The Plaguy Body: Part I

The Plague, the Sickness – ‘A terible Enemie’

For all other Infirmitities, and maladies of the Body, goe simply in their owne Habit. . . . As the Goute passeth onely by the name of the Goute: So an Appoplex, an Ague, the Pox, Fistula, &c. But that dreadfull scourge . . . that sudden destroyer of Mankind: that Nimble executioner of the Divine Justice: (The Plague or Pestilence) hath for the singularity of the Terrors waiting upon it, This title; THE SICKNESSE.

Thomas Dekker, London Looke Backe (1630)

Looking back on the epidemics he had witnessed in London prior to 1630, the playwright and pamphleteer Thomas Dekker was in no doubt which sickness stood out from the rest in terms of the fear it aroused and the devastation it caused. The plague, the sickness (note the stress on the definite article in the above account), was characterized by the rapidity of its spread, high mortality and morbidity, its defiance of medicine, and the pain and horror of its signs and symptoms. These are now known to have been manifestations of the bacterial infection transmitted by the fleas of the black rat: bubonic plague – ‘A terible Enemie’ (London Looke Backe, sig. A4v).

In his earlier ‘plague pamphlets’ of 1603 and 1604, Dekker had graphically illustrated the external signs of this ‘purple plague’: ‘blew wounds’, bodies like ‘speckled marble’, ulcerous ‘running’ sores in groins and armpits, ‘carbuncles’ or ‘tokens’ on the skin. Indeed, after the major bubonic plague epidemic of 1563, all writers of plague pamphlets tended to be equally specific about the external signs of the horrific disease they were dealing with. William Bullein (A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence, 1564) de-
scribed the ‘foule bubo, antaxis and Carbuncles’, which appeared especially on the ‘side, head, neck, flanckes’. Simon Kellwaye (A Defensative against the Plague, 1593), likewise, detailed the ‘exterior Carbunkles and botches’ (f. 1r), and Thomas Lodge (A Treatise of the Plague, 1603) declared that the plague was ‘a popular and contagious sicknesse, for the most part mortall, wherein usually there appeare certaine Tumors, Carbuncles, or spottes, which the common people call Gods tokens’ (sig. B2v). He added, thoughtfully, that the plague was ‘engendred by a certaine and more secret meanes then all other sicknesses’ (sig. B3v). Sadly, the actual mechanism of this disease’s spread remained mysterious and the subject of much controversy until the late nineteenth century and this, together with its lurid skin manifestations and the fear it inspired, seems to have made it a particularly good vehicle for the type of ideological appropriation famously decried by the ancient poet Lucretius.

Certainly, as this chapter will show, the materialities of this devastating sickness – its signs, symptoms, routes of transmission, the characteristics of outbreaks – conditioned the fictions in which the early modern ‘plaguy’ body was enmeshed; however, something else was of immense importance – narrative tradition. Sander Gilman’s seminal work on disease representations has demonstrated the centrality of cultural heritage in making sense of new and incurable ‘plagues’. As my analysis of the physician Thomas Lodge’s medical treatise on the plague will reveal, accounts of this mysterious disease were steeped in layer upon layer of classical, biblical and native myth-making. It is this eclectic soup of competing and complementary narratives that shapes the cultural imaginary and ultimately determines the ideological appropriations of bubonic plague in the period under study. William Bullein’s accomplished literary–medical plague pamphlet of 1564, together with the densely metaphorical location in which it was situated, will form the focus of study of the sixteenth-century political deployments of the ‘plaguy’ body.

A ‘flea-byting’ affair: medical and social contexts of the plague

There are three forms of bubonic plague, which are all caused by the same bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. The commonest variety, transmitted to man by bites from the fleas of the black rat, has an incubation period of approximately six days and kills 60–80 per cent of its victims within eight days. Symptoms of the disease include a high temperature, headaches, vomiting, pain, delirium and coma. A blister forms at the site of the original flea-bite and develops into a gangrenous blackish carbuncle. The lymph nodes, especially in the groin, swell and suppurate forming the buboes