this Plague, for if it doe continue GOD knoweth, it will not onely take a|waie a nomber of poore people, but many wealthie and lustie marchauntes also (Bullein 1564).

The men have a long conversation about the prevalence of plague among the poorer classes, suggesting that there may be certain advantages to men of consequence like themselves if the less useful in society were to be eradicated:

> If soche plague doe insue, it is no greate losse. For, first it shal not onely deliuer, the miserable poore man, woman and barne, from hurte and carefulnesse, into a better warlde: but ause cutte of many coueteous vsurers, whiche be like fat vncleane swine whiche doe neuer good, vntill thei come to the dishe, but wroote out euery plaute that thei can come by.
>
> And in sike Pla|gues, wee pure people haue micke gud. Their losse is our gaine, when thei do be|come naked, wee then are clethed againste their willes: with their dooles and almose, we are relieued, their sicknes is our health their death our life. Besides vs Beggers, many mee menne haue gud lucke, as the Curate, Parishe clarke, and the bell man, often times the executours be ne losers by this game (Bullein 1564).

The cold-heartedness of this assessment is striking. Mendicus' suggestion that the loss of the lower classes in society will be "no greate loss" is hardly mitigated by his faux-sympathetic comment that for some poor people, plague will be a blessed release from the misery of their earthly lives. He also envisions the plague wiping out the greedy money-lenders, who serve only to inflict misery on the poor through their greed. The loss of such people, he suggests, can only benefit moral citizens like themselves. This reading of the plague as affecting primarily those who are perceived to live less admirable and useful lives continues in a conversation Antonuus has with Meicus, the doctor. Antonious is anxious to find out who is most likely to succumb to plague – a question, certainly, that occupied al our thoughts at the start of the Covid—19 pandemic.

> Antonius.
> To what persones I praie you, doeth the Pestilence come?
>
> Medicus.
> Moste chiefly to them, vnder the place in¦fected, then to slotishe beastlie people, that kepe their houses and lodginges vnclene, their meate, drincke, and clothyng, moste noisome, their labour and trauell immo|derate, or to theim whiche lacke prouident wisedome, to preuente the same by good diete, aire, Medicine. &c. Or to the bodies hotte and moiste. And these bodies doe in|fecte other cleane bodies, and wheras ma|ny people do dwell on heapes together, as *Auicen* saieth (Bullein 1564).

Medicus' answer inspired some of the most heated debate in the classroom, as it epitomizes the judgmentalism and lack of empathy with those in society who cannot afford to live in clean, well-ventilated accommodation. The language used to designate these groups of people likens them to animals, suggesting that being poor somehow makes one sub-human. Their failure to nourish themselves properly and tendancy to live in overcrowded locations is attributed to bad personal choices rather than to social circumstances. Moreover it is clear that such groups are themselves to blame for their surroundings, their "slotishe" behaviour and lack of "provident wisedom" suggesting that they are too lazy to work to improve their lots. The focus on physical hygeien is also significant, suggesting that the "hotte and moiste" bodies of the poor are the vectors of the disease. What is most striking is the sense of threat posed by such groups and the fear that if they are not contained, they may spread the disease to other superior classes. It is worth noting that the use of "cleane" to denote hygiene would also have signified moral purity for the Elizabethan readers. Thus the connection between morality and health is made clear, and the plague as in the texts discussed above is specifically attributed to immoral behaviour.

As a doctor, Bullein also inserts considerable medical details in the text, giving a great overview of the recognized symptoms of plague and the remedies that were available to treat them. In response to a question by Antonius about how an outbreak of plague can be anticipated, Medicus responds with a list of phenomena, some of them observable in nature, others based on superstitious explanations of planetary movements, an uneasy mixture that again suggests the conflict between newer scientific narratives and the older traditions that continue to guide public reactions:

> Oh the most fearfull eclipses of the Sunne and Moone, those heauenlie bodies are manifest signes of the pestilence emōg men, and the starres cadente in the begin|ning of Haruest, or in the moneth of Sep|tember, or moche South winde or Easte winde in the *Canicular* daies, with stormes and cloudes, and very cold nightes and ex|treme hot daies, & moche chaunge of wea|ther in a litle time, or whē birds do forsake their egges, flies or thinges breding vnder the grounde, do flie high by swarmes into the aire, or death of fishe or cattelle, or any dearth going before, these ar the signes of the pestilēce, & euident presages of the same (Bullein 1564).

Medicus also provides a detailed and graphic account of the physical impact of plague on the human body, a description that enables us to visualize the true horror of the disease:

> Thei whiche are smitten with this stroke or plague,* are not so open in the spirites as in other sicknesses are, but straite winded, thei doe swone and vomite yellowe chol|lour, swelled in the stomacke with moche pain, breaking forth with stinking sweat. The extreme partes verie cold, but the in|ternal partes boiling with heate and bur|nyng, no reste, bloode distillyng from the nose: Urine somewhat watrie, and some|tyme thicke with stincke, sometyme of co|lour yellowe, sometyme blacke, skaldyng of the tonge, ordure moste stinkyng, with redde iyen, corrupted mouthe with black|nes, quicke pulse and depe, but weake, hed|ache, altered voice, losse of memorie, some|time with ragyng in strong people. These and soche like are the manifest signes, how the hart hath drawen the venome to it, by attraccion of the aire: by the inspiracion of the arters to the harte, and so confirming it to be the perilous feuer Pestilēciall (Bullein 1564).

Antonious' final question to Medicus concerns prevention from infection. Medicus' answer is again an intriguing mixture of valid advice and good practice, much of which are still emphasized today, and other more dubious pronouncements on the most effective medical interventions, most of which have been discontinued over time.

He strongly advises citizens to avoid overcrowded areas, where the disease is known to be rife, trying instead to breathe in fresh air:

> First of all, let all men,* women and children, auoide out of the ill aire, into a good soile (Bullein 1564).

He also links the severity of the disease with an overabundance of moisture in the human body, thus suggesting a range of measures designed to draw as much moisture from the body as possible. This can be achieved, he suggests, through diet, medical remedies and interventions like blood-letting and, interestingly, by strictly controlling one's emotions, not allowing oneself to succumb to any extremes:

> let euerye one of theim, with some good Medicene, drawe from the bodie, su|perfluous moisture[….]lesser meates, not so moche wine as thei haue vsed in custome, neither Potage, Milke, vnripe fruictes: hotte Spi|ces, dates or Honie, or swete meates, wine with Suger are not tolorable. No anger or perturbacions of the minde,* specially the passion called feare: for that doe drawe the spirites and bloode inwardes to the harte, and is a verie meane to receiue this plage (Bullein 1564).

In the final section of the text, Civis, the main protagonist, who had considered himself immune to plague due to his high social standing, economic success and self-proclaimed moral behaviour, succumbs to plague and begins the process of atoning for what, as he reviews it upon his death-ed, is not after all an admirable life. We learn that he has been greedy and as a landlord has charged extortionate rents for his properties, evicting those who have been unable to pay. Civis' fate and the extended dialogue he has with Mors, or death, allows Bullein to emphasize his key message: plague has been inflicted on humanity by an angry God, disgusted at the immoral, greedy, unChristian lives they are leading, and that no medical remedy can save society now. Only atonement and prayer stand between society and its complete destruction:

Ciuis.
What is the cause, O fearfull Death, that thou doest scourge the face of y^{e} yearth with thy Dartes: and who hath sente thee for that purpose?

Mors.

Neither is the saiyng of the Philosophers,* or Poetes true, whiche compt that I come by chaūce, to mortall thinges[….]And some other do affirme, that I do come through the cōcorse of the starres infecting the aire, & poisonyng liuing thinges[….]I am the messenger of God, his scourge and crosse to all flesh good and bad: and am the ende of life, whiche do separate the bodie from the soule. I am no feigned thyng by the wise braines of the Philosophers: but onely through the diso|bedience of your first parentes Adam and Eua,* through whose fault all fleshe is cor|rupted & subiecte to me Death: for through sinne came death (Bullein 1564).

The Plague in Literature

In his book *The Plague in Literature*, Thomas Keys argues that literary texts have the advantage over medical accounts in being more vivid in conveying the realty of life during pandemics – while history gives us the facts, literature provides a more intimate, personal view (Keys 1944, 35). Tyler Stovall argues that pandemics often offer an opportunity for society to reset itself, noting that many periods of plague were followed by a radical reshaping of traditional social structures. In the 17th century, for example: "This enormous biological crisis also prompted fundamental social and cultural changes. For example, the shortage of labor it created helped bring about the end of serfdom and create a free peasantry that could bargain for wages, so that death and freedom marched together" (Stovell 2020). Carlo Franco-Paredes suggests that this social change was, in part, a consequence of the role played by literary texts in recording people's fear and despair, thus inspiring societies to seek new methods of governance and develop better medical and scientific remedies to manage and contain the spread of disease: "Throughout centuries, illness, death, and fear resulting from epidemics and pandemics have played a major role in the history of humankind. In additional to historical records of these events, we have at our disposal many fictional books that portray narratives of human despair, sorrow, and grief originating from the authoritative force of social transformation brought about by infectious diseases. Major pandemics documented in these works, by way of fear, have shaped human emotions and fostered radical change in cultural beliefs" (Franco-Paredes 2021) Of particular consequence to the texts discussed in my classes and detailed above was the role of plague in precipitating a shift from religious to secular, scientific narratives. The toll plague exacted on poorer echelons of society, in particular, precipitated a radical rethinking of the ways in which societies were structured and the responses made to crises: "For centuries, people considered human illnesses as phenomena caused by the supernatural or religious realms[….]A growing secular community emerged from the pandemic, as people searched for a new understanding of the natural world. The stories of plagues also remind us that social hierarchies, racial differences, and wealth determine peoples' ability to shield from the ravages of pandemics. Across the ages, plague and death often disproportionately reach socially disenfranchised populations due to their underlying vulnerabilities linked to inequalities" (Frano-Paredes 2021).

Paul Holm et al have stated that a Humanities approach encourages tolerance and open-mindedness and that literary texts plays a significant role in developing our imaginations so that we can respond empathetically to different perspectives and experiences: "thus making us more sensitive to the attitudes and emotions of our fellow citizens" (Holm et al 2015, 12-13). Our engagement with a selection of 16th century plague texts encouraged us to reflect not only on the vivid, first-hand accounts of the widespread suffering recounted by the authors, but on the transformative impact such accounts could have on our reactions to the education experience during the current lockdown. The texts had great resonance for us, providing considerable insight into the development of public health strategies and the techniques that were used to persuade the population to adhere to guidelines. The overt blame assigned to the poorer classes in the Elizabethan texts, and the specific link drawn between the disease and behaviour characterized as immoral, provided a great context for our reflection on the prevailing narratives of our current pandemic, and students used their own frustrations and

anxieties about the representation of the perceived non-compliance of younger age groups in some media sources to seek out common ground with a number of the authors we read.

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