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Authoritative Folly then and now, and of what Morality: an analysis of *A Journal of the Plague Year*

The Plague epidemic as described by Defoe bears both similitudes and differences to the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic. In the following paper, I will investigate the Plague’s effect on how state and civil authorities navigated and administered policies in response to its high mortality and infection rates. I will further investigate the presence of deceivers and how people made desperate by the plague were taken advantage of by these and other deceivers. Lastly, I will divulge my interpretation of the overarching theme of the novel while discussing the end of the plague. Each of these topics will be examined through a historical deconstructive lens where I compare the events of DeFoe’s time with contemporary ones and ponder the future.

*A Journal of a Plague Year* discusses how state and civil authorities both navigated and administered policies with the goal of mitigating deaths from the plague. The Plague health orders are broken up into four sections: “orders concerning the Infection of Plague… infected Houses, and Persons sick of Plague… for cleansing and keeping of the Streets Sweet…” and lastly, “concerning loose Persons and idle Assemblies” (Defoe 41-47). In contrast, the list of orders that have been issued by the British Columbia provincial government encompasses sixteen different sections (Government of B.C.).

There is no contemporary answer to the “Orders for cleansing and keeping of the Streets Sweet”. These orders call for “the streets to be kept clean, …that Rakers take [the Sweeping and Filth of Houses] out of the Houses, ...Laystalls to be made far off from the City” and “…Care to be had of unwholesome Fish or Flesh, and of musty Corn” (Defoe 46-47). It is my belief that the orders from this category were in fact adopted into common practice in the wake of the Plague. Other orders that differ from contemporary health mandates can be found under the “Orders concerning infected Houses, and Persons sick of the Plague”. These include orders that instruct, “Burial of the Dead”, which essentially disbands funerals and requires graves to “be at least six Foot deep” (Defoe 44-45). This at least describes the origin of the six-foot-deep grave. However, anecdotally speaking, funerals are still permitted for those mourning their losses at the hands of Covid-19. The above snippets of Plague era health code mandates are what I have determined to be the outliers in comparison to our recent and current Covid-19 mandates.

With the outliers out of the way, it is now time to discuss the Plague era health orders that coincide with their Covid-19 counterparts. As there is a plethora of nuances from the plague era health orders, such as the appointment of “Watchmen”, “Searchers”, or “Chirurgeons” that obviously do not exist today, I will be engaging with the underlying ideas and concepts behind the health orders (Defoe 42). The first set of orders, those “concerning the Infection of the Plague” lay the groundwork for today’s health care system (Defoe 41). Defoe writes that it was the examiner’s job and the operation of the examiner’s office to:

…enquire and learn from time to time what Houses in every Parish be Visited, and what Persons be Sick, and out of what Diseases, as near as they can inform themselves; and upon doubt in that Case, to command Restraint of Access, until it appear what the Disease shall prove… if they find any Person sick of the Infection… to give order to the Constable that the House be shut up (Defoe 42).

The job of discovering who is sick and from what and if it is “the Infection” describes the responsibility of modern-day hospitals and the Public Health Act (Government of B.C.). Even the latter half of the order that authorizes a constable to “shut up” an infected person’s house is reflected by the concept of quarantining today.

This brings me to the crux of the similitudes and differences in policies between our on-going pandemic and the Plague; quarantining versus shut ups. Defoe’s narrator voices his discontentment with the orders of shutting up people’s houses often throughout the narrative. He states this repetitively through the narrative, but this excerpt summarizes the nature of the issue quite succinctly:

I believed then, and do believe still, that the shutting up of houses thus by force and restraining, or rather imprisoning people in their own houses… was of little or no service in the whole; nay, I am of opinion, it was rather hurtful, having forc’d those desperate people to wander abroad with the plague upon them, who would otherwise have died quietly in their beds (67).

For the narrator, shut ups were an unproductive solution to the spread of the Plague because they are considerably inhumane, “the shutting up of houses was at first counted a very cruel and Unchristian Method… the people so confin’d made bitter Lamentations… many People perished in these miserable conditions” (Defoe 49). According to Defoe’s narrator, the government justified the cruelty of shut ups by servicing the “public Good” despite however, the violence and “mischief” that was being carried out (49-54). Another matter that the narrator brings attention to is how those who did in fact escape their house prisons eventually died and spread the Plague even more (54).

Taking the first response to Covid-19 and the experience of lockdown and quarantining into account, the similarities between these events and the “shutting up of houses” are pervasive. Defoe’s narrator would have been appalled to see shut ups still occurring. Though shut ups incurred the presence of an actual person to supervise a house, this is remarkably similar to the mandatory symptom reporting service that comes with a 14-day quarantine where only a negative Covid-19 test will result in freedom: a person is required to self-isolate or quarantine until they have no symptoms and test negative (Government of Canada). In British Columbia, as per the Public Health Act, there is an online Self-Assessment tool, and a phone number where one can assess their own symptoms (Government of B.C.). These tools are synonymous to the aforementioned examiner’s office of the Plague days. Essentially, what was a bunch of appointed people is now a system operated remotely. This is fantastic for healthcare workers who would otherwise be risking themselves to exposure. However, that mischief that Defoe’s narrator speaks of is arguably a human constant, and there is no physical presence of authority to enforce these things (supposedly local health authorities are supposed to check up on one who is self-isolating or quarantining but as before mentioned, these checkups are conducted remotely and one could easily lie about their predicament to free themselves, anecdotally speaking) and the very issue during the Plague of people escaping shut ups is still pertinent, though in a different disguise.

It is now time to focus on how desperate people were taken advantage of during the Plague and how these acts are and are not echoed by today’s pandemic. The narrative largely begins when Defoe’s narrator begins discussing how the fears of the people were increased by strange accidents (Defoe 26). These “accidents” are described as anxious prophecies relayed by delusional people (Defoe 24-30). The narrator remarks, “they filled People’s Heads with Predictions on these Signs of the Heavens…” and later, “one Mischief always introduces another: These Terrors and Apprehensions of the People, led them into a Thousand weak, foolish, and wicked Things” thus referencing how delusional people spread their delusions and ultimately terrified the unwitting masses into immorality (Defoe 31). Quite simply, the narrator has described what we now call the spread of misinformation and fear mongering.

The misinformation and fear mongering carried out by deceivers is best described here, “they ran to Conjurers and Witches and all Sorts of Deceivers, to know what should become of them; who fed their Fears, and kept them always alarm’d and awake on purpose to delude them, and pick their Pockets” (Defoe 34). Folly certainly breeds folly in this case and the deceivers were engaging in this wickedness purposefully. As the Plague progresses, however, Defoe’s narrator brings attention to the fact that the people who were deceived soon realize their mistakes (38). Applying these instances to today’s circumstances certainly resonates. During the early days of Covid-19, fear was certainly in the air and it appeared as if every faction was leveraging the lack of concrete information around the virus to activate their own agendas. However, whether or not the deceived will realize their mistakes in today’s circumstances is unknown. For a glaring difference between the plague and Covid-19 is visibility.

Defoe’s narrator describes the infection, saying, “the pain of swelling was in particular very violent” in fact, so much so that mothers murdered their own children, people committed suicide to relieve the pain, and nurses committed “excused murders” (76-77). In fact, the very spectacle of infection from the narrative indicates that it was well known that someone was infected and it was difficult to hide. Today, Covid-19 infection is no spectacle. The most severe symptoms will require a respirator, but there is no visual cue on the body like a sore that indicate infection. Because the infections are quite different, it only makes sense that individual fear of the given infections is different. What were people afraid of during the Plague? Defoe’s narrator certainly conveys an element of visual horror to the Plague. This contrasts the current predicament. Where the Plague operated by brute force, Covid-19 operates by stealth. Which one is truly more frightening?

At last, it is time to divulge the prevalent theme of the novel. *A Journal of the Plague Year* and its narrator are keen on the idea that the Plague is an instrument of God; an exercise in judgement. The novel calls morality into question monotonously. From the inhumanity exercised by the act of shutting up one into their home, to the wicked acts of entrepreneurs seeking to capitalize by deception. Both of which appear, among other things in the novel, in the position of evil and wickedness with the Plague being God’s means of judging the wicked (Defoe 21). When reflecting on the abrupt end of the plague, the narrator states, “nothing, but the immediate Finger of God could have done it”, “it” referring to both bringing about and ending the Plague (Defoe 205). Today it is colloquially known that the Plague subverted because of herd immunity or something along those lines. But what if it was an act of God and what if Covid-19 is too? The end of the novel certainly reminds the reader of psalm 91, but also warns them from repeating Israel’s mistakes,

for the Generality of the People it might too justly be of them, as was said of the Children of Israel, after their being delivered from the Host of Pharaoh, when they pass’d the Red-Sea… they sang his Praise, but they soon forgot his Works (Defoe 208).

Perhaps Defoe wrote the novel in part for historical archiving, but also to make the reader question their own morality.

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