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"A Plague on both your houses"
> *- Romeo & Juliet*

Mercutio's dying line from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is familiar to most readers of the English cannon. However, few remember the pivotal role that plague actually plays in the outcome of this tragedy. The priest writes his entire scheme in a letter that he sends to Romeo through a messenger. But the messenger never reaches Romeo because he is detained by quarantine. Quarantine became an official policy in London in 1578. It was one of the government's first attempts to contain the epidemic resurgences of the Bubonic Plague during Queen Elizabeth's reign. Entire families would be walled up in their houses for six weeks, sick and healthy alike. This concept of quarantine disrupting life would not have been unfamiliar to Shakespeare's audience. Neither would the interruption posed by the plague. Without the presence of the Black Plague, the messenger reaches Romeo and the lovers do not die. Plague here, though never mentioned outside of Mercutio's line is the ultimate villain, the grand interrupter, the leveler of plans, dreams, and young love.

This was the reality of Elizabethan London from 1564 to 1603. While the four pandemic outbreaks during the Virgin Queen's reign (1564, 1578, 1593, 1603) were neither the first nor the last cases of Bubonic plague in London, the texts that concern these outbreaks demonstrate an interesting literary turn from religious texts to imaginative medical texts that offer creative explanations and remedies for the disease.

This summer, I read early modern literature concerning the Elizabethan plagues, in order to study this change. I found that as the 17th century approaches, Early Modern plague texts became more imaginative. Writers invented causes, characters, and fictions that were widely applicable to the realities London was experiencing. My research suggests that this movement from Biblical explanations to imaginative explanations demonstrates a movement from the individual's understanding of disease to the creation of a collective understanding of mass mortality.

So let's back up. Imagine your reality as a Christian living in 1590's London. You've lived through three pandemic resurgences of the Bubonic Plague – people are dying in the streets, entire parishes are wiped out while others go untouched. And no one can explain why.

How would you begin to deal with something so out of control and beyond your understanding of the world?

Well, you would turn to the Bible. And there you would find many examples of God's plagues. And you would see a one to one correlation between sin and punishment, repentance and reprieve.

Take the story of Phineas and the Heresy of Peor. It occurs in the book of Numbers when the exiled Israelites meet the Moabites and begin to forsake their God in order to fornicate with the daughters of Moab. For their sin, God sends a plague to punish the Israelites. Sin equals punishment. Cause equals effect. Then Phineas, son of the high priest, decides to make a grand gesture to God in order to prove that the sinful actions would stop. He enters the tent of an Israel man and Moabite woman coupling and murders them. To this God says that Phinehes "hath turned myne anger away from the chyldren of Israel" (NUM 25:11). Phineas slays the sinners and stops the sin, thereby stopping the plague. One sin removed by one penance.

An early modern thinker understanding catastrophe through this example from the Bible would begin searching for the great sin that had caused their suffering suffering. But they would ultimately come up empty handed. They would find that the authoritative text that had explained their entire existence was suddenly insufficient – the Bible could not explain their suffering and therefore could not offer solace from that suffering. As God's words became insufficient, writers began to move away from religious explanations to explanations based solely in the material world.

I'll turn to James Balmford, a traveling preacher from the late 1500s who gave sermons on the proper way in which one should deal with the plague, to demonstrate the way these writers moved from religious law to "death's law." His pamphlet *A Short Dialogue Concerning the Plagues Infection* dedicates about 40 pages to a dialogue between a Professor and a Preacher, where the Professor uses Biblical examples to challenge the Preacher's seemingly anti-Christian practices -such as refusing to visit the sick. The dialogue culminates with the Preacher claiming, in a rather indignant tone, that the basis for his practices comes not from the Bible but from his experience with the deadly disease, the pestilence: "Nay sir my ground is the moral contaigion of the Pestilence, which we call the plague." That is to say, the preacher directly privileges his experience with the bodies of the dead and dying in the material world over the body of Biblical text. Here, Balmford makes Death's law stronger than God's law.

We see this again in William Bullein's *A dialogue against the fever pestilence.* This dialogue was marketed as a medical how-to guide for preventing and treating the disease. However, Bullein, a preacher turned physician, uses his "medical pamphlet" to create an allegory in which symbolic characters such as Citizen and wife are put against characters such as Double-Dealing, Lying, Greedy, and most interestingly, Death. Death is an actual character in this

dialogue – he visits Citizen at the end of the play when Citizen contracts the plague and says to him: "I spare not one neither Prince nor peasant, against whom I doe cast this dart." Death suddenly has a voice. And this voice takes credit for what had previously been ascribed to God. "I spare no one" "I cast this dart." By putting these words in Death's mouth, Bullein makes Death a separate entity from God. The "dart" that causes the pestilence does not come from a divine source as punishment for a mortal sin. In Bullein's interpretation of the disease, plague suddenly comes from Death itself.

So let's imagine again that you are an Early Modern reader. Death's law is being presented as stronger in the material world than God's law, invalidating the actions you have been taking so far, such as prayer and penance. You would begin to ask questions like, which laws should I live by? What have I done to deserve this? How do I deal with the plague?

We can answer these questions by changing that "I" to a "we." How do we deal with the plague? In my research, I began to see a turn away from a personal connection with mortality towards a mass connection with mortality. Broadsheets and pamphlets suddenly did not ask "Lord have mercy on my soul," but "Lord have mercy on London" - London is perceived as sick instead of the individual. By creating texts for mass distribution, these authors lift the supposed sin or cause from the individual and place it on London as a whole. These texts move the plague to a very real and very manageable space in the physical world, where it can be controlled by physical actions that are regulated on a cultural and national level.

Figure : Thomas Dekker, *A Rod for Run-awaies* **(1625)**

The preachers and physicians and lawyers that would write plague pamphlets were speaking to the entire nation; expressing the concerns of the individual in terms of the collective. That is to say, they shaped the way people dealt with mortality and mass death, by offering them

a culturally legitimate way to approach these topics when the previous collective text that defined them - the Bible - was insufficient.

Suddenly a whole body of medical texts and life regimes emerged and coached people to do irrational things to prevent against the pestilence. For example, one remedy instructed readers to pluck all the feathers off a chicken's rump put said rump to their sore and wait for the chicken to die as it would signify the poison had left their body and entered the Chicken's instead. What is important to see about remedies such as this one is that Early Modern people were beginning to search for a semblance of control outside the parameters of sin and repentance. In other words they were collectively looking for another way in which to be in control of their fates rather than asking for forgiveness for a sin they couldn't remember.

Plague was experienced uniformly across Europe, and if we compare English representations to art that came out of Catholic countries on the continent, such as France, Spain and Italy, we see a stark difference between the artistic representations of death. From Catholic countries we see two trends in art: the Danse Macabre, and depictions of Saints. The Danse Macabre is this idea that one's personal death is always following him, slowly leading him to the grave. While Plague saints, are seen as the mediator between God and man. You would pray to the saint to ask the saint to argue on your behalf to God.

But, England produces broadsheets with lists of the dead, pamphlets with remedies, and allegories vilifying the character Death. They have this intense focus on intellectual production on control; man understanding God, man being responsible for his own death or his own salvation, the importance of creating words and statistics that would define the whole.

What I find interesting about this difference between Catholic countries and England, is that the focus on the collective took place in the country in which the national religion is Protestantism – a religion that focuses on one's unmediated direct connection with God. What I find interesting is the paradox that arises: that in a Protestant country, a country with the religious ideology of individualism, intellectuals turned towards a communal imagining of disease; a communal understanding of their own trauma.

What I hope to find as I continue this research in my senior thesis, is why?

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