

## Pestilential Clouds: The Pamphlet and the Plague in Seventeenth-Century England

I want to add something to the bibliographic lexicon. I'm bothered by the sterilized terms of the catalogue, the terms that sacrifice poetry for precision, that pretend to be objective about information—terms like folio, quarto, octavo, duodecimo—and fields of knowledge like law, theology, medicine, and the arts. These terms lead us into a false sense of security that knowledge is dispassionate rather than charged and dangerous, something passively collected rather than actively used as a tool, a potential weapon. These terms fail to describe how violent it is to save some parts of history rather than others, what the struggle to survive feels like, or which feats of endurance and chance are involved.

I want to move toward treating books more like animals—schools, flocks, a coalition of cheetahs, a murder of crows, a flamboyance of flamingos—descriptive terms loaded with meaning (but also fairly democratic). Why not a bombast of books, or a plague of pamphlets?

To think in terms of plague links publication practices with

reception and circulation. It primes us to notice patterns of collapse between language and disease, insect and human, book and body, information and materiality; and it forces us to maintain historical continuity between biblical ways of thinking and condemning certain knowledge, and their application in the centuries following. I come at Susan Sontag's work *Against Interpretation* (1966)<sup>1</sup> and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989)<sup>2</sup>, from the opposite angle here: instead of working to deconstruct, I am interested in immersion, excessive exposure to the metaphors at hand to realize the work they're accomplishing.

There is a long tradition of describing words as plague, and describing books as carriers of contagion. In *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, Ernest B. Gilman shows that plague "is to be understood fundamentally as a language event."<sup>3</sup> Since medicine was linked so thoroughly with theology in the medieval period, bubonic plague, immoral behavior, and heretical belief were commonly connected in "plague discourse." It is a term to conjure past horrors, present and future threats; plague is a sign from an angry God; it is a visceral medical mystery; it is embodied, it is an analogy—but never any of these in isolation.

That's where Antonin Artaud comes in for me. He wrote about plague and the theater in 1938, in an essay that acts as a road map for those of us born in the twentieth century to walk back to an earlier time

and absorb one of its greatest fears. Artaud describes in horrific detail the decay of a plague-ridden body: "The gall bladder [...] is full, swollen to bursting with a black, viscous fluid [...] the blood in the arteries and the veins is also black and viscous [...] the injured lungs and brain blacken and grow gangrenous[...]"<sup>4</sup> To me, this reads like Thomas Edward in *Gangraena* when he describes the heretics of the 1640s: "every ingenious Reader may plainly behold the many Deformities and gret Spots of the Sectaries of these times, [...] Spots upon them discovering much malignity, rage & frensie, great corruption and infection."<sup>5</sup>

Artaud's essay is about turning crisis into a lens of analysis. He writes: "In the theatre as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element."<sup>6</sup> For me, focusing on the use of "plague" to describe certain information is a strange sun to illuminate the wider world of books, manuscripts, pamphlets, and texts, to understand how they are given value.

With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, plague imagery enjoyed a surge of application. Martin Nesvig catalogues the writing of Spanish Catholic censors about the need to control the trade in books between Spain and Mexico over the course of the sixteenth century. As the

censor Francesco Peña complains, print increases the risk of outbreak from prior limitations imposed by oral or even scribal communication: "because the living voices of heretics can scarcely fill one city, when books are easily transported to and fro, not only a city but kingdoms and provinces are infected."<sup>7</sup>

In England, this particular kind of moral panic heightens as the country plunges into civil war. There is a conventional understanding that the 1640s underwent an "explosion" of printed materials. However, historians have contested that there was not an explosion in paper, only in titles. That is, paper was redistributed towards printing shorter pamphlets over longer works. David Cressy links this informational compression to an increasing demand for news in the rapidly changing political environment of the time.<sup>8</sup> Within this environment, plague was found time and time again as a descriptive or an organizing principle for the messy, repetitive, replicating, viral nature of pamphlet warfare.

John Taylor's satirical poem *A Svvarme of Sectaries and Schismatiques* (1641) described pamphlets as "this Kingdome pestilence / I wish you goe, and drive the devils thence."<sup>9</sup> In Thomas Edward's *Gangraena*, he rants, "We have the plague of Egypt upon us, frogs out of the bottomless pit covering our land, coming into our houses, Bedchambers, Beds, Churches [...]"<sup>10</sup> As literature



professor Kristen Poole shows, "Anti-sectarian literature [of the time] is infested with figurative accounts of teeming bees, frogs, locusts, serpents, eels, and maggots. [...] Images of the swarm."<sup>11</sup> And these designations have continuing consequences for the histories we tell today. The radical, anti-sectarian swarms that Poole describes are largely missing from the story; their narratives too complex, and their ideas about liberty and property too dangerous (even today).

A disproportionate amount of condemnation gets leveled at the Quaker movement: a radical seventeenth-century group of religious visionaries and "enthusiasticks" who printed prolifically, from the very earliest days of their development during the 1650s. George Fox, their leader, promises in a 1653 pamphlet: "thou shalt see more Papers and more Printings, and as the immediat Spirit grows, there will be more abominacions, and filthiness layd open, and all Deceit will be discovered, and the Truth spread abroad."<sup>12</sup>

In 1655, Richard Sherlock, an anti-Quaker cleric, got to the heart of the image of their pamphlet-as-plague when he wrote "The canon of holy Scripture is transgressed and dissolv'd [...] by the superaddition of new Revelations." Their publications, he felt, actively undermined the Bible, "and the authority of God's Word is made null, and void."<sup>13</sup> Sherlock's "new Revelations"

are a direct reference to the last part of the Book of Revelations:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.<sup>14</sup>

I call this the Curse of St. John: if you add to the Book of Revelations, you will personally bring the plagues it foretells upon yourself. Excess breeds excess. Above all, this is a curse against readers. Only readers inspired by the book would dare mimic it by adding to its grim visions.

The belief that there is a wrong way to read or write—that certain texts are pestilential—engenders the opposite belief: that there is a definitive, clean, pure text. That tension haunts the Bible at every verse and has underwritten a history of bloodshed. Historically, it has created hierarchy in which certain writings fall nearer or farther in rank to the Bible's authoritative word.

Quaker spirituality was among those which completely disrupted the tradition. For Quakers, sanctity rested in the reading experience rather than the book itself. As Robert Barclay writes in a foundational work of Quaker doctrine: "The letter of the Scriptur is outward, of itself a dead thing."<sup>15</sup> Using the Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Barclay cites a scriptural passage that was a favourite in Quaker Pamphlets: "The letter killeth,

but the sprit giveth light." Quaker's referred to this reader-spirit as the "inner light" and I believe that understanding the violent impulse to suppress and censor that light (Quakers were executed, beaten, and imprisoned, their works were destroyed rather than preserved by authorities) illuminates the hierarchies of printed knowledge that still energize the histories we write today. But for Barclay, as for most Quaker authors, divinity was not logo-centric nor even libri-centric. Without people to read them, books were absolutely dead things, and I think it's time to recognize that they still are.

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This is an abridged version of a text by Brooke Sylvia Palmieri, based on a talk given in 2016, and their 2018 PhD, "Compelling Reading: The Circulation of Quaker Texts, 1650-1800." An expanded version is forthcoming with The Antinomian Press.

(<http://antinomianpress.org>)

[1] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

[2] Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

[3] Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[4] Antonin Artaud, "The Theatre and Its Double" in *Antonin Artaud, Collected Works Vol. 4*, trans. Victor Corti (London: John Calder, 1974).

[5] Thomas Edward, *Gangraena* (London: Printed for Ralph Smith, 1646).

[6] Artaud, "The Theatre and Its Double"

[7] Martin Nesvig, "Heretical Plagues and Censorship Cordons," *Church History*, Vol. 75 no. 1 (March 2006).

[8] See David Cressy, *England on Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[9] John Taylor, *A Swarme of Sectaries and Schismatiques* (London: Printed luckily, and may be read unhappily, betwixt hawke and buzzard, 1641).

[10] Edward, *Gangraena*.

[11] Kristen Poole, *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[12] George Fox and Richard Hubbert-home, *Truth's defence against the refined subtilty of the serpent...* (York: Printed for Thomas Wayt, 1653).

[13] Richard Sherlock, *The Quakers wilde questions objected...* (London: Printed by E. Cotes for R. Royston, 1655).

[14] Revelation 22:18-19: next line: "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

[15] Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity...* (Aberdeen?; s.n., 1678).