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# Fear and frenzy during the Great Plague of London (1665-1666)

Marilou Guen

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RESEARCH PAPER

# **FEAR AND FRENZY DURING THE GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON (1665-1666)**



Mention Art Lettres et Civilisations

Parcours Textes, Images, Langues Étrangères

Master 1

Supervised by Pr. Alain Kerhervé



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	8
<b>I. Confusion and commotion in the city</b> .....	11
<b>Chapter 1. The arrival of the plague: denial and the first concerns</b> .....	12
1. The comeback of the disease and its denial.....	12
2. Spring fuss and the spread of the sickness.....	14
3. First reactions and initiatives.....	16
<b>Chapter 2. The flight of Londoners</b> .....	17
1. Leave or stay? Dilemmas and inequalities.....	17
2. London in the turmoil: the departures.....	21
3. The countryside.....	23
<b>Chapter 3. London: city of chaos and desolation</b> .....	26
1. A city at full stop.....	26
2. A smell of death and danger.....	28
3. The misery of the miserable, those who stayed.....	30
<b>II. Theories and superstitions regarding the origins of the calamity: justifying the plague</b> .....	33
<b>Chapter 4. God's punishment for his subjects' sins</b> .....	34
1. Embodiment of the plague by God.....	34
2. Begging pardon to God.....	36
3. God punishing the sinners and sparing the good doers: between beliefs and reality.....	39

<b>Chapter 5. Astrology and the occult</b> .....	41
1. The origins of astrological theories.....	41
2. Predictions and the London plagues.....	43
3. William Lilly.....	45
<b>Chapter 6. The miasmatic theory</b> .....	47
1. The origins of the theory.....	47
2. Contagion Versus Miasma.....	49
3. Miasma in London.....	51
<b>III. A medical effervescence</b> .....	55
<b>Chapter 7. Divisions and divisions: a state of the medical community.</b> .....	56
1. The three official groups.....	56
2. Non licensed practitioners and other actors: the women.....	58
3. Blurred lines.....	60
<b>Chapter 8. Preventive attempts and curing the pestilence</b> .....	62
1. Avoiding the plague.....	62
2. Curing the plague.....	65
3. Predisposition, efficiency, social class: beliefs and realities surrounding the medical world.....	67
<b>Chapter 9. Frauds and charlatans: a fruitful ground</b> .....	71
1. A quackery frenzy.....	71
2. An economy based on fear.....	73
3. A dramatic sense of competition and vanity.....	74
<b>IV. The Plague and its effects</b> .....	79
<b>Chapter 10. Death and destruction</b> .....	80
1. Death en masse.....	80
2. A violent and dehumanizing death.....	82
3. The plague's destructive dimension and its objects.....	84

<b>Chapter 11. The deconstruction of society</b> .....	87
1. Human reactions: a drive for self-conservation.....	87
2. Chaos and disorder in the city: a decadent society.....	88
3. Violence of the epidemic: An emotional and psychological shock.....	91
<b>Chapter 12. The body and the spiritual dimension</b> .....	93
1. The body and the scientific dimension of the plague.....	93
2. The soul and religion: a quest for salvation.....	95
3. An overall duality between the below and the above.....	96
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	100
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	105
<b>Appendix</b> .....	109

"Nobody can account for the possession of fear when it takes hold of the mind."<sup>1</sup>

*A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe, 1722

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1. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 189.



# INTRODUCTION

Between 1665 and 1666, the city of London was stricken by one of the most serious epidemics in History, and definitely the deadliest and most memorable one of the British capital's background. Started from Asia and propagated westward, the 1665 plague outbreak followed the path of the Black Death three centuries earlier.<sup>2</sup> Although the city under study was often visited, the Great Plague of London remained, as its name suggests, the most striking and remarkable among all seven great plague outbreaks (1563, 1578, 1593, 1603, 1625, 1636, 1665): in fact, the Great Plague of London attained more than twice the total of plague burials recorded during the second deadly epidemic, in 1625.<sup>3</sup> Every new outbreak in the capital was called "The Great Plague", until the next one arose, but the investigated one turned out to be the final and the biggest of London's History. And while numbers are hard to estimate – due to several factors we will evoke later – historians agree that among the approximate 500,000 individuals that resided in London in 1665, 40% fled the infection (representing 200,000 people), and about 100,000 among those who stayed passed from the plague.<sup>45</sup> It can hardly be imagined how the 1665 plague epidemic shattered London, but one of the leading interrogations of this present research paper will be to try and understand in what way the Great Plague altered life. Common yet unknown as it was, the people called the plague by numerous nicknames: *the pestilence, the infection, the distemper, the visitation, the contagion...* But the most regular calling was *the sickness*: the plague stood out from all the other infectious diseases.<sup>6</sup> It was different, it was unique, it was special. With a mortality as high as 60% in the case of the bubonic form – which was the one that stroke London in 1665 –<sup>78</sup> the plague

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2. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 50-51.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Another 100,000 deaths in the countryside can be added to the 100 000 deceased city dwellers. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 282-283.

8. There are three forms of plague. The septicaemic and the pneumonic ones are both rare, extremely deadly and directly transmitted from man to man. The bubonic plague, characterized by the infection of lymph nodes (buboes) is the most common, less deadly and was likely the only form that developed in London during the Great Plague. Contrary to the other two, the bubonic plague is almost only communicable through *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria infected flea bites, and not from man to man, as it had often been suggested in historic writings. World Health Organization. « Plague ». who.int, 31 October 2017.

triggered frenzies and frightened the people to a degree that could only be comprehended through an in-depth study of the social and religious context of the time. But we will see that the high death rate of the said disease was only always the tip of the iceberg that would trigger a blatant interdependency between the feeling of fear and that of frenzy, materially and psychologically during the Great Plague of London.

To help me dive into these notions of fear and frenzy during the Great Plague of London, and understand how those two are bound together and both correlated to the idea of catastrophe, I will rely on sources contemporary to the plague and contemporary to this present research paper, among which four writings of primary nature. The first one, *Remedies Against the Infection of the Plague and the Curing Thereof, and Rules which are to be Observed Therein* is a short report written by historian and religious controversialist John Belson in 1665, listing a few of the most practised and recommended remedies during the Great Plague in London. By way of length, the second writing we will use is a much religiously tainted poem addressed to the city of London and its inhabitants, written by anonymous E.N. during the plague outbreak under study. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some Serious Notes and Suitable Considerations upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, a Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague* will help us take a look at the sense of guilt and blame that held sway at the time, and more broadly at the scope of the role of religion during the Great Plague. Then, apothecary Theophilus Garencières' *A Mite Cast into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation from the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665* will allow us to glance at the theories attributed to the origins of the plague as well as to advised means of prevention and cure, among other medical points; and most importantly, this document will support the idea of the medical marketplace of London being comparable to a jungle at the time of the Great Plague. Finally, this research essay will partially draw on the most famous Great Plague themed literary work: Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Written in 1722 in the context of the last major bubonic plague outbreak in Europe – the Great Plague of Marseilles –<sup>9</sup> the fictional book is built in the form of a diary narrated by H.F., a middle-class international merchant residing in the city of London during the Great Plague.

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9. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 31.

While fictitious, recent research shows that all figures used in *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Defoe and almost every incident described in the diary can be traced back to actual archives (among which the Bills of Mortality)<sup>10,11</sup> However, it is important to note that although most of H.F.'s claims are verified, a few remain uncertain and should be taken with a grain of salt. It is also the shady and secretive part of the Great Plague that made it unique, mysterious and cryptic.

The approach of this research paper will stand on the sociological and psychoanalytic angle, the aim being to analyse and understand the primitive reactions of those that lived the Great Plague. With this project, I intend to comprehend how the seventeenth-century Londoners reacted to the deadliest epidemic in the British Capital's History by attempting to understand what the experience of such a calamity was like in the social, economic and religious environment of the time. The issue of this thesis will ergo consist in examining the effects of the catastrophe from the population's reactions and behaviours: virtually, we will wonder at what exactly fear for one's life (and soul?) made the seventeenth-century Londoners do, believe, and cling on to, before investigating the sources of this very fear. What was it about the plague that produced the effects it produced in 1665?

In order to solve the interrogations at stake and comprehend how the concept of fear was inexorably entwined to that of frenzy – and vice versa – in the setting of the Great Plague of London, this paper will focus on diverse aspects of material and spiritual matter. To start with, we will go through the practical frantic confusion that held sway in and out the city of London when the disease made its comeback and evoke the chaotic dimension of the city taken over by turmoil and panic; before looking into the attempts of the British to interpret and utterly find explanations to this visitation. After having gone through the Londoners' interrogations, we will explore their responses and investigate the world of the medical marketplace and its delinquencies, scene of the craze of its actors driven by the fright of its addressees. Finally, we will take a step back and try to comprehend, under a distant, and rather social and spiritual angle the experience of a plague outbreak by a community by trying to figure out why the disease of the plague holds a peculiar position in the world of infectious diseases.

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10. In *The Historical Sources of Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year: illustrated by extracts from the original documents in the Burney Collection and Manuscript Room in the British Museum*, Watson Nicholson digs up Defoe's sources for his journal.

11. Defoe, Daniel. *Journal de l'année de la peste*. 1722. Translated by Francis Ledoux, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 11-13.

## **PART ONE**

### **Confusion and commotion in the city**

## Chapter 1. The beginnings: denial and the first worries

To better understand how the last London plague introduced itself in the English capital, it is needed to go back to the end of the year 1664: precisely by the late November, when the very first case of plague came to the attention of Westminster. A Great Yarmouth (English East coast sea port) navy informant had written to Whitehall to report a single plague death in the port, adding that this information should not make the Lord Mayor and its Majesty concerned and that everything was under control. After all, it was only a matter of a single individual.<sup>12</sup> But before the year 1665 only began; the pestilence was already back in the capital, with the presence of a few cases.

### 1. The comeback of the disease and its denial

In December, two people were taken with the plague in Drury Lane in the Parish of St. Giles, and people quickly started suspecting the disease to be back in that edge of town. But six weeks went by and no more plague deaths were recorded. A certain feeling of relief overran the parish. The previous plague outbreaks had left a bitter taste in the mouths of these South-West London Borrows of Camden, and a new spread would be much unfortunate, to say the least. But on February 12, 1665, the sickness took another life, in the very same parish. This time, people were wary; very few dared venture in the Drury Lane area from then on. All the more so as another point had not escaped the Londoners' notice which Defoe's narrator points out in his journal: since the very beginning of the year, we had witnessed a puzzling increase of burials in the general bills of mortality, which at that time of the year, on an average year, would call in between 240 and 300 burials:<sup>13</sup>

Dec. 20 to Dec. 27: 291

Dec. 27 to Jan. 3: 349

Jan. 3 to Jan. 10: 394

Jan. 10 to Jan.17: 415

Jan. 17 to Jan. 24: 474<sup>14</sup>

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12. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, 2004, p. 51.

13. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 2-4.

14. *Ibid.*

That last figure gravely triggered people's attentions. A number so high had not been observed in the bills since the last plague outbreak in 1656. It is with no surprise that these rises were observed "with great uneasiness"<sup>15</sup> by the people, according to Defoe's narrator. When the Yarmouth navy informant learnt, confused, about the multiplication of plague deaths in London, he sent a second letter to King Charles II to warn him not to panic: the disease was not back! These false reports should not be trusted, and were the work of ignorant old alcoholic women, London's searchers.<sup>16</sup> There is something to be said about these women searchers, who were appointed to each parish to find out the causes of death of departed people. Their bad reputation, mainly linked to greed and unreliability seems to have been continuous throughout the numerous London plague epidemics. In fact, they were easy targets when a guilty party had to be found. At the beginning of 1665, they were the ones who were first accused of filling up false reports of plague deaths. Paradoxically, when reports had started to increase dramatically, and that it had become obvious and manifest that there was, indeed, a resurgence of the disease in London, they were blamed again, but this time under the allegation that they had missed plague deaths – therefore delaying plague measures –, either by genuinely misidentifying them or because they were corrupted by families who paid them to lie to avoid having their house shut up. But could we even argue with these potential deals? Each party was getting their piece of the pie: the searchers would get extra money – which, useless to say if they agreed to do this job, was by no means insignificant –, and the household would not get their house shut up nor their reputation tarnished.<sup>17</sup> Either way, it is interesting here to point out the will for putting the blame at all costs on someone. But our research progression will later allow us to come back deeper to the issue of searchers and the shutting up of houses, as well as that of the intent to justify the comeback of the plague.

Now that we have gone through the process of denial that took place at the beginning of the outbreak, it is time to wonder how and why such an episode occurred: denying the presence of the plague, at least until it was genuinely out of control, was beneficial (or thought so) at all scales. Having the sickness labelled to a household, or even to an entire neighbourhood came with the widespread idea that this very household or neighbourhood was materially and morally filthy – things that were believed to lure

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15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

16. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 51.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 65-66.

the disease.<sup>18</sup> It is useless to say that this was really bad for personal reputation, a serious problematic for seventeenth-century London. In the same way, on a national scale; the awareness of the return of the plague by foreign regions or nations meant the straight interruption of business and commerce; and the awareness of the return of plague by the very people concerned meant straight panic and anarchy. Three valuable matters were at stake: one's freedom, one's business, and one's repute – in the plural and in the singular. Hence, if there was a single tiny hope the sickness could still be contained, it was an untold general order that the comeback of the pestilence should remain undisclosed for as long as possible.

## 2. Spring fuss and the spread of the sickness

In that context, the leading press in London published reassuring news to the people, stating that the rumours were nothing but gossip. Londoners still had hopes at that point for the plague was believed to be a disease of the poor, supposedly mainly striking in the filthy penniless overcrowded neighbourhoods where hygiene was solely non-existent.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps would it never reach the better quarters of London...?<sup>20</sup> That prospect did not last long. Chatter and gossip were already travelling at fast pace in the capital's inns and cafes when the month of April came and further confusion and uncertainty seized the city and its suburbs: strangely enough, the Bills of Mortality fluctuated again, revealing a sharp increase of deaths due to spotted fever, a disease known to have very similar symptoms to the plague, if not virtually thought of as the very same disease. After this increase, general deaths in London stagnated again, before sharply rising a second time. The official plague deaths count in the Bills of Mortality made no sense either: several deaths were declared for two weeks, but the next week; nothing at all. Then a sharp increase,<sup>21</sup> then a sharp dip! Londoners were observing the bills with perplexity, not knowing what to think about them. Perhaps a major marker in the time frame was the bill of the 27<sup>th</sup> April where a significant number of plague deaths was declared, concentrated in the parish of St. Giles-In-The-Fields.<sup>22</sup> It seems that the very few days following the last bills of April indisputably symbolized one of the early chronological timeline landmarks historians set to reconstruct how the city of London

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18. A whole subpart will be dedicated to the concept of the guilty sick.

19. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 47.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

switched from a roughly monitored and orderly place to a spatial-temporal breach where turmoil and dread prevail. On April 30, Pepys leaves a note in his diary revealing the Londoners' state of mind: "Great fear of the sickness here in the city", "it is said two or three houses are already shut up", and solemnly adds "God preserve us all".<sup>23</sup>

There was a latent period before the plague officially breaks out inside the city. But until then, London witnessed a significant rise in deaths from other causes between the months of May and June: 39 deaths were attributed to spotted fever, 13 to surfeit, 19 to teething, 14 to rickets, 20 burials were put on smallpox, 31 on convulsions, as well as 27 associated to griping in the guts and 27 to dropsy, along with 63 deaths attributed to consumption. These numbers were tremendous: for some of these medical conditions and compared to prior year bills, this represented a straight increase of 40%.<sup>24</sup> To that, there was one explanation: a singular disease was striking London: it was the plague, and it was about to break out badly. In the first week of May, the first official case inside the walls was reported;<sup>25</sup> following a month of no other plague death inside the wall; but in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of June, four cases were reported: two in Crooked Lane, one in Wood Street, and one in Fenchurch Street.<sup>26</sup> In the meanwhile, the parish of Cripplegate was recording 886 burials for that week, among which 850 were attributed to the plague, and the parish of Clerkenwell was registering 155 burials, 145 of them being from the plague.<sup>27</sup> There was now no hope of keeping the sickness away from the heart of London, and people seriously started beware and being suspicious of their neighbours. It is said by H.F. that "it was a very bad time to be ill",<sup>28</sup> for people would instantly run away from you under any suspicion. By then, the sickness had struck ten parishes, including some of the poorest and some of the wealthiest ones<sup>29</sup>. And a few weeks later, the disease started to migrate East after it had struck West.<sup>30</sup> There was no way of stopping the rage of the disease: it was growing from week to week, spreading inside the capital.<sup>31</sup>

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

25. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 80.

26. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 5.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

29. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 81.

30. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 12-13.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 4.



### 3. First reactions and initiatives

The very first government's attempt to repel the disease and ease the Lord's anger took place early in Spring, right after it was starting to feel plain that something was coming, but before the sickness actually broke out inside the city. The power of the propagation of the sickness being automatically in the hands of God, and the primary cause of the calamity being the sinful lives of the city dwellers, it was the people's devotion and repentance that were immediately encouraged by the political establishment: hence, Londoners should "implore the mercy of God to avert the dreadful judgment which [hung] over their heads".<sup>32</sup> To assist the population, the government very quickly appointed days of fasting to promote the absolute humility of God's subjects, as well as public prayers in all churches. Despite the sight of the most terrible of diseases propagating in London, those ceremonies were apparently urgently attended with "uncommon devotion" by the people according to Defoe's hero, and it can easily be assumed that the sense of invulnerability and immunity these religious venues triggered among the believers brought some to their graves.<sup>33</sup> It was said that they gathered crowds so colossal that it was almost impossible to even get near the doors of parishes. In the wake of public fasts, entertainment and luxuries were forbidden: spectacles, plays, public dancing rooms, music houses, brothels, inns...<sup>34</sup> Everything more or less related to the seventeenth-century standards of debauchery and corruption of morals, everything that fostered religious sins, was taken away from Londoners. From then on, "death was before their eyes and everybody began to think of their graves, not of mirth and diversions".<sup>35</sup>

The dread impression of an escalating feeling of anxiety and scare at the beginning of the epidemic is also evoked at the beginning of E.N.'s poem: "I do find that cares and fears do grow in people's minds, and discontents do almost every where, seem to abound within this city here".<sup>36</sup> The Londoners being deprived of solutions and

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32. *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

33. H.F. consistently evokes the negligence of people who thought themselves immune when accomplishing religion-related actions.

34. Inns were actually still allowed to host sound travelling guests, but no excess (drinking or gluttony) was allowed.

35. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 21-22.

36. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague*. London, 1665, p. 3.

not knowing what to do or how to react, ran to those who welcomed them with open arms and gave them answers: astrologers and fortune tellers. In *History of the Plague in London*, H.F. makes an account of the quacks and impostors that multiplied at that period and were over represented in the streets of the capital. He evokes “old women”’s predictions and interpretations of other people’s dreams. At the beginning of the infection, when anxiety was growing in people’s minds, it was apparently a common thing for people to have terrible nightmares about their future and the city’s. Terrified about their dreams, the city dwellers ran to those predictors who usually did nothing else but foster and expand the pre-existing fears, assuring them that dreadful things were about to happen to them or to the city (fear being, always had been and always be financially more profitable). What is interesting to observe here is the somehow material and intellectual inter-dependency of both the scared individual and the fortune teller, one needs the other, introducing a double folly, one enhancing the other. On the same scheme and to support this point, H.F. goes on arguing about the eager and naivety (again, on both sides) people put at that time, in other people’s claims. He evokes a time when he ran into a small crowd in the street, in March, when plague was still contained and concentrated in the parish of St. Giles. He describes a curious scene: people staring at the sky, listening to a woman claiming she was seeing an angel holding a sword in the air, and people believing her and even pretending they saw it too, as if it was a matter of life and death. The city dweller ends the anecdote with “so I left them, and this appearance passed for as real as the blazing star itself”.<sup>37</sup>

For Charles II, the stakes were high and the mood was tense.<sup>38</sup> To the sight of the city slowly falling into a state of terror, and the one of seeing the bills getting worse and worse; the political establishment decided to gather at the end of June to take actual actions. On the 1<sup>st</sup> July, was published the following report: “Orders Conceived and Published by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London, Concerning the Infection of the Plague; 1665”. This document comprised several order reports, each concerning the regulation of a particular field (concerning infected houses, concerning hygiene of the streets...). Following these orders, watchmen were set at each parish border to ensure that travels around the city were limited, all suspected houses were to be inspected, and shut up for forty days if infected, with its inhabitants inside, sound or

37. A blazing star was witnessed in the sky before the plague broke out. Some say it was foretelling the coming outbreak. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 18-19.

38. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 53.

unsound. Two watchmen<sup>39</sup> were appointed to each infected house to monitor the house from outside (and go on errands for the family if asked to) as well as live-in nurse keepers to care for the family.<sup>40</sup> These measures were of very little innovation: the King did what his predecessors had done before him. Perhaps the shutting up of houses was the order most discussed and controversial. Indeed, the King was not taking into consideration the fact that by ordering that, he was condemning entire families, even if only one member was infected in the first place.<sup>41</sup> The frightful prospect of having one's house shut up certainly participated in the mass exile that followed the first times of the infection.

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39. One for the day, one for the night.

40. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 27-32.

41. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 53.

## Chapter 2. The flight of Londoners

The fear of the worst of all diseases along with the logistic and material consequences this comeback involved triggered an expected yet unprecedented general turmoil in the city. When some locked themselves in, others hurried out.

### 1. Leave or stay? Dilemmas and inequalities

Before diving into the wild mayhem in which the city of London quickly plunged into from June onward, it is necessary to first mention how difficult it appears to be to discuss the mass exile that took place at the beginning of the summer without evoking the broad dichotomy that loomed between the lower and the higher classes in London. It is hardly surprising that the chance of a Londoner having the opportunity to leave the city to the remote countryside was proportional to their material and economic means. The lower a person stood on the economic ladder, the less likelihood there was of this person being able to move away.<sup>42</sup> This can simply be explained by three major factors. First, travels were very expensive: the cheapest transportation by coach to the immediate countryside outside London was already far beyond the means of a skilled craftsman.<sup>43</sup> The second point concerned the fate that awaited the lower classes who were determined enough to leave by foot: their miserable appearances scared and repelled the countrymen, due to the belief of the plague being carried and propagated by the poor.<sup>44</sup> The third factor was purely material. Very few city tradesmen or craftsmen did own a second residence to retreat to, and neither did they own enough money to pay for someone to watch their belongings in the city, which often consisted of tools and professional linked goods, necessary for their business – possessions that, if stolen (which happened a lot during plague epidemics), would eventually lead to the ruin of their businesses. By contrast, it felt more secure for the gentry to escape London because they often had other retreats as well as enough funds to pay for servants or watchmen to guard their city residence.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the economic and material obligations that made the prospect of fleeing more or less unachievable for most of the lower class London — making the choice of staying not an actual one but an obligation for the poor —, there remained another sort

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42. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 76.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of dilemma; this one, more ethical. Indeed, the people's state of mind at the time being marked by the weight of religious guilt for the comeback of the disease, fleeing the town was perceived as an act of cowardice. To a lot, running away from London was the same as running away from God's judgment: not only had people sinned vigorously enough to oblige the Lord to punish them with such a calamity, but in addition they would run away from their fate instead of repent without delay! From a spiritual sight, the deed was considered a disgraceful decision, that the religious institution was resolute to stigmatize: single sheet broadsides were quickly printed and shared throughout the town with the title "Lord Have Mercy Upon Us", the same note we will see inscribed on infected houses. The message from the Church to the city dwellers was implicitly the following: you cannot save yourself by physically escaping if God has made its mind for you. Running away from him will worsen your destiny, and repentance is your only potential way out.<sup>46</sup> This sharp stigma is explicitly observable in *London's Plague-Sore Discovered*,<sup>47</sup> where the author evokes a "challenge"<sup>48</sup> God purposely threw to his subjects by exposing them to the plague, while virulently condemning and scorning the runaways; claiming that "the longer you provoke the Righteous God, the greater is his stroke".<sup>49</sup> In a moralizing holier-than-thou attitude, E.N. chastises the escapees at the end of his poem: "What do you think, or where do y'mean to stay, that you from London make such hast away? Here this from me; if that you take your sins along with you, you do yourselves but wrong to flee away, for you had better be punish'd at first than to go longer free".<sup>50</sup> One thing that needs to be noticed here concerning this decision making<sup>51</sup> is the way the disease of the plague seems to have more frightened the people than God himself and his judgment did; but we will have time to go back to that theory later.<sup>52</sup> Anyhow, for those who achieved to gather both the economic and material means as well as the moral conviction that they

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46. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 84.

47. Full title: *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague.*

48. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague.* London, 1665, p. 4.

49. *Ibid*, p. 7.

50. *Ibid*.

51. Here evoking the choice of leaving despite the religious stigma and threat.

52. This dimension will be further discussed later in the thesis.

would rather try their luck and bodily flee the sickness than face it and trust their Lord, it was then time to take off.

## 2. London in the turmoil: the departures

Now that the social and economic inequalities and dilemmas that held sway at the beginning of the epidemic regarding the getaway from imminent death that a flight to the countryside represented in 1665 to the London's citizenry have been set, it is needed, to comprehend how frenzy took over the capital, to go through how practically the departures affected London's townscape. In the two weeks overlapping the months of June and July 1665, when panic and "consternation"<sup>53</sup> started taking over the city, London witnessed the incredible rush of tens of thousands of its inhabitants, "especially the nobility and gentry from the West part of the city"<sup>54</sup> where the infection had gotten out of control, Defoe's narrator specifies. The richest parishes in particular were emptied out, such as Covent Garden or Whitehall where most employment had to do with the Royal Court, which initially comprised around 25,000 inhabitants.<sup>55</sup> In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. makes a vivid account of the departures and invites the reader to picture the frantic and tumultuous aspects of this incredible rush:

When the plague first began, when it became certain that it would spread over the whole town, when the better sort of people first took the alarm, and began to hurry themselves out of town. It was true that the throng was so great, and the coaches, horses, wagons, and carts were so many, driving and dragging the people away, that it looked as if all the city was running away.<sup>56</sup>

The city dweller describes the Broad Street in Whitechapel where wagons and charts filled with goods had invaded the road. People "of the better sort"<sup>57</sup>, loaded with baggage, were attended by coachmen, and were "all hurrying away"<sup>58</sup>. During that period, you could hardly walk two feet around the extremities of London – where traffic converged – without being rushed or hit by a horse drawn coach or a gentleman in

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53. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 6-7.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 89.

56. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 139.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

58. *Ibid.*

hurry.<sup>59</sup> Another place of commotion and disarray was the Lord Mayor's door, where "there was such pressing and crowding [there] to get passes and certificates of health"<sup>60</sup> which were essential for travellers who wished to have a chance to be welcomed in inns or main roads outside London. The pressing there was even greater considering the rumours that swirled concerning an imminent order about to be passed stating that "turnpikes and barriers"<sup>61</sup> were going to be installed on English roads to prevent Londoners from travelling in the country and bring the distemper with them. To add to the idea of a chaotic spectacle the big hurry out must have looked like in the summer of 1665, historians Dorothy and Lloyd Moote make a comparison with the Civil War battles by mentioning the thumping sound and the tough dust from horses' hooves on the streets during this time.<sup>62</sup> After having gone through his description of the chaotic London townscape, H.F. concludes with a wistful remark on what was awaiting next for London: "This was a very terrible and melancholy thing to see [...] it filled me with very serious thoughts of the misery that was coming upon the city, and the unhappy condition of those that would be left in it".<sup>63</sup>

Though most of the exiled had left in June, including the court,<sup>64</sup> departures continued all summer long, as the infection progressed around town.<sup>65</sup> The mass exodus is estimated to have reached a total of 200,000 runaways, which represented at the time between a third and a half of London's population.<sup>66</sup> In town, not a single horse was to be found, to rent or to buy.<sup>67</sup> Many took the decision to leave anyway, by foot; and sleep in tents in the fields – the weather being luckily cool enough. Others found their way out of town by actually staying in the very heart of it: a certain number of people took residence in available boats on the Thames by paying boatmen to serve their essential

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59. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 89.

60. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 6-7.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 89.

63. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 6-7.

64. Members of the court had retired to Oxford in June, where they were kept sound until the end of the epidemic. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 14.

65. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 89.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

needs.<sup>68</sup> From this, we observe the urgent and clear will and spine to get away from the sickness, regardless of how. Overall, despite the difficulty and risks this migration involved for the poorest, this massive outflow affected every class and every geographic area in and out the Capital.<sup>69</sup>

### 3. The countryside

Though the English countryside might have been ideally perceived by the distressed Londoners as a safe retreat away from the public enemy of the plague and the sinful city of London, it seems that for many, the flight out posed other threats. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe's narrator and central character tells the reader about the story of three London workmen who were faced with the leave-or-stay quandary. After weighing the pros and cons, they took the decision to take their chance and fly during the month of July, despite the little money they owned: "We can neither go away nor stay here... If we stay here, we are sure to die, and if we go away, we can but die. I am resolved to be gone".<sup>70</sup> The narrator explains that the example of these three workmen only serves the purpose of illustrating the bigger picture of what happened to the thousands of poor who fled, before giving an account of the harsh reality of the countryside and the troubles that were encountered during those travels. The departed poor, who had left "in great number"<sup>71</sup>, and who had nowhere to go, found shelter "in any place they could find"<sup>72</sup>, obliged to build themselves "little huts and retreats in the fields and woods"<sup>73</sup> where they would live "like hermits in holes and caves"<sup>74</sup>, resigned to go back to their primal state, before the great enemy. H.F. assures the reader that the destitute exiled "suffered great extremities".<sup>75</sup>

However, the greatest roughness and severity did not come from the land but from its locals. In fact, a dismal account of the way the fleeing Londoners were treated in the countryside is made in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and backed up by historians Lloyd and Dorothy Moote. It was reported that the countrymen right outside London

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68. Boatmen were paid by the new residents to bring them food and essential goods from the mainland. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 89.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 88.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 112-114.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*



and further would attack anyone from the Capital who tried to only pass through their towns and villages, especially the lower middle classes whose poor attires would scare the locals, due to the belief of the disease of the plague being carried by the filthy people, and by consequence, the poor.<sup>76</sup> Though those incidents must have been punctual, the reality is, that most of those who had left on foot were refused in inns in the country and were barely sold food to.<sup>77</sup> H.F. writes: “I know that the inhabitants of the towns adjacent to London were much blamed for cruelty to the poor people that ran from the contagion in their distress, and many severe things were done”.<sup>78</sup> But though he uses the term “backward”<sup>79</sup> to describe them, our character tries to put himself in their shoes and intend to advocate for them: “there was no remedy: self-preservation obliged the people to those severities which they would not otherwise have been concerned in”.<sup>80</sup> He insists: the mortal fear of the sickness made people do what they never thought they were capable of. To the legitimate fear of being unluckily infected by a distressed Londoner, H.F. relates, is annexed another point, perhaps more evil:

Another thing might render the country more strict [...] was [...] that there was a seeming propensity or a wicked inclination, in those that were infected, to infect others. There have been great debates among our physicians as to the reason of this. Some will have it to be in the nature of the disease, and that it impresses every one that is seized upon by it with a kind of rage and a hatred against their own kind, as if there were a malignity, not only in the distemper to communicate itself, but in the very nature of man, prompting him with evil will, or an evil eye, that as they say in the case of a mad dog, who though the gentlest creature before of any of his kind, yet then will fly upon and bite anyone that comes next to him, and those as soon as any, who have been most observed by him before.<sup>81</sup>

Consequently, the fear of the other made the countrymen force the runaways to move “from place to place, til they were obliged to come back again to London”.<sup>82</sup> And

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76. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 90. It should however be noted here that though wearing higher classes clothes would most of the time allow you a distant respect, it would not guarantee hospitality. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 112-114

79. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 112-114.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

thus, due to the very unhelpful countryside, many resigned to come back to the Capital as soon as the death count decreased, from late October onward. Sadly, those en masse barefoot travellers lacked the emotional and physical immunity the ones who had stayed had gained during the epidemic, and with no surprise, the death toll rose again, allowing the sickness to continue its work through the winter.<sup>83</sup> It would be a mistake to think that “the Great Plague of London” only impacted the English Capital. The devastating effects of the mass exile of 1665 were felt at all corners of Britain, such as in Colchester where the cloth making industry, very vulnerable to the disease of the plague (plague fleas travelling on fabric) was of major significance. The town knew the longest visitation in the entire country. The cloth making industry experienced total collapse, smashing the local economy which widely remained on it.<sup>84</sup> Overall, very few counties remained unaffected by the infection, and it can be stated that the total death toll was doubled by this propagation in the countryside, adding around 100,000 victims to the approximate 100,000 plague deaths in London, in 1665 only.<sup>85</sup>

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83. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 244-245.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 207-208.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

### Chapter 3. London: city of chaos and desolation

It was the summer of 1665 and by then, London had witnessed the departures of more than a third of its population.<sup>86</sup> Already taken by terror and dread, London was gradually plunging into a state of chaos and havoc; indulging in an unprecedented fateful spacious-temporal breach.

#### 1. A city at full stop

What first needs to be discussed is the unspeakable desolation the city experienced during this last plague outbreak. Seventeenth-century authors insist on a contrast between what London used to look like before the epidemic and what it was resembling and becoming during the epidemic. In his poem, E.N. writes about the dread falling upon the once thriving city: “amongst a people of late did glory, of Gallant Times, beyond the reach of story; for wealth and share they had so great a share, they scorn'd that any should with them compare”.<sup>87</sup> Later, Defoe will write: “It was a most surprising thing to see those streets, which were usually so thronged, now grown desolate, and so few people to be seen in them”.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, as the epidemic spread, the British capital’s townscape progressively shifted. The times where the Big Exchange of London gathered crowds and was a symbolic place of success and affluence were now bygone days.<sup>89</sup> Popular fairs in and out London got cancelled one after another.<sup>90</sup> Taverns and inns; scenes of the social classes crossroads and of social interaction and vibrancy; as well as of display of human sins and debaucheries, were shut down and forbidden from “entertaining” citizens.<sup>91</sup> Only sound travellers were allowed in, and were permitted to be served with “sobriety and moderation”.<sup>92</sup> We certainly did not want to upset and offend God any more than the sinful London had already did. Neighbourhoods were shutting up, one by one. In the streets, traffic became less and

86. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 251-252.

87. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague*. London, 1665, p. 3.

88. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 14.

89. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 30.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 116-115.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

less busy. People were deserting the thoroughfares, and locking themselves in with all windows closed to try and prevent the infected miasmas to get in, while practising fumigation inside their homes.<sup>93</sup> The fear of the disease was so great that, as H.F. narrates, people would walk “in the middle of the great street”<sup>94</sup> in Holborn, as far away as possible to one edge or another of the street, for fear of bumping into “anybody that came out of houses”<sup>95</sup> or meeting “smells and scents from houses, that might be infected”.<sup>96</sup> Other streets were virtually desolate and empty. After some time, inside the wall, nature was taking over. Grass was sprouting out on the streets.<sup>97</sup> The once very alive and noisy city was pausing, in silence. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. recalls “a profound silence in the streets”.<sup>98</sup> It was as if time had stopped in the most active and roaring city in the world. Perhaps one major element that embodied this general halt was the discontinuation of the normal functioning of law courts.<sup>99</sup> Justice stopped. Occasional arrests occurred, and temporary detentions kept happening, of course. But Justice stopped. How symbolic is that when attempting to prove the scale and scope of the rift in space and time the city of London knew in the year 1665?

Not only was justice halting, but economy was freezing as well: all trade, “except such as related to immediate subsistence was, as it were, at a full stop”.<sup>100</sup> H.F. then underlines that consequently, “classes of people [who] fell into immediate distress upon this occasion”<sup>101</sup>, before listing those who found themselves in instant economic distress. Workmen in manufactures, whose masters had dismissed them, officers of customs, watermen, porters, tradesmen, seamen, “and all the poor whose labour depended upon the merchants were at once dismissed and put out of business”.<sup>102</sup> The plague was eating and sucking up all state economic resources: salaries for physicians, surgeons, treatments and money for parishes were emptying the treasury.<sup>103</sup> By the

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93. *Ibid.*

94. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 15.

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

99. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 115-116.

100. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 67.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

103. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 210.

month of October, the city's cash funds were at their lowest, and outside gift money from the retired rich was almost gone as well.<sup>104</sup> The debt was immense, the city was dying. Payment for medical teams who enrolled for the state during the epidemic came as late as five years after the end of the Great Plague for some doctors. The grand total for this last plague's bill was estimated to be at least as high as 40,000 pounds which – despite how low this number was compared to what the Dutch war and the rebuilding of London after the fire cost Britain – remained a tremendous amount of money, especially when we understand that this debt occurred in a city on a standstill commercially speaking, and which lacked 60% of its population: 40% gone and 20% dead.<sup>105</sup>

## 2. A smell of death and danger

As if the calamity of the plague falling upon the great city of London was not enough, Britain also had to go through one of the hottest summers of the century. Outside the capital, the sun was giving the countryside bountiful harvests which contrasted with the astrological predictions that had foreseen that 1665 would be a very lame year for crops. However, the very same weather that was making the joy of Britain — and which also allowed London to be fed during the outbreak — was, to say the least, painfully lived in the confined capital.<sup>106</sup> Pepys even recorded in his diary in mid July that he was then experiencing “the most extraordinary hot that [he] ever knew”.<sup>107</sup> There, rain had barely fallen for months and the city dwellers were gasping for air.<sup>108</sup> In the drought — that was believed to draw the faeces out of the earth and therefore to spread the infection — deaths had doubled in most parishes over just two weeks.<sup>109</sup> The death toll kept massively increasing throughout the summer, until the point where people wondered how many inhabitants London contained, for it was incredible so many could keep dying and dying.<sup>110</sup> This mad weather was often interpreted as an additional challenge thrown on earth by God,<sup>111</sup> as if the year 1665 was aimed to be a year of suffering comparable to what hell must have looked like: a timeless hot place where you feel stuck at, and where your earthly sins are being punished through deep mental and physical sufferings.

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104. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 251-252.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

110. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

111. And so was lived the subsequent Great Fire of London.

The plague had now been raging at all corners of the town for a moment, and the magnitude of the deaths was of a never seen before scale. According to Pepys, in the particularly affected parish of Saint Sepulchre; the bells which rang every time a person was declared dead were “always going”.<sup>112</sup> Though often visited, never had London experienced such a Human tragedy. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. describes the “strangely altered”<sup>113</sup> face of London where death was everywhere but invisible, driving Londoners to a legitimate paranoia: “sorrow and sadness sat upon every face [...] all looked deeply concerned, and as we saw it apparently coming on, so everyone looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger”.<sup>114</sup> The narrator goes on in his dreadful description of the shattered London:

London might well be said to be all in tears. The mourners did not go about the streets [...] nobody put on black or made a formal dress of mourning for their nearest friends: but the voice of mourning was truly heard in the streets. The shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors of their houses, where their nearest relations were perhaps dying, or just dead, were so frequent in the streets, that it was enough to pierce the stoutest heart in the world to hear them. Tears and lamentations were seen almost in every house, especially in the first part of the visitation; for towards the latter end, men’s hearts were hardened, and death was so always before their eyes that they did not so much concern themselves for the loss of their friends, expecting that themselves should be summoned the next hour.<sup>115</sup>

Death and mourn were now prime components of the Londoners’ lives, yet the city was not prepared for what was next awaiting for her, after the summer. The most dreadful of all weeks came mid September, between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup>: the death toll in the city reached a point that was never reached before and was never reached again.<sup>116</sup>

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112. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

113. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 14.

114. *Ibid.*

115. *Ibid.*

116. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 178

### 3. The misery of the miserable, those who stayed

London's General Bills of Mortality for 1665 revealed that among those who stayed on, the poorer communities outside the wall were the ones who suffered most losses.<sup>117</sup> And while the city of London was pausing, the essential Human needs were not. Indeed, to the utmost fear of the disease was added the fear of starvation for the bulk of the needy whose jobs had been taken away from, from the very beginning of the infection, when "all the families retrenched their living as much as possible, as well those that fled as those that staid"<sup>118</sup>, leaving "an innumerable multitude of footmen, serving men, shopkeepers, journeymen, merchants, bookkeepers, and especially maidservants [...] friendless and helpless".<sup>119</sup> In *London's Plague Sore Discovered*, the author voices this double concern: "For why already trading's grown so dead, our present gains will hardly yeeld us bread: our care are doubled and our hopes are vain [...] we fear each day it will be worse tomorrow".<sup>120</sup> In parallel, besides this lack of means for the poor and despite the abundance of food and goods that came from the functioning countryside, many victuallers and farmers were too afraid of venture inside the much infected suburbs, making sustenance even harder to reach for the miserable.<sup>121</sup>

The poorer London was suffering from massive unemployment. When they were lucky, they had access to a subsistence wage mercifully offered by their country retired employers. Those represented a negligible number, and most of the destitute were left on parish relief or on their own with no wage at all. The most daring would try and find plague jobs. Extremely risky, they were virtually the only way to make a little money and fight hunger. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the main character describes the extensive and "odious" nature of these new jobs:

And indeed the work of removing the dead bodies by cart was now grown so very odious and dangerous, that it was complained of that the bearers did not take care to clear such houses where all the inhabitants were dead, but

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117. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

118. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 68.

119. *Ibid.*

120. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague*. London, 1665, p. 3.

121. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 168.

that some of the bodies lay unburied till the neighbouring families were offended by the stench, and consequently infected.<sup>122</sup>

Although exceedingly hazardous, H.F. goes on, pointing out the necessity of these jobs being handled by someone:

And had it not been that the number of people who wanted employment, and wanted bread, as I have said before, was so great that necessity drove them to undertake anything, and venture anything, they would never have found people to be employed; and then the bodies of the dead would have lain above ground, and have perished and rotted in a dreadful manner”.<sup>123</sup>

Maybe for some, the fear of starvation was stronger than that of the plague. The standpoint might have been “If I do not find a job, I will die. If I find a job, I might die”. The prospect of death was closer than ever for the most miserable.<sup>124</sup> However, the authors of *The Story of London's Most Deadly Year* underline a significant and noteworthy matter: London owes part of its subsistence to this very inter-dependency of the classes. While the departed rich of London, taken by pity (or will to be forgiven by God for their sins and subsequent flight) helped the capital and its destitutes with financial charity, the poor did the bad work in London, keeping the city going and saved what could be saved.<sup>125</sup>

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122. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 72.

123. *Ibid.*

124. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 116.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 257.



To say the least, a comeback of the plague meant poor news for the Londoners. And although there was a latent period between the time the first cases of plague were declared and the time the first preventive actions were taken; when it was official and serious news that the plague was back in London, the city did not take long to be taken by scare; as much as in regards to the mass rural exodus that occurred in the months of summer, as in the way the city fell in a state of panic and chaos for those who stayed. Little did Londoners know that this plague outbreak would be the last and the most grandiose. But against this familiar yet unknown and fearsome formidable enemy, the people could do little more than address God, the likely origin of the disease.

## **PART TWO**

**Justifying the plague: theories and superstitions  
regarding the origins of the calamity**

## Chapter 4. God's punishment for his subjects' sins

When a daunting catastrophe falls upon a community, it always ensues a frantic and desperate will to understand, to comprehend, to justify, and to find the source of the beyond matter. Regarding the plague in seventeenth-century London, we can divide three main theories relative to the origins and causes of the disease, each revealing a lot about the medical knowledge and the socio-religious context of the time. In both the monotheist and polytheist religions, God or the divinities being creators and gatekeepers of health, the divine nature of the apparition of the plague was always the first theory the people turned to when trying to apprehend the causes of this curse.<sup>126</sup>

### 1. Embodiment of the plague by God

As early as the first outbreaks in the Western World, the plague was immediately interpreted by the Church as a tool for God to punish the sinners. Paradoxically the plague was from the outset always tied to the divine and never to the evil.<sup>127</sup> The traditional representation of the plague was hence always paired with an angel, and not a devil, holding a bow – embodying the hand of God – and throwing an air piercing arrow towards the earthly sinners.<sup>128</sup> Throughout History, textual and pictorial representations of the higher retribution through this scourge and calls for repentance arose.<sup>129</sup> In *London's Plague Sore Discovered*, E.N. points out the role of God in the destruction of the city and evokes this traditional embodiment of his hand practically hitting London: "in every corner of our famous town, he sends his arrows of destruction down".<sup>130</sup>

This spacial travel of the plague in London is also strongly conveyed and articulated in Defoe's writing. Halfway through his journal, the narrator decides to describe the way the plague progressed during the sickness, outlining the "merciful"<sup>131</sup>

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126. Melhaoui, Mohammed. *Peste, contagion et martyre: Histoire du fléau en Occident musulman médiéval*. Paris, Editions Publisud, 2005, p. 73.

127. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste?: Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 20.

128. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 21-22.

129. *Ibid.*

130. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague*. London, 1665, p. 3.

131. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 142.

nature of this "disposition of God"<sup>132</sup>: "as the plague began at one end of the town first [...] so it proceeded progressively to other parts, and did not come on this way; or eastward, til it had spent its fury in the west part of the town; and so as it came on one way it abated another."<sup>133</sup> Continuing his chronological description of the plague's travel, H.F. specifies that in September, "the case altered quite; the distemper abated in the west and north-west parishes, and the weight of the infection lay on the city and the eastern suburbs, and the Southwark side, and this in a frightful manner".<sup>134</sup> Later in the text, Defoe's hero chooses to reinforce and insist on the idea that the way the sickness abated in London was a gift from God, who must have given a chance to the people to prove that their lives were worthy, by having the opportunity to help those in need:

I cannot but mention again, though I have spoken several times of it already on other accounts (I mean that of the progression of the distemper), how it began at one end of the town, and proceeded gradually and slowly from one part to another, and like a dark cloud that passes over our heads, which, as it thickens and overcasts the air at one end, clears up at the other end: so, when the plague went on raging from west to east, as it went forward east, it abated in the west; by which means those parts of the town which were not seized, or who were left, and where it had spent its fury, were spared to help and assist the other.<sup>135</sup>

He underlines that "had the distemper spread itself over the whole city and suburbs at once, raging in all places alike",<sup>136</sup> one side must have not been able to help the other. The way the disease progressed in London served the theory of God being at the source of the epidemic, who would throw a decisive one last chance for Londoners to be forgiven by God, and repent.

Not only is the spacial travel of the disease described, but we also find in H.F.'s narration, the time progress of the plague, seemingly as wisely picked and as dependent of God's will as its territorial progression. When evoking the end of the outbreak, H.F. notes that "it pleased God"<sup>137</sup> during the Winter to "restore the health of the city"<sup>138</sup>, and that by February, "we reckoned the distemper quite ceased, and then [they] were not easily frightened again".<sup>139</sup> To the 17<sup>th</sup> Londoners, God was the cause of the start and

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132. *Ibid.*

133. *Ibid.*

134. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

136. *Ibid.*

137. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

138. *Ibid.*

139. *Ibid.*

end of the distemper and restored order and health in the city when he decided it should be so:

But the mercy of God was greater to the rest than we had reason to expect; for the malignity, as I have said, of the distemper was spent, the contagion was exhausted, and also the wintry weather came on apace, and the air was clear and cold, with some sharp frosts; and this increasing still, most of them that had fallen sick recovered, and the health of the city began to return. There were indeed some returns of the distemper even in the month of December, and the bills increased near a hundred; but it went off again, and so in a short while things began to return to their own channel.<sup>140</sup>

Overall the responsibility of God is constantly evoked and mentioned concerning the emergence, sustainability and progression of the plague; and one thing we observe is how the people submit to God and worship him, no matter what he makes them go through.

## 2. Begging pardon to God

Indeed a strong blind trust into the Lord by the Londoners during the Great Plague prevailed, paired with a general passive acceptance for one's fate. People feared the plague, and the plague being from the hand of God, people feared God equally. The belief of the disease taking its origins from God's will really influenced the way the people approached the epidemic. If the sickness was the Lord's hand, then it is without surprise that the people felt immune and did not take the necessary precautions when visiting churches – only places of gatherings still open – to worship their God:

During the whole time of the pestilence, the churches or meetings were never wholly shut up, nor did the people decline coming out to the public worship of God, except only in some parishes, when the violence of the distemper was more particularly in that parish at that time, and even then no longer than it continued to do so. Indeed, nothing was more strange than to see with what courage the people went to the public service of God. [...] They [the poor] went on with the usual impetuosity of their tempers, full of outcries and lamentations when taken, but madly careless of themselves, foolhardy, and obstinate, while they were well. Where they could get employment, they pushed into any kind of business, the most dangerous and the most liable to infection; and if they were spoken to, their answer would be, "I must trust to God for that. If I am taken, then I am provided for, and there is an end of me".<sup>141</sup>

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140. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

141. *Ibid.*, p. 160-162.

Pastor Reverend Patrick had told his congregation that they should not fear God's will: if they were to die then they were meant to die from the very beginning. And if they live then, in the same way, it was God's choice and there was nothing to be done about it.<sup>142</sup> People accepted the accomplishment of their fate, whatever it might be. If God had decided to spare them, then blessed be God. If he had decided to take them away, blessed be God still.<sup>143</sup>

The unequivocal faith and reliance in the creator is also deeply embodied through the character of H.F. himself, who, throughout Defoe's realistic fiction, proves his blind faith to Christianity by constantly thanking God for his good health and regularly claiming that "it pleased God" that he was still spared.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, the episode that best shows H.F.'s special relationship with God and his devotion and acceptance of his Lord's power remains at the beginning of the journal, when the character was faced with the dilemma of staying or leaving: "I had two important things before me: the one was the carrying on my business and shop [...] and the other was the preservation of my life"<sup>145</sup>. H.F.'s point was as follows: God had all power on him, and he trusted the latter. If he stayed, then God could decide to either take him away, or spare him. But if he fled out of town, then "it was a kind of fleeing from God, and that he could cause his justice to overtake [him] when and where he thought fit".<sup>146</sup> H.F., indecisive, was attempting to perceive a message from the creator through any sign; and his thoughts leaning more and more towards the idea of staying were confirmed when he ran across a passage of the bible (91<sup>st</sup> psalm): "I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in him will I trust. [...] Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness..."<sup>147</sup>. H.F. had made his choice, he would stay. However, though this blind trust in God and the general acceptance of one's fate seems to have, on surface, prevailed during the Great Plague of London, it must not be forgotten that men were men, and men feared the terrible disease of plague that involved a dreadful death, followed by an early post-mortem divine judgement. Their behaviour was not

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142. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 68.

143. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

144. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 74.

145. *Ibid.*, p. 7-8-9.

146. *Ibid.*

147. *Ibid.*

completely passive: there was a strong ambition to save one's life by swaying and shaping destinies.

Indeed, the general call for repentance was one of the major responses to the outbreak, if not the most important. The only type of public gatherings allowed and even encouraged was special plague services that were held in cathedrals, abbeys and parish churches. These services had become rituals during the epidemic, held every Sunday and at the midweek. Besides these religious gatherings were also established fast days on the first Wednesday of each month. A whole new routine was set towards an aspiration to have London's sins forgiven by the Lord.<sup>148</sup> Londoners were desperate for some mercy. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. writes that "as the desolation was greater during those terrible times"<sup>149</sup>, there were "a thousand unaccountable things"<sup>150</sup> people "would do in the violence of their fright [...] some would go praying and lifting up their hands to heaven, calling upon God for mercy"<sup>151</sup>. And besides this call for repentance, must not be forgotten the strong stigma that goes along, towards those who sinned, those who fled, and those who did not worship enough. In *London's Plague Sore Discovered*, the author severely condemns the sinning Londoners: "hast thou not spitted in the glorious face, of Blessed Jesus when in love he came to wash thee from thy filthiness and shame?"<sup>152</sup>, adding that "sin is the cause of this thy present WO".<sup>153</sup> E.N. commands the city dwellers to "repent and turn to God without delay"<sup>154</sup>, finishing his poem by frantically stating that repentance is the only way out.<sup>155</sup> A practical symbol of this religious stigma must have been the red crosses appointed on infected houses, usually combined with the message "Lord Have Mercy Upon Us". According to F. Wilson, they embody a midway point between the material tool of public interest and the implored mercy of Londoners towards God.<sup>156</sup> These crosses represented a distinctive sign that motivated the people not to approach them, and symbolically

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148. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 117.

149. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 73.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*

152. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague*. London, 1665, p. 6.

153. *Ibid.*

154. *Ibid.*

155. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

156. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 59-60-61.

expressed the idea that these infected houses were the final resting places of those that inhabited them. The plague hitting the sinners, these crosses were often considered an object of blame and shame towards those that had their doors painted a thirteen inch high red cross on.

### 3. God punishing the sinners and sparing the good doers: between beliefs and reality

The religious stigma towards the sinners, though unjustified from a scientific twenty-first century point of view, seems to have actually been demonstrated and legitimated by practical elements of the 1665 outbreak. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. makes a curious observation:

One thing I cannot omit here, and indeed I thought it was extraordinary, at least it seemed a remarkable hand of the divine justice; that all the predictors, astrologers, fortune tellers and what they called cunning men, conjurers and the like, calculators of nativities; and dreamers of dreams, and such people, were gone and vanished, none of them was to be found. I am verily persuaded that a great of them fell in the heat of the calamity, having vented to stay upon the prospect of getting great estates, and indeed their gain was but too great for a time, through the madness and folly of the people: but now they were silent, many of them went to their long home, not able to foretell their own fate or to calculate their own nativities. Some have been critical enough to say that every one of them died. I dare not affirm that; but this I must own, that I never heard of one of them that ever appeared after the calamity was over.<sup>157</sup>

The journal's reader might be tempted to think that this statement was a matter of rumours or simple fiction and invention from Defoe, but there are potential explanations to this supposed evaporation of this category of people. The first hypothesis would be that these charlatans, who were very popular during the epidemic, simply found themselves physically in direct contact with a certain number of people, and consequently, were en masse exposed to the sickness. The second option, as legitimate, would be that a lot of them must have fled or hidden, after having spread lies and fake antidotes which obviously, at one point, turned out to be inefficient. Nevertheless, the disappearance of charlatans after the plague probably emphasized the belief of God punishing those who deserved it. Another thing, more general, that must have participated in fostering the belief that the plague mainly touched the sinners concerned

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157. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 135.



hygiene. The plague was always associated with the poor filthy suburbs which were always struck harder, due to prevailing squalor. They were therefore perceived (or rather *further* perceived) as places of vices and sins. Hence, if God always tackled them first and stronger, it was because they deserved it.<sup>158</sup>

In the same way, according to Defoe's hero, God seems to have also protected the worthy and the good doers.

Nay, some pious ladies were transported with zeal in so good a work, and so confident in the protection of Providence in discharge of the great duty of charity, that they went about in person distributing alms to the poor, and even visiting poor families, though sick and infected, and in their very houses, appointing nurses to attend those that wanted attending, and ordering apothecaries and surgeons, the first to supply them with drugs or plasters, and such things as they wanted, and the last to lance and dress the swellings and tumors, where such were wanting; giving their blessing to the poor in substantial relief to them, as well as hearty prayers for them. I will not undertake to say, as some do, that none of those charitable people were suffered to fall under the calamity itself, but this I may say, that I never knew any one of them that miscarried, which I mention for the encouragement of others in case of the like distress; and doubtless if they that give to the poor lend to the Lord, and he will repay them, those that hazard their lives to give to the poor, and to comfort and assist the poor in such misery as this, may hope to be protected in the work.<sup>159</sup>

Another common theory concerning the origins of the plague, that slightly differed from it being the direct extension of God's hand and which came somewhat closer to a scientific explanation, concerned astrology.

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158. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 35.

159. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 162-163.

## Chapter 5. Astrology and the occult

Besides the religious theory for the origin of the plague, the astrological thesis according to which the placement of stars and planets had impact on life below prevailed. However, the two theories could hardly be beheld as independent and distinct from each other.

### 1. The origins of astrological theories

Though further developed from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward, the origins of astrological theories for the plague can be traced back to Aristotle's speculations, who firmly believed that the superior bodies that were the stars, the planets, the Moon and the Sun, had a significant influence on earth. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Aristotle's principles revived, and consequently, so did the debate on the influence of celestial bodies on the life of men. Surprisingly enough, this somehow scientific explanation was as popular among laymen as among churchmen; and rather despised by the scholars, who widely doubted that the stars could have a relevant power on Humans' fates. However, Rebecca Johnson outlines, though doubtful and sceptic about the capacity of superior bodies to impact people's lives, the scholars had to concede on the evidence of the power of astrology on earth through the tides and the seasons. What must be underlined from the rise of this discourse is how it cannot be utterly detached and set apart the Christian rhetoric according to which God would be the prime cause of everything that takes place on earth. In reality, even to those who believed it was the stars that influenced the existence of men, it was almost always God that instrumented them in the first place, using them as means to accomplish his will, God being characterized as the "primum movens, of first cause, of all things"<sup>160</sup> like it was the case in the Aristotelian concepts. Nevertheless, despite the way both discourses had been intersecting with each other, Rebecca Johnson outlines the deterministic nature of the growing prominence of astrological theories, which seemed to have been introducing – yet not completely – the rise of scientific explanations to make sense of the world, and more generally, of life. Overall, it must be understood that parallel to the classic religious scenario, the discourse on the influence of stars played a major part in the effort to make sense of the plague's sources.<sup>161</sup>

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160. Johnson, Rebecca. « From Sin to Science: Astrological Explanations for the Black Death, 1347-1350 ». Medievalists.net, 30 September 2018.

161. *Ibid.*

The theory of a half divine-half natural source for the appearance of the sickness was undoubtedly widely shared by seventeenth-century medical astrologers who stood by the idea that astrological bodies were means for God to use to pass his message and his judgment. To John Gadburry, a master figure of almanacs and astrological theories of seventeenth-century London, astrology was “the only science that can give the cause and effect of plagues”<sup>162</sup>. Yet, he acknowledges God to be “the chief and supreme cause”<sup>163</sup>, before the constitution of the Universe.<sup>164</sup> God seemed to always be behind what we could call secondary causes; but nonetheless, it appears that in certain writings contemporary to the Great Plague, both theories were presented as distinct, separate and distinguishable from one another. In *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*, Theophilus Garencières lays out his point of view as follows: the plague is “either the immediate will of God [...] for the punishment of our sins”<sup>165</sup> or comes “from a peculiar and mediate disposition, and configuration of the Starrs and Planets”<sup>166</sup>. However, yet precise and clear when describing the “three principal and different opinions concerning the nature and cause of the plague”<sup>167</sup>, Garencières blurs the line by supporting the idea that pestilence *is* “a certain filth in the air”<sup>168</sup> (here evoking the miasmatic theory) brought “by a peculiar position, aspect and configuration of the Celestial bodies”<sup>169</sup> and which is “hidden from our senses”<sup>170</sup> in a manner that we “cannot perceive its nature”<sup>171</sup>. This complex and ambiguous intertwining between common theories was not rare in times of plague, and we will have other opportunities to evoke this ambiguity later in this present thesis.

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162. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 38.

163. *Ibid.*

164. *Ibid.*

165. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 3.

166. *Ibid.*

167. *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

168. *Ibid.*

169. *Ibid.*

170. *Ibid.*

171. *Ibid.*

## 2. Predictions and the London plagues

While sometimes thought of as a foolish and artificial science in our materialistic and down-to-earth contemporary societies and despite the fact that we, twenty-first century humans could be inclined to believe that the art of astrology was also perceived as such in seventeenth-century religious London, it was not quite the case. In fact, astrology was generally regarded as a respectable practice.<sup>172</sup> Actually, even King Charles II believed in this usage and was himself a good client of astrologers, whom he regularly consulted for matters of politics, or for his own personal health.<sup>173</sup> The consultation of astrologers had become very common among all classes of people during times of plague. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and through a mocking and incisive tone, H.F. makes an account of the profitable dimension of the context and of the frenzy surrounding that world during the dreadful epidemic:

The apprehensions of the people were likewise strangely increased by the terror of the times, in which I think the people, from what principle I cannot imagine, were more addicted to prophecies, and astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives' tales, than ever they were before or since. Whether this unhappy temper was originally raised by the follies of some people who got money by it, that is to say, by printing predictions and prognostications, I know not.<sup>174</sup>

Perhaps the trust the people put in those predictors came from – besides their disarray – the fact that several plagues had indeed been seemingly announced by comets or eclipses that had occurred right before the beginning of numerous outbreaks in London.<sup>175</sup> For the Great Plague, several accounts of astral events can be found in written records. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the narrator tells the reader how fears of the people “were increased strangely by several odd accidents”<sup>176</sup>. In fact, a blazing star or a comet had appeared several months before the plague, and another one little before the fire. It is said, that those two comets passed so close to rooftops while traveling above the city that it was obvious they were the hand of God trying to deliver

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172. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 21.

173. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

174. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 17-18.

175. Like in 1603 or in 1625, F. Wilson records. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 22-23.

176. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 16-17.

a message to Londoners. H.F. recalls that the first was “slow but severe, terrible and frightful, as was the plague”<sup>177</sup> and the other was “bright and sparkling [...] flaming, and its motion swift and furious [...] as was the conflagration”<sup>178</sup>. These comets had a great influence on the people’s worries and “these things terrified the people to the last degree”<sup>179</sup>, according to Defoe’s character. He also mentions that consequently to those events, a lot of writings were predicting the ruin of London, and oral predictors supposedly sent by God had overran the capital to preach to the city. He writes that there was “one in particular”<sup>180</sup> who “cried in the streets ‘yet forty days, and London shall be destroyed’”<sup>181</sup>, and “another ran about naked [...] who cried ‘Oh, the great and dreadful God!’ and said no more, but repeated those words continually, with a voice and countenance full of terror”<sup>182</sup>. While delicate to try and untangle the truth from the rumour, historians Dorothy and Lloyd Moote write about a series of three comets that manifested in the London sky before the plague breaks out in 1665. A first one appeared in November 1664 during the night, followed by another one on the 1<sup>st</sup> December. Then, another comet “streaked across the dark winter sky [...] from London to Devon”<sup>183</sup> and was seen as far as Spain or Austria. It seems to have been that last one that generated considerable commentary and public interest: distinguished astrologer and member of the Royal Society for the Advancement of Science John Gadbury wrote in *De Cometis: or a Discourse of the Natures and Effects of Comets*: “this comet portends pestiferous and horrible windes and tempests”<sup>184</sup>. He was not the only one predicting a dark future for the city of London. After the events of late 1664, many astrologers prophesied “war between two great maritime powers, England and Holland, fire, famine, earthquakes, and pestilence”<sup>185</sup> for the 1665 almanacs. In *News from the Stars*, William Andrew’s almanac was even announcing “a mortality, which will bring many to their graves”<sup>186</sup>. And while some mocked the prophecies, Dorothy and Lloyd Moote tell us, “many

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177. *Ibid.*

178. *Ibid.*

179. *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

180. *Ibid.*

181. *Ibid.*

182. *Ibid.*

183. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 20.

184. *Ibid.*,

185. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

186. *Ibid.*

Londoners, especially religious dissenters, took the comet's appearance more seriously"<sup>187</sup>.

### 3. William Lilly

It would be abnormal and nearly inconceivable to write about the field of astrology during the Great Plague of London without evoking its perhaps most notorious figure: William Lilly. Famous predictive astrologer Lilly is legendarily known and remembered to have foreseen the Great Plague as well as the Great Fire the following year, through a series of "hieroglyphic images"<sup>188</sup> inserted in *Monarchy in England*, published fourteen years before the Great Plague, in 1651. The choice of images from Lilly was purposely meant to serve the intention for his predictions to be suitably understood from everyone, including "the vulgar"<sup>189</sup>. His predictions having been proven truthful, Lilly was summoned to a Parliamentary Committee after the Fire to investigate on the reasons of the latter and on the potential responsibility of the astrologer. He quickly cleared himself and evoked his gift to be one given by God.<sup>190</sup>

William Lilly was one of the most consulted astrologers of the period and was much celebrated by all. In fact, he was as visited by the poor as by the rich, and his fame spread far outside London. Consultation was a common and accessible practice that "cost a poor peddler only a penny or two"<sup>191</sup>. He would be visited by about 2,000 clients on a typical year among which could be found people of the gentry, nobles, but also seafarers or servants; who were desiring to know what the stars had to say about their missing husbands or their child to born.<sup>192</sup> More than a simple astrologer, Lilly "walked the blurry line between traditional academic medicine and magic"<sup>193</sup>, as many did, including Gadbury.<sup>194</sup> Their reading of planetary conjunctions also served the purpose to find out in what season would the air become corrupted to decide when to be bled or purged, by instance,<sup>195</sup> and delivering treatments was part of their occupation. About his role during the Great Plague, Lilly wrote:

187. *Ibid.*

188. Cave Wade. « William Lilly, Astrology, and the Plagues of London ». *Rubedo Press*, March 26 2020.

189. *Ibid.*

190. *Ibid.*

191. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 108.

192. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

193. *Ibid.*

194. *Ibid.*

195. *Ibid.*

Now I come unto the year 1665, wherein that horrible and devouring plague so extremely raged in the city of London. 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1665, I retired into the country to my wife and family, where since I have wholly continued, and so intend by permission of God. I had, before I came away, very many people of the poorer sort frequented my lodging, many whereof were so civil, as when they brought waters, viz. urines, from infected people, they would stand purposely at a distance. I ordered those infected, and not like to die, cordials, and caused them to sweat, whereby many recovered. My landlord of the house was afraid of those poor people, I nothing at all.<sup>196</sup>

Again, it is important to notice here how the religious, the astrological, and the miasmatic theories simply cannot be set apart from each other and treated as distinct and independent. On the same line, to explain the prominence of said astrologers and planetary consultations during the Great Plague of London, Historian Keith Thomas writes: “if magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it”<sup>197</sup> – placing this field as a solution, a shelter, and a retreat for the distressed Londoners who were helplessly witnessing the transitioning of their town into a chaotic place, the relentless dying of their loved ones, and the imminent one of their own.

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196. Cave Wade. « William Lilly, Astrology, and the Plagues of London ». *Rubedo Press*, March 26 2020.

197. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 109.

## Chapter 6. The miasmatic theory

It can easily be agreed that the miasmatic theory completes the triangle of the most common and widespread beliefs for the nature of the cause of the sickness, along with the religious and the astrological hypotheses.

### 1. The origins of the theory

The miasma conception was popular from its origins in ancient Greece until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when progress and innovation in health and medicine started replacing a world based on religious and moral concepts, and that the theory of miasma was substituted for the theory of germs.<sup>198</sup> Over the course of Western History, the miasma theory was always put forward when trying to make sense of the scourges that infectious diseases – the plague, the cholera, the malaria – represented in Europe. Even the malaria, a disease as old as the plague, proves the existence of the miasmatic approach way before the middle ages Black Death: in fact, *mala* in Italian means bad, and *aria* means air.<sup>199</sup> Essentially, this concept was based on the cause and effect idea that men got infected by inhaling effluvia of a corrupted air which was tainted from the decaying of organic matter of the ground (often referred to as the faeces of the earth), which was altered by a lack of hygiene or a superior force; either the stars and conjunctures of the planets (much often, they themselves were already believed to be altered by God in the first place), or the hand of God himself. The miasma scenario was very early taken seriously and laws and orders were often passed to address the corruption of the soils and air, such as in 1388 when the British Parliamentary statute made the deposition of ordure into rivers, waters or ditches prohibited.<sup>200</sup>

In an attempt to frame the generic definition of miasma, medical author William C. Shiel Jr. introduces it as "a poisonous vapour or mist believed to be made up of particles from decomposing material that could cause disease and could be identified by its foul smell".<sup>201</sup> It is of profound significance to underline the olfactory dimension that always prevailed in the miasmatic theory. Today, vestiges of the concept remain undiluted in the language, such as in the French word *empester* or in *pestilence* in both

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198. Kannadan, Ajesh. « History of the Miasma Theory of Disease ». Essai, vol. 16, no 18, Spring 2018., p. 42-43.

199. *Ibid.*

200. *Ibid.*

201. Davis, Charles Patrick. « Definition of Miasma ». MedicineNet..



English and French, that refer in part to the sense of smell.<sup>202</sup> It is also much relevant to point out the seemingly inter-dependency of both the smell and the disease that interplay, one appearing to spread the other. To fight against the putrefaction of the air and hence, infectious diseases, Europeans quickly set fragrant and odorous matters to be a logical means to counter the alteration of air.<sup>203</sup> During the Great Plague of London, doctors wore sweet smelling flower filled masks to try not to inhale the bad vapours that leaked out of patients as well as from the air in general, thought contaminated. To get rid of the bad smells of the city, measures were set: buildings were sanitized, swamps were drained, and streets were cleaned.<sup>204</sup> A smell too mild being considered by some as ineffective against the plague, the argument according to which a strong vapour had to be fought by another strong vapour slowly became the source of a schism throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century between advocates of a strong medicine that put forward the use of smelly and toxic products (brimstone, arsenic, antimony...), and supporters of a softer, more delicate medicine where pleasant perfumes and herbs were used against foul smells. This conception based on the idea of smell and dirt, will slowly disappear with the gradual establishment of a public hygiene.<sup>205</sup> Derived from the approach that deadly agents travelled in contaminated air, doctors did not wash their hands between patients until the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>206</sup> but although the miasmatic approach turned out to be untrue, it must be mentioned that this ancient theory embodied the recognized link between filthiness and disease, and, William C. Shiel Jr. stipulates, "encouraged cleanliness and paved the way for public health reform"<sup>207</sup>.

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202. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 44.

203. *Ibid.*

204. Davis, Charles Patrick. « Definition of Miasma ». MedicineNet..

205. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 44.

206. Davis, Charles Patrick. « Definition of Miasma ». MedicineNet..

207. *Ibid.*

## 2. Contagion Versus Miasma

The miasmatic theory can itself be divided into two schools, that split in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the rise of syphilis, when Verone doctor Girolamo Fracastoro published a today well renown work in the field of History of medicine, *De Contagione E Contagiosis Morbis Et Eorum Curatione* (1546), which could be translated as "Contagion, Contagious Diseases and their Treatments", which incarnated a massive study of the causes and consequences of contagion of infectious diseases.<sup>208</sup> In this renowned work, Fracastoro introduced the idea that the nature of contagion had to involve two distinct factors. From this ascertainment, Fracastoro divided the mode of transmission of disease into three groups: transmission from man to man, indirect transmission to man from an object touched by an infected person; and remote and contactless transmission.<sup>209</sup> Essentially, to Fracastoro, the world was composed of atoms, and so were diseases, that were made of atom-like seed lets that he called "seminaria".<sup>210</sup> Like miasmas, those seed lets were capable of travelling in the air and to infect a person. His approach was only seriously considered and shared by some when the plague broke out in Venice a few years later. Subsequently, the theory travelled to London and the expression "the seeds of pestilence"<sup>211</sup> made its entry into the sphere of medicine.<sup>212</sup> This concept of a plague in the air fostered a frightening view of plague's contamination: according to that theory, the sickness was then genuinely out of control. It could travel long distance, it was invisible, it was everywhere.

The debate between those who fiercely believed in the contagious nature of diseases and those who did not held sway for centuries.<sup>213</sup> On the one hand, the supporters of the miasmatic theory claimed that the germs that contaminated the sick then emanated from them, and the only way to counter the potential propagation of the disease was to place aromatic herbs or candles between a sound and a sick person, and to light fires in the streets to purify the air.<sup>214</sup> Among the miasmatics was famous doctor

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208. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 133-134.

209. *Ibid.*

210. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 71.

211. *Ibid.*

212. *Ibid.*

213. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 133-134.

214. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste?: Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 56-59.

Boghurst who played an important role during the Great Plague of London: he thought the plague was caused by subtle exhalations emanating from the putrefaction of the faeces of the earth that were spread by the heat of the sun.<sup>215</sup> On the other hand were those who believed in the contagious character of illnesses and who – theoretically closer to modern approaches of contagious diseases than their rivals – defended the more scientific and straightforward idea that disease was transmitted directly from a sick person to another, and that the sick hence unquestionably *had* to be segregated from the sound.<sup>216</sup> One major argument for this approach was the point that contagion could simply not come from the air for the reason that if it had been the case; animals, who breathed the same air would also have gotten infected, which they did not.<sup>217</sup> Doctor Hodges who was one of them, was much criticized by Boghurst for his truthful statement about the plague being carried on goods and transported from the Middle East to Europe.<sup>218</sup> Though meeting on common grounds for certain elements, in particular on the olfactory dimension,<sup>219</sup> the debate between the two approaches was still an issue until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in the way the plague was dealt with in Caro, where while some fought for the disinfection of coming goods, the isolation of the sick, and the halt of the trade with Asia, others considered the measures to be of the utmost irrelevance and pointlessness.<sup>220</sup>

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215. *Ibid.*

216. *Ibid.*

217. Vitaux, Jean. *Histoire de la peste*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, p. 135.

218. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229., p. 56-59.

219. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 44.

220. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229., p. 56-59.

### 3. Miasma in London: the spiritual and the practical

Though perhaps fanciful sounding, the miasmatic theory reflects the most realistic and pragmatic approach of all evoked in this present thesis and really does take its source somewhere conceivable. In fact, the theory of miasma is directly correlated to the material and earthly matter that the soil represents, and embodies an early yet clear link between dirt and disease. In a city like London, Hildesheimer remarks, the contamination of groundwater is obvious, and between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the more prosperous a town is, the more dirty it is. In the same way, the more dirty it is, the more prosperous it is. Now, the more dirty, the more smelly.<sup>221</sup> No surprise the theory of miasma knew a solid popularity during the Great Plague in London, that sorely lacked the public sanitation put in place two centuries later. The idea of seasons and weather also plays a part in the way the plague was interpreted: like did the Great Plague, it was commonly believed that plague episodes would almost always break out around spring time; a period of transition where the new sun is heating the wet soil, often creating visible vapours above the ground.<sup>222</sup> Hence is collectively shared the idea that a hot and wet air is the source of epidemics.<sup>223</sup> Additionally, it appears that strong winds (thought capable of conveying disease for long distances) had also been felt in 1665 in the British capital right before the start of the epidemic, which coincided with an unexpected mass death of a significant amount of birds. To Londoners, there was no doubt: this episode had been a confirmation that "infected air" was likely the cause of the infection, and that birds had felt it before men.<sup>224</sup>

While practically explainable and materially manifesting itself on earth, the miasmatic approach always seems to take its source from the above. Indeed, even when evoking what was often referred to as "natural causes", God was never too far. Very often the miasmatic theory came with the other two: God, who had both the universe and the forces of Nature at his mercy,<sup>225</sup> was the one orchestrating the astral conjunctions, thought very influential over the state of the air.<sup>226</sup> In *Timon of Athens*

221. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 43.

222. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 57-58.

223. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 43.

224. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 70.

225. *Ibid.*, p. 67-68.

226. Melhaoui, Mohammed. *Peste, contagion et martyre: Histoire du fléau en Occident musulman médiéval*. Paris, Editions Publisud, 2005, p. 83.

(Act IV., sc. 3-1.122-124), William Shakespeare beautifully evokes the causal effect, by mentioning sin, planets, and air on the same line: « Be as a planetary plague when Jove will o'er some high-iced city hang his poison in the sick air »<sup>227</sup>. Being a diehard religious man did not prevent you from believing in natural causes. For Dr. Hodges, whom we evoked earlier for his involvement in the debate about the modes of contagion, the plague had half spiritual, half natural roots: God was sending death on earth by the means of "pestilential steams"<sup>228</sup> carried on travelling cotton or silk fabric from the very seat of the infection (evoking the probability of Turkey) and continuing its route throughout Europe. Along with this very assumption, Hodges asked his peers not to think him an atheist for believing in a more scientific hypothesis about the origins of the plague. To him, there was no doubt: the first cause was always "that of the Almighty".<sup>229</sup> In the same way, John Allin, described as "an interesting combination of alchemist, astrologer, ejected minister and unlicensed physician"<sup>230</sup>, strongly believed in the natural dimension of contagion: "the infection [...] may be taken by the scent of smelling and [...] grosse savour of a foggy infected aire or the corruption of an infected person or place"<sup>231</sup>. Yet to him, God was responsible for this process, and repentance was the only way out.<sup>232</sup>

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227. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 21-22.

228. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 67-68.

229. *Ibid.*

230. *Ibid.*

231. *Ibid.*

232. *Ibid.*

Although a few medical observers of the time had voiced a potential suspicion of connection between the industry of clothing and the propagation of plague (without practically<sup>233</sup> ever mentioning the possible accountability of fleas nor of rats), the preferred theories surrounding the causes of the latter remained of a distant and inconspicuous nature. Nevertheless, what should be noticed about how Europeans tried to make sense of the plague for centuries is how redundant and similar the general theories of the origins of the scourge seem to have always been. In London, historians Dorothy and Lloyd Moote tell us, all of these random approaches were sensibly the same every ten or twenty years:<sup>234</sup> besides a few attempts to derive from common ideas (cf. the schisms between the miasmatics and the contagionists, or between those who believed in a strong medicine opposed those who believed in a softer medicine, for instance), it can only be agreed that there was very little originality in trying to make sense of the plague in Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>235</sup> Nevertheless, the process of attempting to justify the unjustifiable was revealing of a latent fear, and this lack of novelty is absolutely relevant of the place the disease held in the history of men: plague remained absolutely unknown, foreign, mysterious and unearthly until late, and the unparalleled nature of the disease of the plague compelled men into interpreting it as an unavoidable and fatal curse, that inevitably hang over their heads.

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233. Theodore Mayerne, Charles I's French physician had once evoked a suspicion of a potential relation between rats and the plague. (Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 280-281.)

234. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 70.

235. *Ibid.*, p. 280-281.



**PART THREE**  
**A medical effervescence**



## Chapter 7. Divisions and divisions: a state of the medical community

It would be a heresy to try and unveil the notion of frenzy or of fear during the Great Plague without going through the key role the seventeenth-century medical realm played in London. In such a time of health crisis, actors of the medical community were often those whom the distressed ran to. But we will see that the lines between official practitioners and quacks, as well as those between medical care and psychology were of a thin and foggy nature. And to better understand the way the medical establishment and marketplace operated during the 1665 epidemic, it is necessary to first go through who were those who composed it.

### 1. The three official groups

To start with, the official establishment in London was made up of three elite registered institutions of licensed practitioners.<sup>236</sup> On top of the hierarchy was The College of Physicians, then considered the most esteemed group. The College of Physicians comprised about fifty aristocratic members, who thought themselves the only legitimate group in the health field. They were known for looking down on anyone else, and especially disregarded the other two groups which they considered “empiricks”<sup>237</sup> whose only knowledge was based on practice (like artisans) and who lacked the academic theory the members of The College of Physicians possessed.<sup>238</sup> In May 1665, the College of Physicians released an official and public work on the King’s council demand, comprising advice for the preservation of one’s health, and suggestions of plague cures. This work, based on Galenic Medicine, comprised pieces of advice and directions on what to eat or what not to eat as well as on how to deal with a fever, or how to balance humours, thought by Galen’s supporters to play a significant role in one’s health. According to Galenic medicine, which constituted the foundation of the physicians’ theory and practice, a person’s humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile) could be altered by various factors in and out the body: in particular diet, sleep, exercise, elimination, sex, and the quality of air. These six factors were known as “the six non-naturals”<sup>239</sup> because they embodied features of lifestyle the individual had impact on. When an illness came forth, humours suffered a putrefaction which resulted

236. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.

237. *Ibid.*, p. 97-100.

238. *Ibid.*

239. *Ibid.*

in a lack of balance between them: evacuation of the corrupt matter was requisite, and the regular cures then consisted in bleeding, purging, sweating or vomiting.<sup>240</sup> The principle of evacuation – which was common to all diseases – had been what featured the licensed physicians’ practice for long; but at the time of the Great Plague, things were changing. In fact, the use of these practices having caused the death of too many patients due to loss of blood or weakness, the new manual of the College of Physicians, released in 1665, did not include any of them. As a matter of fact, it even involved warnings against the use of purging or bleeding. Yet, nevertheless, these usages holding a universal and timeless status, died hard long after the end of the Great Plague.<sup>241</sup> Opposed to the physicians of the prestigious College of Physicians was a breakaway group of academically trained caregivers that named themselves “chemycal physicians”<sup>242</sup>, and who challenged the traditional medicine of the members of the College. What distinguished them from the Galenists could be summed up under one principle: they fought fire with fire; contrary to their rivals who would rather use cold beverages to cool a fever, for instance. With no surprise, they gained much popularity in London during the 1665 plague outbreak which represented a golden opportunity for them to put themselves forward on the stage. While practically all the members of the College fled, most chemical physicians stayed; offering aggressive cures of salts, sulphur, mercury or liquid gold to the distressed Londoners.<sup>243</sup>

Immediately below the physicians on the medical hierarchy of the time was the Society of Apothecaries. These men, who invaded the city of London in 1665, were trained through apprenticeships, and were virtually the pharmacists of today. Though they solely asked to have the right to actually treat and cure the people, the most they could do by then was handing out medicine to patients and attempt to relieve the sick from plague pain by the means of concoctions.<sup>244</sup> Right next down the medical ladder was the Company of Barber-Surgeons, whose services were much less costly than were the treatments of physicians or the drugs of apothecaries. That last institution was the most despised, due to the filthy and profane nature of their activities: the surgeons, who had skills the doctors did not possess, were men with hands-on experience, and their work – which consisted in cutting the skin, removing tumours or fix fractures – was

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240. *Ibid.*

241. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

242. *Ibid.*

243. *Ibid.*

244. *Ibid.*

based on practice rather than theory.<sup>245</sup> They were closer than any other medical actor to the human anatomy, materially and manually dealing with the external manifestations of disease on the body.<sup>246</sup> What also differentiated the surgeons from the physicians or the apothecaries was the easiness and straightforward dimension with which could be judged one of their treatments' outcome, unlike the funny antidotes often prescribed by the other practitioners. Altogether, around 250 licensed practitioners were to be found in London before 1665; yet it is a delicate thing to estimate how many of them fled the city in the peak of the epidemic.<sup>247</sup>

## 2. Non licensed practitioners and other actors: the women

Besides the three elite groups that framed the official medical community of London during the Great Plague, there was a whole part of society that historical writings put aside despite the crucial place they held during that time: the women. Yet unqualified to deliver medical care, the first stakeholders we could name are the *searchers*, who exemplified the prime role, or rather the last on this sanitary chain.<sup>248</sup> The searchers were literally corpse inspectors, who were called to investigate “to the utmost of their knowledge”<sup>249</sup> on the causes of death of the deceased, and were given a list of symptoms and features to look for on dead bodies. The Plague Orders in London specified that each parish had to appoint two searchers of “honest reputation”<sup>250</sup>, that they be paid per body, that they were required to carry a red wand to identify themselves as well as to be segregated from the rest of the population.<sup>251</sup> Brave enough to undertake what could be described as the most hazardous and grimmest of jobs, the searchers suffered nonetheless a terrible reputation: they were seen by the rest of the population as unreliable greedy alcoholic poor old women whose reports could not be trusted. However, although searchers were much criticized for their lack of qualifications and their unreliability, it would be misleading and phony to assume they were absolutely incompetent. Indeed, those women had acquired knowledge with experience, learning it

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245. *Ibid.*

246. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 125.

247. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 100.

248. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

249. Guest Editor, and Rebecca Rideal. « Women of the plague ». History Extra, November 26 2020.

250. *Ibid.*

251. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 65.

the hard way while licensed physicians were mostly familiar with theory only.<sup>252</sup> During the Great Plague of London, which turned out to be an incredibly busy period for such professionals, the searchers recorded as much as 68,596 deaths, of plague only. This invaluable data became the keystone of the Bills of Mortality that, Rebecca Rideal underlines, “provided the only graspable way for contemporaries to monitor the progress of plague in the city”<sup>253</sup>, and represents the foundation for any study of early modern plague in London.<sup>254</sup>

Apart from the corpse inspectors, whose jobs did not include medical care, London was home to numerous unlicensed female medical practitioners,<sup>255</sup> including white witches, who were forgotten in written records. These white witches, who were very busy in plague time, and who surprisingly experienced a better reputation than searchers, would in normal circumstances deliver cures for sick cattle, charms, balms, or correctives for sterility: virtually, white witches offered cures not so different from those of apothecaries or physicians.<sup>256</sup> But perhaps the most important female actors in this health chain were the nurses of London: indeed, the nurses and midwives constituted the major, and often the only supply of care for the sick poor who sustained on parish relief,<sup>257</sup> who were less likely to be attended by a male caregiver as they were present in much smaller numbers in the suburbs than in the city and whose fees were far beyond reach. In fact, women caregivers were obscenely cheaper<sup>258</sup> and easier to find for the poorer suburban parishes which were very few to pay for a doctor, an apothecary or a surgeon to treat their residents during plague epidemics.<sup>259</sup> Their reputation during plague outbreaks played a key role in shaping the image they held among the population as well as how Londoners lived the epidemic: the nurses, who were often thought immune to the plague for they had been exposed so many times and never got sick, suffered a mediocre reputation among Londoners of every class,<sup>260</sup> and as Rebecca Rideal underlines, “sympathy and admiration for the plague nurses was, it appears, in

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252. *Ibid.*

253. Guest Editor, and Rebecca Rideal. « Women of the plague ». *History Extra*, November 26 2020.

254. *Ibid.*

255. *Ibid.*

256. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 109.

257. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

258. Live-in nurses were paid two chillings a week to care for a child in an infected home, and five for an adult. *Ibid.*

259. *Ibid.*

260. *Ibid.*

short supply”<sup>261</sup>. To physician Nathaniel Hodges they were “wretches [who] out of greediness to plunder the dead, would strangle their patients and charge it to distemper in their throats”<sup>262</sup>, and were also accused of “secretly convey the pestilent taint from sores of the infected to those who were well”<sup>263</sup>. Rumours about their vicious, opportunistic and evil manners held sway during epidemics: the non-threatening care and empathy the image of a nurse evokes today was replaced by “fear and revulsion”<sup>264</sup> that they inspired “among a terrified population”.<sup>265</sup> In total, it is estimated that there were in London at least as many unlicensed practitioners (most of them women) as licensed ones, if not more, reaching the approximate number of caregivers to five hundreds during the Great Plague.<sup>266</sup>

### 3. Blurred lines

Now, what appears substantially significant and relevant of the notions of frenzy and confusion is how the hierarchy among the actors of the medical scene during the Great Plague, in theory so obvious and unmistakable, is in practice, much ambiguous and foggy. In fact, this line of hierarchy between official trained and non official care givers among the marketplace was already blurry before the epidemic, but virtually disappeared when the plague stroke.<sup>267</sup> For instance, there was no general and common opinion (about a potential predisposition of a said category of people to be more likely to catch the disease, about the deadly rate of the plague, etc.) to all carers of a specific rank: a certain category of carers did not own a belief, nor a belief a certain category of carers.<sup>268</sup> Besides the triangle of the official institutions, prevailed a whole world of witches, charlatans, healers and examiners, who essentially mingled and blended into the established orders. And despite a fierce hostility from those who thought owned the official knowledge, the cures and the clientele uncovered the tightness of the supposed gap between *real* doctors and *fake* doctors.<sup>269</sup> This is rationally explainable. In a context

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261. Guest Editor, and Rebecca Rideal. « Women of the plague ». History Extra, November 26 2020.

262. *Ibid.*

263. *Ibid.*

264. *Ibid.*

265. *Ibid.*

266. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 100.

267. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

268. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

269. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 127.

where there is no room for pride, reputation, patience or status – which are all values belonging to the world of the ordinary – and where instinct, haste, disorder and disarray prevail, there is no difference: “Who was the legitimate practitioner and who the quack when the answer depended on effectiveness rather than on the origins of the therapy?”<sup>270</sup>

In fact, historians Dorothy and Lloyd Moote tell us, the competition between rival wonder drugs escalated as the outbreak progressed.<sup>271</sup> We witnessed exotic cures working their way up the social ladder. When an antidote was failing, another was tried. Panic and fear were such that we were now looking at the noble Galenist treatments and at the funny cures of white witches the same way, the successful nature of the antidote being what was most important.<sup>272</sup> That, as well as the sharing of medical knowledge among the lower classes, participated in taking away the sacred aura around the “official” treatments and noble cures. In this way, people of all classes passed from Galenist cures to herbs and potions, or even mixed practices with the groundbreaking chymical physicians’ ways. People were sharing recipes, swapping treatments, trying anything they would hear of. In a way, the hierarchy of cures disappeared simultaneously to the fall of hierarchy of practitioners, turning the London medical marketplace as a whole upside down.<sup>273</sup> But this blending and blur not only applied to who the people would run to or what treatments they used. Even “serious” doctors themselves would try unusual cures and looked into the vulgar ways. Dr. Willis, known as a very steady and disciplined doctor, dipped into popular remedies when his learned treatments failed, and would even use urine to treat Jaundice.<sup>274</sup> To Dr. Hodges, these “exotic cure-alls”<sup>275</sup> only existed to fool the naive public, who were ready to go through anything to avoid or cure the most severe disease of all. But nevertheless, the Lloyd authors remark, “behind most doctors of physic loomed the shadow of a white witch”<sup>276</sup>.

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270. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 101.

271. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

272. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

273. *Ibid.*

274. *Ibid.*

275. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

276. *Ibid.*

## Chapter 8. Proliferation of cures and antidotes

Parallel to the wild effervescence of the actors of the medical community, prevailed a craze in London around the ways of cures and the preventives of the plague. And as it is a challenging thing to isolate the noble cures from the vulgar ones for the reasons we evoked above, we will divide the upcoming study according to the aim of these treatments, before taking some distance on the topic area.

### 1. Avoiding the plague

Besides the measures of isolation, street cleaning and shutting up of houses that we mentioned earlier, the city imposed other measures to counter the miasmatic putrefaction of the city of London. One major effort that marked the endeavour to fight the plague in 1665 was the killing of cats and dogs – believed to be susceptible to be carers and spreaders of the infection – that was ordered by the Guildhall in June. London's constables travelled the streets of London to command pet owners to eradicate their animals before the following week or they would face prosecution.<sup>277</sup> This serious action triggered dissension among the population who doubted the relevance and efficiency of the move. The prime argument against this operation concerned, again, the miasmatic approach: to Garençières, the dead bodies of cats and dogs would only just add putrefaction to the pre-existing ambient putrefaction of the air, and might even help the spread of the disease. He writes: "inhumanely butcher cats and dogs, and after that leave them in heaps to putrefy [...] as if the plague were not sufficient to do its work without the addition of this new infection"<sup>278</sup>. Right after the killing of dogs and cats, public gatherings were forbidden (except religious ones) and schools were closed down.<sup>279</sup> Street fires were also often lighted in the English capital in times of plague as they were believed efficient to purify the infected air. This measure, being a century old at the time of the Great Plague, was first implemented in the month of July 1563 when they were imposed in the streets of London every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 7 pm. In 1665, the fires were only ordered as late as in the month of September 1665 as

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277. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 115-116.

278. Garençières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 6.

279. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 115-116.

an ultimate attempt to offset the raging epidemic, but were grotesquely extinguished by the rain in less than three days.<sup>280</sup>

After the public space, the next effort to keep away from the plague was at home. In fact, the plague could strike anyone, anywhere, anytime: the infected air was believed to be able to travel in and out houses through the open windows and doors, and interiors should be purified with the utmost meticulousness.<sup>281</sup> The most common way to proceed to the cleaning of houses was the process of fumigation that involved the burning of tar, pitch, niter, frankincense or rosin in front of doors, and inside the most frequented room in the house. For the poorest, it was rather recommended to use cheaper matters such as brimstone or vitriol.<sup>282</sup> Guidelines on the exact way of procedure were extremely diverse, yet all so rigorous and specific. In a single sheet medical writing, John Belson advises the city dwellers to burn some incense “every morning and evening”<sup>283</sup>, “in all the chambers, parlours and shops [...] in the entries of the houses”<sup>284</sup>. The incense, in the size of a “walnut”<sup>285</sup>, shall be stirred and “burn[t] in a chaving dish”<sup>286</sup> for a moment, “until fully consumed”<sup>287</sup>. For optimal efficiency, house owners should inhale the smoke by “passing over it several times”<sup>288</sup>, as well as proceed to set the same amount of incense in a chaving dish in every room, shut all windows and doors, and hang all the potentially infected clothes, house linen and fabrics so they get a chance to be cleansed as well. He also details that six hours are needed to purify a room.<sup>289</sup>

Then, as ultimate shielding measures, existed a profusion of ways of protection to ward the plague off from one’s body. Numerous things that would sound much heretical to us contemporaries were thought to be efficient preservatives from the plague, like tobacco, – which notorious Samuel Pepys was a great user of –<sup>290</sup>, or even,

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280. Wilson, F. *La Peste à Londres au temps de Shakespeare*. Paris, Payot, 1987, p. 40-41.

281. Belson, John. *Remedies Against the Infection of the Plague and the Curing Thereof, and Rules Which Are to Be Observed Therein*. London, 1665, p. 1.

282. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 115-116.

283. Belson, John. *Remedies Against the Infection of the Plague and the Curing Thereof, and Rules Which Are to Be Observed Therein*. London, 1665, p. 1.

284. *Ibid.*

285. *Ibid.*

286. *Ibid.*

287. *Ibid.*

288. *Ibid.*

289. *Ibid.*

290. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 106.



as farcical as it may sound, the French disease: syphilis.<sup>291</sup> Besides, the use of talismans or potions as a way of protection was much recommended. In *Remedies against the Infection of the Plague and the Curing Thereof, and Rules which are to be Observed Therein*, Belson suggests the use of a "bag"<sup>292</sup> or "purse"<sup>293</sup> that should be hung around the neck, "falling upon the heart or stomach"<sup>294</sup>. The said bag should be perfumed once a day with the same previous incense which should give it on the spot the virtue to draw away any infection susceptible to enter the body.<sup>295</sup> The author also recommends the consumption of a mysterious "celestial water"<sup>296</sup> every morning through a soup ("broth"<sup>297</sup>), a dessert ("posset"<sup>298</sup>) or in half a glass of white wine, and should make the product taste "as if you had squeezed in the juice of a lemon"<sup>299</sup>. This water or cordial, has many denominations and variants. In *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*, Garencières evokes the "Venice Treacle"<sup>300</sup> (made of flowers, saffron and "dissolved in a pint of rose water"<sup>301</sup>) renowned as a noble preservative and curative, and "only antidote against all plagues, poisons, bitings and stings of venomous beasts"<sup>302</sup> and other health troubles.

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291. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

292. Belson, John. *Remedies Against the Infection of the Plague and the Curing Thereof, and Rules Which Are to Be Observed Therein*. London, 1665, p. 1.

293. *Ibid.*

294. *Ibid.*

295. *Ibid.*

296. *Ibid.*

297. *Ibid.*

298. *Ibid.*

299. *Ibid.*

300. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 17.

301. *Ibid.*

302. *Ibid.*

## 2. Curing the plague

When it was too late, and a person fell sick, the first step was to recognize the illness, a procedure described in many writings contemporary to the Great Plague. To renowned apothecary Boghurst, “carbuncles, buboes, blains, blisters, spots rising on the boyd”<sup>303</sup> are symptoms that evidence the infection from the plague of an individual. To that, could also be added cramping in the guts, faltering speech, faintness, shortness of breath, frenzy, hysterical laughing, as well as obvious sweats and fevers.<sup>304</sup> In the same medical work we evoked earlier written by Theophilus Garencières, the author describes how the plague always comes with either “tokens”<sup>305</sup>, “a botch”<sup>306</sup>, or a “carbuncle”<sup>307</sup>, which are all denominations matching with the description of buboes, before proceeding to warn his reader of the serious nature of the appearance of these symptoms: when the described signs appear, the response must be urgent and without delay. To him, the time period in which the sick person is handled is “the chief and principal cause”<sup>308</sup> of death with the plague. If handled within the first four to six hours, “the plague is one of the easiest diseases in the world to be cured”<sup>309</sup>. But if nothing is done after six hours, he stipulates, it is “for the most part mortal”<sup>310</sup>; before adding that if everyone was to follow his advice, nineteen out of twenty sick individuals would survive the plague. A delusional sounding number, that simply does not coincide with the death counts nor with the descriptions and testimonies (or rather the absence of testimonies) of the experience of the plague. Now, it is legitimate to ask ourselves what cure or treatment was thought efficient at the time of the Great Plague, and how successful were they really?

If preventive antidotes against the sickness were plentiful and rigorously specific in their ways of use, processes and commands of ways of cure were tremendously customized. And while a lot of treatments drew on the traditional medicine of Galen, the Great Plague turned out to be coming across a medical revolution. In fact, the chemical

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303. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 62.

304. *Ibid.*

305. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 18.

306. *Ibid.*

307. *Ibid.*

308. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

309. *Ibid.*

310. *Ibid.*

physicians' methods were starting to become more and more popular: when traditional processes of evacuation were losing ground, aggressive treatments were gaining influence. To Garencières, the plague being of "malignant quality"<sup>311</sup>, the intervention of "a peculiar way of cure"<sup>312</sup> was needed. Hence, the sick patient should be given "cordials and sudorifick antidotes"<sup>313</sup> without which the person would be at high risk to kill themselves. In fact, the aim of Nature is to "thrust and expel the disease from the center to the circumference and so to preserve the heart which is the fountain of life"<sup>314</sup>, by ways of fevers and sweats, causing extreme weakness. This process being however inevitable for the very reason we just adduced, and for the motive of the plague being of a particular nature, the use of aggressive antidotes and produce to counter the aggressive infection was due, in contrast to the traditional medicine of Galen. Thus, besides the drug intake was recommended the ingestion of "strong bear lukewarm or some generous claret-wine"<sup>315</sup> as well as strong meat, which could do no harm to a plague infected person, unlike for other diseases where was required the removing of these products in the diet.<sup>316</sup>

But to better prove the gradual revolution the London medical sphere was going through in terms of ways to handle the plague, we can perhaps quote a 1665 plague publishing of the College of Physicians (*Certain Necessary Directions for the prevention and cure of the Plague*), an institution originally symbol of the traditional medicine of Galen:

To break the tumor [bubo]: take a great onion, hollow it, put into it a fig, rue cut small, a dram of Venice Treacle, put it in a wet paper, and roast it in embers, apply it hot unto the tumor. To draw it: when it is broken, to draw and heal it, take the yoke of an egg, on ounce of honey of roses, turpentine one ounce, wheat flour a little, London treacle a dram and a half, mix these well, spread it upon leather. Change twice a day.<sup>317</sup>

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311. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 12.

312. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

313. *Ibid.*

314. *Ibid.*

315. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

316. *Ibid.*

317. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 104.

What was new in their manual was not only the near absence of recommendation of processes of evacuation, but also the use of harsh products, traditionally avoided. Hence the use of some “London Treacle”<sup>318</sup>, also called “Theriac”<sup>319</sup> is encouraged. This antidote had many denominations, many versions, many alleged benefits and was all-purpose. Being ineffective anyway, the value of this beverage was of symbolic nature only. Theriac, described as the plague drug of choice in 1665 in *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*, was made out of viper's flesh mixed with garlic, vinegar, walnuts, onion and opium, and was rather reserved to the middle to upper class London, who all seemed to have a supply at the time of the Great plague.<sup>320</sup> But ingredients did not really matter that much. The poor’s option consisted in applying a single onion straight onto the plague sore to help take the “venom”<sup>321</sup> away, which precisely highlights, again, the symbolic value of these cures.

### 3. Predisposition, efficiency, social class: beliefs and realities surrounding the medical world

Now, besides the material aspect of the medical marketplace – which will be evoked again in the next chapter – we need to go through the social scope that surrounded that world in the 1665 London, a whole realm that raised deeper issues than just people who tried to cure other people in a time of pandemic. To start with, it is of much interest and relevance to mention a debate that always held sway in times of plague: it was the potential predisposition of certain categories of people to catch the disease more easily than others, a matter discussed in Theophilus Garencières’ medical writing. To him, children are more subject to plague than are young men, young men are more subject than old men, and women are more subject than men. Regarding types of personalities, he goes on, the moist (in other words, women) who are rather “sanguine and phlegmatik”<sup>322</sup> are more subject than the dry (men) who tend to be more “melancholick and choleric”<sup>323</sup> and will therefore fall sooner. Garencières adds to his argument that lifestyle plays a key role in a person being more or less susceptible to

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318. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

319. *Ibid.*

320. *Ibid.*

321. *Ibid.*

322. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 15.

323. *Ibid.*

catch the sickness, or to be weaker before it. In fact, he supports the idea that the debauched will be more subject than the temperate, and the loose than the continent.<sup>324</sup> Now, the physician most importantly asserts a point which reveals to be noteworthy on our quest to unveil exactly how anxiety manifested during the Great Plague. In fact, Garençières points out the role of passions, specifically quoting fear – which supposedly disarms the person from their ability to fight the plague – in the propensity of someone being more or less susceptible to catching the disease. In the contrary, he mentions "those in the meantime that have escaped upon that score in the country, owing their preservation merely to the opinion they had that being out of the city, they were out of danger, and so living without fear, gave no admittance, but shut the door to the distemper"<sup>325</sup>, adding a psychological dimension to a thing that, to many of our contemporaries, should only address to scientific facts. Hence, in this case we can distinguish a circle, that evokes the two-way process of interdependency of the concepts of fear and frenzy we mentioned in our introduction. Hither, the plague triggers fear, which triggers frenzy, and both together apparently trigger (or were thought to trigger – and beliefs were what mattered) a propensity to catch the disease or to be weaker when faced to it, which, if we follow Garençières' argument (which was shared by many at the time), results in a more dreadful epidemic, and the circle goes on.

Another thing that we cannot but question concerns the level of efficiency of the ways of prevention and cure that were commonly used during the Great Plague, a subject matter that contemporary authors have a lot to say about. In fact, French doctor Jean Vitaux remarks that it is essential to isolate the preventive treatments from the curative ones. The first being sometimes efficient – not necessarily by the way intended – and the latter being most of the time, if not always, unsuccessful and even dangerous (edible cures, the process of bleeding, etc.).<sup>326</sup> Now, let us have a look at the typically deployed preventive attempts during the Great Plague and their effects. As evoked in the chapter on the flight of Londoners, the two principal pre-emptive measures were Hypocrates' motto "cito, longe, tarde"<sup>327</sup>: leave soon, go far away, return late; as well as self or forced confinement. Two measures that, if followed soon enough, were susceptible to be successful as they virtually consisted in keeping away from the

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324. *Ibid.*

325. *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

326. Vitaux, Jean. *Histoire de la peste*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, p. 138-139.

327. *Ibid.*

disease.<sup>328</sup> Another preventive remedy that turned out to be efficient (yet not for the reasons the Londoners thought in 1665) was the burning of sulphur, saltpetre and amber inside homes – originally in order to fumigate and therefore purify the air –, which did indeed keep the rats away.<sup>329</sup> However, not all precautionary efforts were useful: we can name the London fires that were lighted for three days in September. To Pepys, "the extreme heat of the day and the blazing fires made the scene apocalyptic"<sup>330</sup>, and the latter triggered much controversy. To Reverend Josselin, high temperatures and lightning dispelled the plague. To Doctor Hodges, the fires, which were soon extinguished by the falling rain, were expensive, useless and harmful, and had even precipitated the most fatal twenty four hours of the 1665 epidemic, when more than 4000 Londoners passed in a single day.<sup>331</sup> Lastly, we shall mention religious processions which intended to pull away the disease by pleasing and pleading God, but in reality became major sources of contamination.<sup>332</sup>

Finally, there is something to say about the medical marketplace and social class during the Great Plague. The idea that the plague was a disease of the poor and that the rich were likely exempt of the disease was not completely incorrect. However, the justifications we attached to that assumption at the time were the wrong ones: it was believed that unreasonable lifestyle and excessive behaviours (alcohol, food, sex, games...) – which rather characterized the lower classes' ways of living – resulted in God's anger, leading to a predisposition before the disease. In reality, if the plague always stroke in the poorer suburbs first, it was because of the lack of hygiene, and the overcrowding of these districts, which attracted rats.<sup>333</sup> Nevertheless, one thing was undeniable. It was that the poor had to feel abandoned and helpless in regards to the cure and the prevention of the sickness: they were less able to pay for antidotes, could hardly isolate inside tiny lodgings, and were more distant from the knowledge of the time and of medical books; indeed few could actually read. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can ascertain that that was the experience and perception of Londoners,

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328. *Ibid.*

329. Tames, Richard. *Great Plague and Fire – London in Crisis*. London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1998. Oxford, Turning Points in History, p. 15.

330. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 217-219.

331. *Ibid.*

332. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 27.

333. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 71.

but that scientifically speaking, the poor and the rich were on the same level, maybe not concerning the prevention and preservation from the disease (the haves were able to retire away from London, or to live a safer and more pleasant confinement in the city), but on the likeliness of death after contracting the disease, effective plague antidotes being simply non-existent at the time.<sup>334</sup>

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334. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

## Chapter 9. Frauds and charlatans: a fruitful ground

Intertwined to this medical frenzy of actors and antidotes in the London medical marketplace, it must be clarified that during the Great Plague, a culture of fraud established itself, based on what could be called “The Big Three”: opportunity, rumours, and despair.

### 1. A quackery frenzy

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. makes a vivid description of the extreme mushrooming in the streets of London of what the people called wise women, cunning men, white witches and conjurers, and that the medical establishment of the time condescendingly called “quacks”<sup>335</sup>: it was incredible to see, he writes, “how the posts of houses and corners of streets were plastered over with doctors’ bills, and papers of ignorant fellows quacking and tempering in physic, and inviting people to come to them for remedies”<sup>336</sup>, where were advertised “infallible”<sup>337</sup>, “never-failing”<sup>338</sup>, “sovereign”<sup>339</sup> or “royal”<sup>340</sup> antidotes. It was said that there was not a single street in the city that did not have posters advertising the latest antidote from an unknown wise woman from Italy or a witch from Cornwall. Attractive books promoting promising cures were displayed in bookstalls, tracts were printed, shared; and even read at loud for the illiterate.<sup>341</sup> No one could escape this massive craze. Those astrologers and fortune tellers were to be found at all corners of London and their number dramatically multiplied as soon as the plague broke out, as if anyone could turn into a doctor overnight. Their popularity rose swiftly. In his journal, the narrator even makes an account of what modern readers would be tended to interpret as a comparison to rock stars being stalked by crazy paparazzi: “certain it is, that innumerable attendants crowded about their doors every day: and if but a grave fellow in a velvet jacket, a band and a black cloak, which was the habit those quack conjurers generally went in, was but seen in the streets, the people would follow them in crowds, and ask them questions as

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335. *Ibid.*, p. 95-96.

336. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 22-23.

337. *Ibid.*

338. *Ibid.*

339. *Ibid.*

340. *Ibid.*

341. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.



they went along.”<sup>342</sup> And despite the continual warnings of the three “official” groups towards these quacks, who desired to keep the monopoly over their own practices and thought themselves as the only legitimate medical practitioners, people kept clinging, desperately, to what they thought could potentially be their way out of the plague.<sup>343</sup>

The people were delusional, and so were these charlatans who, according to medical historian Roy Porter, more than delusional, were “self-delusional”<sup>344</sup>. Now, having witnessed “the foolish humour of the people in running after quacks”<sup>345</sup>, the Lord Mayor of London appointed physicians and surgeons in May 1665 to serve the relief of the diseased poor and ordered the College of Physicians to publish directions for cheap remedies for the needy, that were copied, made public and shared for free, in order to fight against the false remedies and to promote official ones.<sup>346</sup> The leaflet named “Certain Necessary Directions for the preservation and Cure of Plague”<sup>347</sup> was soon found in any bookstall or apothecary shop around town.<sup>348</sup> In his Journal, H.F. writes: “These things agitated the minds of the common people for many months while the first apprehensions were upon them, and while the plague was not, as I may say, yet broken out”<sup>349</sup>. Clearly for the narrator, the function of these quacks consisted in fostering fear among the people, which turned out to be the source of a lot of money for the year 1665.<sup>350</sup>

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342. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 21.

343. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.

344. *Ibid.*

345. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 26.

346. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.

347. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

348. *Ibid.*

349. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 65.

350. *Ibid.*

## 2. An economy based on fear: blind trust, naivety, and despair of the people

One thing was certain: this plague outbreak triggering the most dreadful terror among the gullible Londoners trapped inside the capital city was a golden opportunity for anyone who claimed holding psychic powers or an efficient cure for the disease, and the craze of the summer 1665 shed the light on the opportunistic behaviours of corrupted individuals.<sup>351</sup> Earlier in this study, we evoked the naivety people fell into when they were stroke with fear and apprehensions. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe's hero does not miss to underline and emphasize how this effect led people to behave uncontrollably:

“One mischief always introduces another. These terrors and apprehensions of the people led them to a thousand weak, foolish and wicked things [...] and this was running about to fortune tellers, cunning men and astrologers, to know their fortunes, or, as it is vulgarly expressed, to have their fortunes told them, their nativities calculated and the like.”<sup>352</sup>

Throughout the journal, the narrator accounts of the folly of the people who, deprived of reason and logic, would fall into any kind of trap or fraud; turning the topic of the effects of fear on human's reactions in times of catastrophe into one of the most recurrent themes in the writing. He goes on: people were so “ignorant and stupid in their reflections”<sup>353</sup> that they were “now led by their fright to extremes of folly”<sup>354</sup> and “ran to conjurers and witches”<sup>355</sup> to “know what should become of them, who fed their fears and kept them always alarmed and awake, on purpose to delude them and pick their pockets”<sup>356</sup>. The poor people were “storing themselves with such multitudes of pills, potions and preservatives”<sup>357</sup> that “they not only spent their money, but poisoned themselves beforehand, for fear of the poison of the infection”<sup>358</sup>. Victims of the system were desperately clinging on to anything that could be clung on to, and found themselves at the mercy of impostors, who took advantage of a ready market. But though H.F. criticizes the extreme naivety, foolishness and nonsense of people's actions

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351. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.

352. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 20.

353. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

354. *Ibid.*

355. *Ibid.*

356. *Ibid.*

357. *Ibid.*

358. *Ibid.*

and beliefs, he puts the blame on the charlatans whose “wickedness [...] lay chiefly on the side of the deceiver’s deceiving, not upon the deceived”<sup>359</sup>. Later, he adds:

All this was the effect of the hurry the people were in, after the first notion of the plague being at hand was among them [...] when the plague evidently spread itself, they soon began to see the folly of trusting to these unperforming creatures [...] their fears worked [...] to amazement and stupidity [...] they ran about from one neighbour's house to another and even in the streets, from one door to another, with repeated cries of, “Lord, have mercy upon us! What shall we do?”<sup>360</sup>

### 3. A dramatic sense of competition and vanity

Now, the medical marketplace being first and foremost a market, the period knew a stiff competition among the self-proclaimed experts who battled and competed for the recognition of their own (though sometimes stealing one’s credit) potions and preventive antidotes.<sup>361</sup> The economic dimension, that relied on the people’s fears, could not be set apart this medical effervescence: plague waters and powders were replicated in many variations, seemingly renewed, and adapted to different economic classes. Marketability was everywhere. Products were named after famous figures and advertised with impressive claims. This cure was available in short supply in this or this particular shop “and nowhere else”.<sup>362</sup> It was a race for safety on the side of the distraught Londoners, and a race for profit for those who chose to take advantage of the distressed, at all cost. In that regard, in *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*, Theophilus Garencières writes: “let everyone beware of those that set up bills for the curing of this and other diseases [...] the wonders they promise, lay an ambush to your purses, and their care of your health, is less than that of your wealth”<sup>363</sup>.

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359. *Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

360. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

361. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 95-96.

362. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

363. Garencières, Theophilus. *A Mite Cast Into the Treasury of the Famous City of London Being a Brief and Methodical Discourse of the Nature, Causes, Symptomes, Remedies and Preservation From the Plague, in this Calamitous Year, 1665*. London, Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665, p. 3.

In fact, Garencières' writing appears to be really insightful and relevant of the rivalry and greed of London's charlatans, both in the way he addresses the topic, and in the way he speaks about himself. The real remedies for the plague being so cheap and accessible, the author cannot but "wonder at the impudence of many"<sup>364</sup> who encourage the use of "chymical drops, Mineral Bezoart and such like trumperies, and at the credulity of those that believe them"<sup>365</sup>, and criticizes the "vanity"<sup>366</sup> of those who believe their own remedy to be the only one legitimate, disregarding any other way of cure. Besides sniping at charlatans, he wonders why people are so naive to pick the silly remedies of self-proclaimed experts over real remedies "which for the space of 1600 or 1700 years, have been found grounded upon reason, authorized by the best physicians in all ages, and approved certain by a constant experience"<sup>367</sup>. At the beginning of his paper, the author addresses the Lord Mayor in an "Epistle Deditatory" in which he affirms that the following discourse is aimed to "rectifie"<sup>368</sup> people's lack of knowledge about the plague and its remedies and counter fake assumptions:

Seeing the calamity to continue, and the infatuation of the Vulgar to be such still, as to suffer themselves to be deluded by every frivolous prescriptions physick, and persuasion of ignorant men, I have here undertaken to rectifie their understanding, and to show them there is means in nature both for the cure and preservation from this disease.<sup>369</sup>

He adds that his intentions are "to give some few, short and perspicuous rules whereby every one may know how to cure himself and his family with a small charge"<sup>370</sup> and that its reader "shall find nothing but truth in this paper"<sup>371</sup>, his aim being "in the publick good"<sup>372</sup>. But behind presumed pure and uninterested intentions, Garencières sounds in fact very little different from those he condemns, advertising himself as the one detaining the real knowledge, but also using marketing techniques to promote the product he praises. Indeed, the author finally reveals *the* antidote everyone should use and which is "so much celebrated by Galen and so much authorized by the

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364. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

365. *Ibid.*

366. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

367. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

368. *Ibid.*, Epistle Deditatory.

369. *Ibid.*

370. *Ibid.*

371. *Ibid.*

372. *Ibid.*

constant experience of all subsequent ages”<sup>373</sup>: the Treacle of Andromachus (also called Venice Treacle). Our suspicion of interested intentions from Garençières turn true in the conclusion of his writing, where he implies to be looking for employment:

The short compass of three sheets of paper admitting no more, I shall conclude, assuring the readers, that I have said nothing here, but what is most true, and I am able to justify by reason and experience, as those will find, who shall be pleased to employ me.<sup>374</sup>

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373. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

374. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Now, to get back to the three-arc-notion evoked in the introduction of this chapter (opportunity, rumour, despair), we can perhaps lay out one precise example that illustrates perfectly the point we are trying to make. One known story is the anecdote of the “Four Thieves Vinegar”, which goes as follows: during a plague infection in London, a constable of London had ran across four robbers stealing a corpse on the street. When asked about the risk of infection from the pestilential body, the thieves responded that they actually felt safe thanks to the vinegar and herbs they had rubbed themselves with beforehand. The word of that potential preventive spread, and in a few days, London apothecaries were selling the “four thieves vinegar”, advertised as the latest antidote. With no surprise, sales were hasty and after the epidemic, this potion even stayed a long time on the market. However, the presence of this story in earlier writings shows that this anecdote did not date back to the Great Plague of London as Defoe’s *Journal* claimed, but rather to a previous epidemic in Italy.<sup>375</sup> More generally, what is striking regarding the medical world and marketplace is the absolute mushrooming of ways of cures and preventives parallel to the mushrooming of supposed medical actors. The Great Plague unquestionably turned out to be a great opportunity for individuals to take advantage of the global situation of panic and distress; and the idea of frenzy introduced itself as much regarding the profusion of actors and cures among the London medical marketplace, as much as regarding the rush of the distressed and helpless Londoners to avoid or cure the frightful plague, at all costs.

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375. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 112.



## **PART FOUR**

### **The plague and its effects**



## Chapter 10. The burden of death and destruction

Besides the certain material disturbance the city of London found itself plunged into in regards to the way the medical marketplace and its actors took advantage of a frightened people, it must be understood that the disease was more than a grotesque ground to acquire economic gains or renown on, and that plague outbreaks around the world and throughout History were always synonyms of a shift in society, primarily triggered by the destructive complexion of this affliction. “A plague is a formidable enemy, and is armed with terrors that every man is not sufficiently fortified to resist, or prepared to stand the shock against”.<sup>376</sup>

### 1. Death en masse

The month of July exemplified a turn in the deadly 1665 epidemic. To take the example of the widely infected densely populated parish of Saint Margaret Westminster where the number of deceased in the bills would usually come near to ten or twenty lives, the death toll during the epidemic actually came to reach more than four hundred deaths, in this very month only.<sup>377</sup> By mid-September, the prospect of death was such that Londoners would desperately wonder if they would survive another week, as death was so close, and everywhere; at every corner street.<sup>378</sup> *In London's Plague Sore Discovered*<sup>379</sup>, E.N. expresses the dreadful destruction of families during this dismal period: “Yea, Mother, Father, Sister, also Brother, do daily see the ruin of each other; and little babes which at the breast do lye, amongst the rest do often gasp and dye, Whilst grieved mothers over them do mourn, till angry death do them as good a turn”.<sup>380</sup> Between August and October, no less than 50,000 souls had passed,<sup>381</sup> and the general bill for the year 1665 concluded on listing 97,300 deaths, among which 68 600 had been

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376. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 183.

377. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 118-119.

378. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

379. Full name : *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution : Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague.*

380. E., N. *London's Plague-Sore Discovered. or, Some serious Notes and Suitable Considerations Upon the Present Visitation at London Wherein is Something by Way of Lamentation, Information, Expostulation, Exhortation and Caution: Whereunto is Annexed, A Never-Failing Antidote Against the Plague.* London, 1665, p. 5.

381. Vitaux, Jean. *Histoire de la peste*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, p. 157.

triggered by the plague. Now, this number should not be taken for granted. Particularly due to the thousands of unidentified bodies buried without records and to wrong death diagnostics, historians rather agree to say that the death toll in 1665 preferably climbed to 110,000. In 1666, the Bills of Mortality claimed 2,000 plague deaths, but again, the number is likely incomplete: in fact to the same reasons we just evoked was added another factor of number fallibility, the Great Fire of London in which certain parish records were lost. The following year in 1667, only thirty five people were listed as dead from the plague in London. In 1668, fourteen, and in 1669, but two.<sup>382</sup>

To measure the weight of death during the Great Plague; by mid-August, the death toll was such that burials initially rendered at night only were now carried out at any time of the day or night.<sup>383</sup> The parish of Cripplegate was hit so hard by the outbreak that the next year, the churchyard had to close down. In fact, it was fully booked for seven years.<sup>384</sup> And when the plague abated in London, and that the city undertook a massive sanitation of households, hundreds of abandoned lonesome dead corpses were found lying down on beds or floors, and had to be taken out with the help of a shovel.<sup>385</sup> Economically speaking, most of the spending was connected with death and passing: bells and ropes had to be constantly replaced due to the constant ringing of them. Shelters had to be paid for in every churchyard to host the undertakers and the searchers who needed to stay away from the rest of the population. The burials of the poorest had to be dealt by parishes. Little items like candles that lit the night for gravediggers, or burial shrouds had to be disbursed. Fortunately, insane amounts of money came from the countryside and the rich who generously donated to help London and its poor, as well as themselves for they thought charity would weigh in their favour when the hand of God decides who to keep on earth and who to join him or his rival. However, expenses were so important that the City Piggy Bank seemed drilled.<sup>386</sup> In the early summer 1665, we were already calling the present epidemic a “Great Plague of London”: the perspective of the outbreak was set before it even ended. The final

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382. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 259.

383. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

384. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

385. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. *Sciences et techniques* 229, p. 136.

386. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 118-119.

dimension of the *the* will be added later, when it was almost clear the 1665 plague outbreak in London was the greatest and its ultimate one.<sup>387</sup>

## 2. A violent and dehumanizing death

Not only was the mortality rate was extremely high (60% to 90% for the bubonic plague)<sup>388</sup>, but the disease was extremely violent, sudden, and painful. In a passage where he puts the focus on the plague and its symptoms, H.F. makes an unbearable description of the way it affected individuals when it stroke:

The swellings, which were generally in the neck or groin, when they grew hard, grew so painful that it was equal to the most exquisite torture; and some not able to bear the torment threw themselves out at windows or shot themselves or otherwise made themselves away, and I saw several dismal objects of that kind. Others, unable to contain themselves, vented their pain by incessant roarings; and such loud and lamentable cries were to be heard, as we walked along the streets, that would pierce the very heart to think of, especially when it was to be considered that the same dreadful scourge might be expected every moment to seize upon ourselves.<sup>389</sup>

He goes on, evoking the “innumerable stories”<sup>390</sup> that were heard of people who “died without warning”<sup>391</sup>, instantly dropping dead in the streets or in markets. And besides the death the plague brought by its infection, the narrator also mentions the collateral damage the sickness caused.

Every day, people, in the rage of the distemper, or in the torment of their swellings, which was indeed intolerable, running out of their own government, raving and distracted, and oftentimes laying violent hands upon themselves, mothers murdering their own children in their lunacy; some dying of mere grief as a passion, some of mere fright and surprise, without any infection at all; others frightened into idiotism and foolish distractions, some into despair and lunacy, others into melancholy madness.<sup>392</sup>

Dying from the plague, in a place where the latter had already installed and was striking widely, was synonymous – besides fear and pain – with strong dehumanization

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387. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

388. Tames, Richard. *Great Plague and Fire – London in Crisis*. London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1998. Oxford, Turning Points in History, p. 8.

389. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 54.

390. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

391. *Ibid.*

392. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

and humiliation. No more proper individual burials for the noblemen, magistrates or clergymen (except for a few lucky ones), who largely found themselves carried in the same carts as peasants, thieves and the wicked; and threw down gruesome collective pits.<sup>393</sup> Religious rituals, though sometimes maintained at the beginning of the epidemic, were hardly witnessed when the outbreak grew big. At St. Margaret Westminster, deaths were so numerous that the count was impossible to hold. Therefore, dead bodies without names, or simply last names of families without the number of members were registered. Entries like “Ann Smith and her children”<sup>394</sup>, or “buried in the morning”<sup>395</sup> were recorded as well. This sense of anonymity added to dehumanization. People died in indifference. On that note, Pepys made an entry in his journal, mentioning how the constant sight and closeness with death gradually made Londoners less and less sensible to it, condemning himself as he could not even react to seeing dead corpses on the street any more for he had come across so many. This disease, he says, “is making us more cruel to one another than we are to dogs”.<sup>396</sup>

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. presses the notion of indifference and points out the absence of remembrance for the dead, as the living started returning to London in the winter.

The people being thus returned, as it were, in general, it was very strange to find that, in their inquiring after their friends, some whole families were so entirely swept away that there was no remembrance of them left. Neither was anybody to be found to possess or show any title to that little they had left; for in such cases what was to be found was generally embezzled and purloined, some gone one way, some another.<sup>397</sup>

Overall, September was "the most dreadful month"<sup>398</sup>, according to Defoe's hero. “The confusion among the people, especially within the city at that time was inexpressible. The terror was so great”<sup>399</sup>. He mentions the official number of deaths as being of 40,000 in just five weeks (from August 22 to September 26), before explaining

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393. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 74.

394. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 179-181.

395. *Ibid.*

396. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

397. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 179.

398. *Ibid.*, p. 135-136.

399. *Ibid.*

how this figure is, again, "deficient"<sup>400</sup>. The fact that no one exactly knows how many people lost their lives from the plague during the outbreak generates much mystery. There is no record of a part of the calamity, there is no remembrance, adding, again, dehumanization, humiliation and indifference.

### 3. The plague's destructive dimension and its objects

Now, it is perhaps of interest, to better understand the material manifestation and magnitude of the dreadful scope of death and destruction in London, to take a look at its symbolic objects. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the narrator makes a ghastly testimony of the dead carts travelling the streets and bringing corpses to their graves, describing an "awful"<sup>401</sup> vision, "full of terror"<sup>402</sup>, for people were all lying on one another, sometimes half naked, rich and poor together with no difference, all ready to be thrown away like garbage.<sup>403</sup> To accommodate the deceased passed en masse, several pits were dug from the beginning of the summer. H.F. takes the examples of Whitechapel where the plague was raging to depict their scale. "Into these pits they had perhaps fifty or sixty bodies each, then they made larger holes, wherein they buried all that the cart brought in a week, which, by the middle to the end of August, came to from 200 to 400 a week."<sup>404</sup> But by the end of the summer, "the plague raging in a dreadful manner"<sup>405</sup>, the pits were overcrowded, and the digging of another "terrible pit"<sup>406</sup>, rather described as a "dreadful gulf"<sup>407</sup> by H.F. was ordered. It was thought the latter would supply for a month or more. But opened the 6<sup>th</sup> September, the hole was full by the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>408</sup> By then, the six feet rule was not respected any more.<sup>409</sup> What Londoners knew as "pitts" were called "tumultuary burials" by The Guildhall and symbolized a rupture in human civility. It is hard to know exactly how many of these pits were graves to Londoners in 1665 and 1666, and how many bodies were thrown down them. In the parish of Cripple-gate, really affected by the infection, the plague pits of Finsbury Field

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400. *Ibid.*

401. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 46.

402. *Ibid.*

403. *Ibid.*

404. *Ibid.*, p. 43-44.

405. *Ibid.*

406. *Ibid.*

407. *Ibid.*

408. *Ibid.*

409. The six feet rule declares that in times of plague, dead bodies should be buried at least six feet down to avoid any contamination of the soil or pestilential effluvia.

are said to have held 2,200 corpses. In fact, those pits were a solution to the lack of place in the overcrowded London, but in a time-space where religion and its rituals thrive, they embodied an affliction to the religious integrity and honour of Londoners who could not offer an honourable enough burial to their deceased loved. However, though the disease made no difference in terms of targets, the treatments of burials were relatively still different according to economic and social class:<sup>410</sup> a part of the noble class would have the chance to be buried in individual coffins and graves, and the lucky poor would sometimes get a single coffin for the whole family. Those passed in pest houses were those first threw down plague pits, which sometimes had to be dug out of vacant land purchased by the city for space was lacking everywhere.<sup>411</sup>

Besides the pits, another key object was definitely the bells that deeply embodied a connection between death and time. The bells (in each parish) were ringing for every new death. To measure its symbolic nature and how death took over London; in the Parish of Cripplegate, by the 25<sup>th</sup> July, there died more than 550 people a week, so the bell that was constantly ringing just literally stopped ringing.<sup>412</sup> What connected time and death as well was how organized the weeks were in London. On the first Wednesday of each month, people fasted and collected money for the poor. On Sundays, Londoners gathered in churches for special plague services. On Thursdays, they went out to consult the Bills of Mortality, in hopes of seeing them decrease.<sup>413</sup> The Bills of Mortality, most relevant object of death during plague times were weekly bills that listed deaths and causes of death for each parish. Though a trace of a similar concept can be traced back to 1519 in London, they will only be printed and widely shared around town from 1593. The Bills of Mortality now embody a key source for historians who study the plagues in London's history.<sup>414</sup> To write one of the main references for this present memoir, the authors of *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year* confided to their readers. While going through the archives of the Bills of

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410. There is no general rule on that point. Difference of burials depended on how impacted was the concerned parish.

411. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 188-190.

412. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 62.

413. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 128.

414. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. *Sciences et techniques* 229, p. 73.

Mortality and seeing “row after row of victim’s names”<sup>415</sup>; they were faced with “a sense of the immensity of the calamity”<sup>416</sup> which “affected either of [them] strongly”<sup>417</sup>.

It is manifest, the disease of the plague holds a particular place among the other infectious illnesses, on account of the way it exceptionally and singularly wrecked the people's lives, souls, and society. Throughout History, the plague has always been perceived as one of the par excellence burden of humankind, "the most terrible enemy in the world"<sup>418</sup>. To French Guy de Chauliac, Pope Clément VI's doctor, "none of the diseases equal the plague. Because the others occupy a region, that one the whole world. The others are curable in some way, that one is not".<sup>419</sup><sup>420</sup> In fact, the very etymology of the word, from the Latin *pestis* means "burden".<sup>421</sup> The plague is a scourge. So much that the word *plague* has even become a synonymous with the word burden and can be used as such in the English language. To carry on with etymological note, at the beginning of the epidemic in London, numerous key words like "the sickness"<sup>422</sup>, "the distemper"<sup>423</sup>, "the infection"<sup>424</sup>, or "the contagion"<sup>425</sup> would be heard around town, and everyone knew what it referred to. Generic words that initially designated an illness were forever associated to the plague, *the* disease, *the* one that was feared most.

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415. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, preface, XIX.

416. *Ibid.*

417. *Ibid.*

418. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 104.

419. Personal translation from French.

420. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 8.

421. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 14.

422. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 63.

423. *Ibid.*

424. *Ibid.*

425. *Ibid.*

## Chapter 11. A deconstruction of society

As during all tough episodes in History, the Great Plague modified the social fabric of London by wrecking a time-place, and became the scene of primitive reactions among which the flight and the increase of criminality appeared prominent.

### 1. Human reactions: a drive for self-conservation

With a burden so destructive and appalling as the plague, the traditional cultural and religious conducts of acceptance of death were altered, and the norm turned into the gut and primitive reaction of escaping at all costs.<sup>426</sup> In fact, to French historian Pierre Chaunu, the threshold of the intolerable for an infectious disease lays at a mortality rate of at least 50%. A figure well exceeded in times of plague where the polish of civility gives way to a driving determination for self conservation.<sup>427</sup> In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the narrator makes numerous accounts of people escaping shut up houses when the watchmen are gone on errands. To him, the shutting up of houses, key measure during plague outbreaks in London served “more to make the people desperate and drive them to such extremities as that they would break out at all adventures”<sup>428</sup>. Humans are comparable to animals. When entrapped, they get into survival mode and can get physical if they feel like their own safety is at risk. And when the danger is so close, reactions follow. In houses where entire families were locked in when a single member was infected were often heard “the most dismal shrieks and outcries of the poor people, terrified, and even frightened to death, by the sight of the condition of their dearest relations, and by the terror of being imprisoned as they were”<sup>429</sup>. We can only imagine the dichotomy of feelings relatives must have felt in witnessing their loved ones being caught by the plague.

The prospect of death being closer than ever for the sick and the sound, it was witnessed among the population a certain will to accomplish what needed to be accomplished before death. A precipitated series of last moves at different scales. On the legal level, people hurried to settle scores expeditiously, hastening ongoing judicial

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426. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 49.

427. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

428. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 37.

429. *Ibid.*, p. 41.



affairs.<sup>430</sup> The imminence of death also prompted the people to prepare their will, but many flaws were observed during this process, due to the cease of the normal execution of the procedure. The presence of a legal notary as well as that of witnesses being complex in times of plague, the last wishes of the dying were often collected by the closest person, usually a member of the family, or a nurse. It is useless to specify that many did not respect the victim's testament and granted themselves the goods intended to the rightful heirs, and that deprived families made the fortune of lawyers after each epidemic.<sup>431</sup> Besides writing testaments, seeing death approaching, the sick hurried to complete the last sacraments, distraught at the idea of passing before them.<sup>432</sup> Among these death related actions, was remarked a steep increase of marriages and births during and after plague outbreaks; which were actually encouraged by the authorities to restore a normal demography.<sup>433</sup>

## 2. Chaos and disorder in the city: a decadent society

During the Great Plague, a massive increase of criminality was witnessed, wreaking more chaos in London. After dignity in death was taken away from Londoners, many tried to get it back, defying the law. Some wealthy congregants in Cripplegate took up the tiles of the sanctuary and buried their dead themselves. In Greenwich, Pepys witnessed a clandestine cortège following a deceased relative all the way up to the grave and described it as “the madness of the town”<sup>434</sup>. And though the public access to pits were forbidden by a strict order; H.F. accounts of “delirious”<sup>435</sup> individuals “that were infected and near their end”<sup>436</sup> throwing themselves in alive. But the main acts of criminality were certainly the robberies that massively occurred in houses left vacant by departed owners, who either fled to the countryside or passed from plague. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the narrator attests of the wickedness of those whose “avarice was so strong”<sup>437</sup> and whose “hearts [were] so hardened, in the midst of

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430. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 83.

431. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste?: Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 39.

432. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

433. *Ibid.*, p. 74-75.

434. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 195.

435. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 44-45.

436. *Ibid.*

437. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

such a calamity, as to rob and steal”<sup>438</sup>. He adds, “yet certain it is that all sorts of villainies, and even levities and debaucheries, were then practised in town as openly as ever”<sup>439</sup>. Not only did the people steal houses, but nurses and watchmen could not be trusted either according to Defoe’s narrator, for some would hasten people’s ends instead of caring for them, in order to take off as early as possible:

We had at this time a great many frightful stories told us of nurses and watchmen who looked after the dying people (that is to say, hired nurses, who attended infected people), using them barbarously, starving them, smothering them, or by other wicked means hastening their end, that is to say, murdering of them. And watchmen being set to guard houses that were shut up, when there has been but one person left, and perhaps that one lying sick, that they have broke in and murdered that body, and immediately thrown them out into the dead cart; and so they have gone scarce cold to the grave.<sup>440</sup>

It appears that, according to H.F.’s descriptions, besides indulging in criminal actions, a part of the population started at some point to become much undisciplined in respecting protective measures, in opposition to the shattering fear that took possession of them at the beginning of the outbreak. Death was so certain that they did not bother any more. One would say “I do not ask you how you are, or say how I am. It is certain we shall all go: so ‘tis no matter who is sick and who is sound”<sup>441</sup>. And in this way, the people became “bold and venturous”<sup>442</sup>, they were “no more shy of one another, or restrained within doors, but went anywhere and everywhere, and began to converse”<sup>443</sup>, switching from a dire position of distrust, to another level of despair, led by desolation and resignation. Stories were heard of respectable women indulging in all sorts of debaucheries,<sup>444</sup> or worse, “raving and distracted, killing their own children [...] for the danger of immediate death to ourselves took away all bowels of love, all concern for one another”<sup>445</sup>. It had become so common to encounter dead bodies in the streets that Londoners started stopping paying attention to them.<sup>446</sup> To Defoe’s city man, “this was a

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438. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

439. *Ibid.*

440. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

441. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

442. *Ibid.*

443. *Ibid.*

444. Mollaret, Henri, and Jacqueline Brossollet. *Pourquoi la peste ? : Le rat, la puce et le bubon*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994. Sciences et techniques 229, p. 136.

445. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 83.

446. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

time when every one's private safety lay so near them that they had no room to pity the distress of others"<sup>447</sup>.

In *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*, Françoise Hildesheimer makes an interesting point about the source of this social disorganisation. Opposed to low progression infectious diseases (like leprosy) that strike a minority of the population and create long term groups of rejected outcasts, the plague hits hard, kills a lot, and strikes fast, triggering an inevitable wealth based individualism.<sup>448</sup> In fact, the outbreak plays an essential role in unveiling the popular awareness of a cleavage between the rich and the poor a little more, ineluctably paving the way to social mayhem. The city, Hildesheimer observes, is the obvious scene of these tensions, for it gathers a dominated working class, and a middle to higher dominant bourgeoisie. The first, she says, is forced to be submitted to the violence of the epidemic, while the sanitary fight – exerted by the ones in power by violent means of force – is initiated by the second, more concerned in protecting itself and its possessions than in promoting a solidarity among the population. The experience of the epidemic, she concludes, only contributed to the recognition by the population of the gradual switch in the structure of society. From societies relying on orders and honour, European communities grew into confesses wealth based ones.<sup>449</sup>

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447. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

448. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 81.

449. *Ibid.*, p. 84-86.

### 3. Violence of the epidemic: an emotional and psychological shock

This general disarray triggered by a plague outbreak has often been compared to that of a war. In times of plague, society would instantly fall into a war-time economy where people lacked the financial means to provide for themselves and had to be supplied and fed by an exterior source.<sup>450</sup> Addressed to God, a famous quote says "Libera nos a peste, fame, et bello" ("Deliver us from plague, hunger and war"). Here, all three of these religiously imposed calamities seem to be equally painfully experienced by the people.<sup>451</sup> Like war, the epidemic, from the Greek *Epidēmos*, weighs on the people.<sup>452</sup> Like war, it is synonymous with immediate and mass death. Like war, the plague comes sometimes unexpected, smashes everything in its path, and shatters a time-place by disrupting the normal order and functioning of society. The violence of the epidemic also holds in the violence of its attempts of curing, whether practical or chemical. In fact, to that parallel of burden like feature, the link between wars and epidemics has also been made in relation to the way those two fields constituted a scene for medical experimentation and progress, in particular in regards to the development of surgical practice.<sup>453</sup>

Indisputably, the violence of a plague outbreak constituted a deep and unrivalled emotional shock in the concerned population. It involved numerous modifications in the normal operation of society, which made the people feel like in a parallel dimension. Regular activities stopped. The city once so noisy and active became silent. Deceased people were not deceased people any more, but anonymous bodies. Individuals would witness their whole families falling in a space of a couple of days. All conditions were gathered to trigger a profound mental imbalance and psychological stress on the population. Unruly, the plague outbreak would imposed a temporary social terror; and was able to drive individuals to extremities of frenzy. Furthermore, Hildesheimer points out that the climate of the plague only aggravated the psychological feature of seventeenth-century Britain where emotion predominates from reason and the rational. Hence, the concept of infectious disease outbreak unconditionally paves the way for dreadful stories, collective terrors, mad rumours and groundless accusations.<sup>454</sup> In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. mentions in fact frightful accounts (or tales) to depict the distress of the people during this period.

450. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

451. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

452. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

453. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

454. *Ibid.*, p. 151-152.

I could dwell a great while upon the calamities of this dreadful time, and go on to describe the objects that appeared among us every day, the dreadful extravagances which the distraction of sick people drove them into, how the streets began now to be fuller of frightful objects, and families to be made even a terror to themselves. But after I have told you, as I have above, that one man being tied in his bed, and finding no other way to deliver himself, set the bed on fire with his candle (which unhappily stood within his reach), and burned himself in bed; and how another, by the insufferable torment he bore, danced and sung naked in the streets, not knowing one ecstasy from another – I say, after I have mentioned these things, what can be added more? What can be said to represent the misery of these times more lively to the reader, or to give him a perfect idea of a more complicated distress?<sup>455</sup>

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455. Defoe, Daniel. *History of the Plague in London*. 1722. Milton Keynes, Dodo Press, 2007, p. 134.

## Chapter 12. The body and the spiritual dimension

When we try to understand the origin and operation of the notions of fear and frenzy during the Great Plague both in regards to its sources and its consequences, we realize that everything can be traced back to a duality between the physical body and the immaterial soul.

### 1. The body and the scientific dimension of the plague

Before evoking the idea of the body in regards to the plague, it is perhaps smarter to first recap a few scientific points. The plague bacillus is one of the most deleterious. It leads to cell necrosis, stoppers the capillaries, and infiltrates lymph nodes.<sup>456</sup> This dire process leads the body to undertake a relentless fight for life with the bacteria, driving the body to reveal external signs of the infection among which the appearance of a strong fever, and that of buboes (usually discernible within three days).<sup>457</sup> The image of the bubo (also often called tokens or carbuncles in seventeenth-century London) played an important role in the way the disease was portrayed throughout History. Because of the regular plague outbreaks in London and the recurrent representation of this infection through writings and paintings, every Londoner knew what a bubo looked like, and most importantly what disease it symbolized. In fact, it was the one external sign that differentiated the plague from other diseases. But despite the somewhat familiarity Londoners had in 1665 with the pestilence, the sight of those buboes was always frightening and puzzling. They meant plague, which meant death. And the disease startled the people so much that for long, only very few dared taking the risk to study it from a close sight.<sup>458</sup> The presence of buboes led to unbearable pain for the sick. And emergency decree after emergency decree, Sir John Lawrence, Lord Mayor of London understood that containing the sickness was out of his power, shifting his goal to rather try and ease the suffering of those stricken.<sup>459</sup> But what would strike the spectators of the infection, Hildesheimer notes, was not the brutal soreness of the bodies; but the way the latter physically altered. The internal fight within the body exposed itself outside, by scarring the flesh with

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456. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 16.

457. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 282-283.

458. *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

459. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

tokens and ulcers; but also by the issuance of pestilential exhalations due to the discharge of serous fluids, blood and pus. The body of a plague infected individual was everything monstrous, characterized by the foul processes of decomposition and putrefaction.<sup>460</sup>

But although the body seems to hold an obvious key role in the way the disease under study was portrayed and interpreted, it seems that the place of the body comes only second. What is more relevant of the vision of the plague by the people, is not how the disease altered the body, but how it affected the *bodies*. In fact, classical writings on the plague seem to always put forward the fact that the disease affects a crowd, a group, and leaves very little room for the precise description of symptoms from individual to individual. As if the plague was so deleterious, so destructive that it could not incarnate itself into individuals. Hence, the writings on infectious diseases rather discussed the collective interpretations, experiences and discourses, as if the plague primarily attacked society as a whole, before attacking the bodies.<sup>461</sup> In fact there are very few testimonies or descriptions of a victim's last hours. The plague did not leave room for anyone to share on paper what they were going through, and the mortality rate being exceptionally high, few, again, had the opportunity to survive and share their experience of the plague. Hence, the majority of society stayed silent – adding much mystery and mysticism to the topic –, all the more so as reading and writing was limited to a minority. On that note, French Historian Bartholomé Bennassar wrote: “what is the state of mind of the sick? What feeling overwhelms them most? There is nothing available for us to understand there states of mind and feelings. We are lacking the diary [...] of a sick individual. I am writing in singular, but it is the plural that I wish”.<sup>462</sup>

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460. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 58.

461. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

462. *Ibid.*, p. 58. Translation by myself from the French.

## 2. The soul and religion: a quest for salvation

The way the plague was interpreted, addressed and experienced by the Londoners in 1665 could never be discussed without understanding the weight religion played in this community, constantly pursuing God's eternal salvation (religious processions, worshipping of the protective Saints...), albeit for a part of the population. In fact, during the Great Plague, as we mentioned earlier, a significant segment of the population deviated from the religion's strict habits, to devoting themselves to non-orthodox worships (use of charms, superstitious practices, consulting of witches...). To Hildesheimer, this type of rejection of the religious institution's rules and morals – though rare, poorly viewed and frowned upon – was the common result of the disarray and helplessness felt by the people in a time of pandemic, when it seemed like God would never help. In a way, to an exceptional situation, exceptional resorts were needed. But this reaction was reprehensible by the Church. Losing faith in God was a terrible thing. Hence, the religious establishment always tried to force reason upon the distressed people, by constantly reminding them that it was them (as a society) who were responsible for the calamity that was falling upon them, and that pursuing sinful behaviors would only pull them away a little more from a potential redemption. In fact, the situation was so extreme that what was asked was not the recovery of the sick, considered lost anyway; but the early discontinuation of the outbreak; that would be triggered by the necessary public penance arising from the obvious nature of the collective responsibility for the origin of the calamity.<sup>463</sup>

Hence, the Church took advantage of that terror of death to make it an educational and theological one: religion positions the community as guilty, but at the same time, implements a certain sense of reassurance and comfort. In fact, although the people are responsible and sinful, the Church fosters the idea of a possible redemption by God, either in the cessation of the epidemic, or in the after-death salvation. Consequently, by providing an efficient explanation and response to the plague outbreak, the religious institution substitutes to the collective and irrational fear of the unknown, a theological fear placed under the thumb of an angered God awaiting for the submission of its sinful subjects. The message of the religious actors is clear: the burdens that materially afflict the people down below cannot be compared to the torment and misery of hell that awaits for the sinners. In other words, the death of the

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463. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 111-112.



body is less severe and fearful than that of the soul. Hence, Hildesheimer remarks, the plague can easily be considered the marker of the unveiling of a system where the hope for redemption compensates the fragility of the earthly existence.<sup>464</sup>

### 3. An overall duality between the below and the above

After having gone through the bodily and the religious aspects of death, we cannot but discuss the obvious duality that exists between these two angles. When talking about infectious diseases in History, two types of death can be distinguished, both addressed and experienced differently through the Christian perspective. The first category is the death triggered by a low developing disease like consumption or leprosy, that leaves time for the ill to prepare and achieve the last religious rituals before passing. Opposed to that longer death, there is the more feared sudden and violent death that occurs with the plague, which leaves very little time and energy for the sick to complete the last rites, and which embodies a real and potent apprehension among the collective psyche.<sup>465</sup> Most importantly prevails the idea that the body embodies the visible sign of the condemnation of the soul. In public imaginary, the plague being a punishment for the sins of humans, the sick individual is often unconsciously associated to the sin. Consequently, the disease has a moral connotation; generating the concept of a guilty body. The plague afflicted person is more than a plague afflicted person, it is a social character.<sup>466</sup>

Hence the association of the doctor and the priest at the dying's bedside. On that pairing, Hildesheimer makes a taunt: "Is not the first duty of the doctor to talk his patient into religious confession? And the therapeutic virtues of the Extreme Unction; are they not recognized?"<sup>467</sup>. In fact, religion and medicine were long associated, often bound to the concept of charity. Hospitals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were not public and secular places where surgery and straight medical care was administrated. They were institutions operated by the Church under the thumb of the religious charitable ideal.<sup>468</sup> Further in that idea of charity being the bridge between religion and medicine, we must evoke the public charity that occurred during the Great Plague, that bound the assisting with the assisted in the effort for public salvation. The people donated, not in the hope

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464. *Ibid.*

465. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

466. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

467. *Ibid.*, p. 114-115.

468. *Ibid.*

to materially ease and repel the outbreak (that was beyond their scope), but in the hope to be redeemed and obtain a salvation from God. In a way, the people donated to God, through the means of the people. Once again, the religious discourse placed the Church as a comforting figure that knew how to address the calamity and was armed against the death of the soul, overpowering the royal and the medical discourse.<sup>469</sup>

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469. *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

Demographically, economically, socially and psychologically, on an individual level as well as a collective one, the plague constituted – to say the least – the source of a temporary disorder; by triggering a deep trauma at all scales. Destructive and fearsome, and through its divine dimension, the plague surpassed the mortals, going beyond what was conceivable and manageable for the people below, and was experienced as a calamitous burden, weighing on the population and only potentially manageable on a religious undertaking. In that sense, the way the outbreak was addressed paradoxically opposed the temporal material and physical emergency caused by the abrupt and raging nature of the plague, to the hope of the above everlasting salvation pursued by the distressed people, who by force of circumstance lost faith in the earthly life to indulge in a comforting divine devotion.



# CONCLUSION

To dive into our subject, we have first gone through the material turmoil and the practical chaos that had held sway in the city of London when the plague broke out, and after the big wave of fleeing Londoners swept the capital. Then, we have explored the different theories for the origins of the plague at that time and the will for Londoners to utterly justify the sickness, and have uncovered that all sources could be traced back to religion and God, which was relevant to unveil and unravel the notions under study. After addressing the different theories, we delved into the frantic world of the medical marketplace driven by the fear of the people of London where we discussed the opportunistic behaviours as well as the distress of the city dwellers. Finally, we took a step back to analyse the bigger picture and went through the destructive effects of the plague on men and society and studied the duality that existed between the bodily experience of the plague and religion. Now, it is perhaps finally time to address the interrogations that led the writing of this present paper.

With the help of the complementarity of primary source documents of different natures, we have proven in this research work that the disease of the plague has unquestionably been embodying a chief and prime burden on touched communities and their societies throughout History. Inherent in this eternal scourge, the fear of the said plague exercises in accordance to the practical, psychological and spiritual means and dynamics available to the concerned population. Nevertheless, during plague epidemics, patterns remain similar. The disease frightens the people, shatters a time-place and triggers collective and individual delirium and deviance. But where does this fear come from? We can perhaps proceed to answer this interrogation by naming three material and factual starting points. First, it must be unambiguous that despite an early link made between dirt and disease, the said sickness and its operation remained fundamentally unknown to the world until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Intrinsically, what is obscure is a threat. Then, we must keep in mind that a death from the plague before the Pasteurian Revolution was very brutal – in the way that it was sudden as well as extremely painful and horrifying. Besides the individual terrible experience of death, it is needed to mention the collective degree: the plague killed masses of people in a flip of a switch. These practical elements had impact beyond. They altered the social, psychological and spiritual aspects of the experience of the plague. We discussed it earlier, death being inexorably entwined to religion and the plague being synonym of death, the religious

dimension was extremely crucial. The fear of death was not so much related to the awful physical experience of the latter (though we suppose that as the disease took men back to their most primitive states, the bodily experience should be taken into account when evoking the fear of the disease), but most importantly to the fear of the above: the idea of dying without the last sacraments and going to hell, at the time of the Great Plague in London represented an utmost dread for the population. One that contemporary laymen could never understand. The plague was the hand of God, which deeply influenced the way it was addressed and experienced. There was something fatal about the way Londoners handled the epidemic in 1665 – as their fate depended on God's will. Yet in reactions brought up in this paper, we identify a certain effort to utterly physically escape the plague, which could be interpreted as a form of tearing between their earthly lives and the eternal above. Between their bodies and their souls. Between Nature and Culture. Entwined to religion, the plague altered society, by corrupting the normal functioning of the latter. The plague deprived men of everything dear to them – including their humanity – and crushed every social standard meaningful to the seventeenth-century Londoners. As a response, the reactions often integrated in a frantic dynamic, characterized and led by the determination to save one's life and, or, one's soul at all costs. The plague, creating a parallel chaotic time-place, left Man faced with the most primal of his feelings, – fear – triggering a psychological and practical frenzy in an every man for himself environment.

By the beginning of the year 1666, the plague had abated in London.<sup>470</sup> Little did the city dwellers know that they had just experienced the last and deadliest bubonic plague outbreak in the British capital's History. For long, the plague remained a recurrent topic of conversation in London, relevant of the fear of potential new outbreaks. The plague lived on in the collective consciousness of the said community. Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, released after the 1720 plague of Marseilles kept popping up in London's bookstalls for decades with slight changes in the title and the text.<sup>471</sup> The disease under study remained a category in the bills of mortality until 1703 in the event of a new outbreak, but no more plague death was ever recorded again beyond 1679. The plague was done in London.<sup>472</sup> Two centuries later, the Pasteurian Revolution arose: the plague bacillus was uncovered along with its "ménage à quatre" –

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470. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 249-251.

471. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

472. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

the bacteria, the flea, the rat, and the Human.<sup>473</sup> But while the nineteenth-century medical discoveries allowed the lifting of the shadow of an ancient scourge, they embodied the start of a new era, perhaps more fearsome. That of a world of the invisible, of the disguised, defined by the omnipresence of billions of potentially harmful microbes. As an age of the obscure died out, another was dawning.<sup>474</sup>

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473. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

474. Hildesheimer, Françoise. *Fléaux et Société: De la Grande Peste au choléra (XIVe-XIXe siècle)*. Paris, Hachette, 1993. Carré d'Histoire, p. 28.

“This is the terrible enemy of mankind, that sends its arrows abroad by day and walks all stained with slaughter by night; that turns the vital into noxious air, that poisons the blood and kills us by our breath [...] Before it are beautiful gardens, crowded habitations and populous cities; behind it, unfruitful emptiness and howling desolation.”<sup>475</sup>

*The City Remembrancer, Being Historical Narratives of the Great Plague at London, 1665*, Guideon Harvey, 1769.<sup>476</sup>

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475. Moote, Lloyd, and Dorothy Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2004, p. 19.

476. Full title : *The City Remembrancer, Being Historical Narratives of the Great Plague at London, 1665; Great Fire, 1666; and Great Storm, 1703. To Which are Added, Observations and Reflections on the Plague in General; Considered in a Religious, Philosophical, and Physical View: With Historical Accounts of the Most Memorable Plagues, Fires, and Hurricane.*





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## APPENDIX

1. (p. 1) Pollard, Robert. "Two women lying dead in a London street during the great plague, 1665, one with a child who is still alive. Etching after R. Pollard II ." [1755-1838]. Etching 7,4 x 9,5 cm.

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