Shifting plagues

Whilst Bullein’s socially aspiring and reprehensible Medicus located the worst focus of the 1563 London plague in the ‘sluttishe, beastly people, that keepe their houses and lodynges uncleane . . . their labour and travaile immoderate’ (p. 51), the complete Dialogue conveys the opposite impression. A rich merchant and an affluent citizen fall victims to the pestilence, their sins as extortioners increasing their susceptibility to infection. Interestingly, no poor people catch the disease in the Dialogue, though they do suffer when their rich masters succumb to plague. Significantly, though, Medicus’ negative, judgemental account of the living conditions and habits of the ‘beastly people’ appears to anticipate dominant constructions of the ‘base sort’ in later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century élite discourses – particularly those of the Protestant establishment (in church, medicine and state). By putting such words into the mouth of a greedy, unpleas-ant, extortioner/physician, Bullein was undoubtedly highlighting, and expressing timely disapproval of, his society’s increasing tendency to identify the growing numbers of ‘have nots’ (the unemployed, immigrants, dis-banded soldiers, who were flocking to the capital) as the disease polluters and criminals of the metropolis – the burgeoning ‘plaguy body’ of early modern London.

A rhetoric of social division expressing anxiety about the ‘unruly poor’ was clearly gaining ground in this period, and by the early seventeenth century it was heavily impregnated with pestilence language and associations. King James’s Proclamations are particularly noteworthy in this respect. The ‘Proclamation for the due and speedy execution of the Statute against Rogues, Vagabonds, Idle, and dissolute persons’ (17 September 1603), for example, describes how the realm had been ‘much infected’ with these idle types in Elizabeth’s reign: its desired solution was to banish these
‘incorrigible and dangerous Rogues’ to ‘some place beyond the Seas’.1 ‘Dan-
gerous’ marginal types were becoming intimately linked to the spread of physical, moral and social ‘infection’, and in the King’s view they needed urgently to be expelled from the body of his kingdom. James and his Privy Council took a particular interest in the quest to move the ‘idle’ poor out of overcrowded tenements inside the City walls, claiming in further Proclamations that these ‘dangerous persons’ living in ‘small and strait Roomes’ spread the plague to other persons of a ‘principall’ quality; and issuing orders that any new houses within the walls must ‘not be inhabited but by persons of some abilitie’.2

Spatial-relations concepts are ‘embodied’ in various ways and contagious disease is often integrally involved in the definition of cultural boundaries, and the ordering of social spaces.3 Indeed, medical, topographical and social issues can sometimes be so tightly intermeshed that they are impossible to tease apart. As the locutions of the Proclamations reveal, early modern plague was deeply implicated in the process of distinguishing between the worthy ‘insiders’, and the contaminating ‘others’ requiring forcible extraction from the City and the nation: epidemics provide an excellent excuse and a good rationale for the re-ordering of ‘bodies’.4 The first section of ‘The Plaguy Body, Part II’ will examine the geographic, demographic and social transformations, and the facilitating metonymic chains of contagion, which, in the second half of the sixteenth century, pinpointed the liberties and suburbs of the capital as the focus of moral and physical pollution, posing a threat to the City and its respectable inhabitants and warranting urgent ‘ordering’. As I shall proceed to argue, it is from within this socially polarized cultural location that the plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker should be viewed and interpreted. Far from being ‘consoling’ artistic creations that rise above the material chaos of human existence, or straightforward ‘news reports’, these are politically committed works which, like Bullein’s Dialogue, William Wager’s Interlude, and Spenser’s Prosopopoeia, expound radical Protestant ideology.5

The topography and ordering of London’s plagues

He is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.

Leviticus 13: 46

The surviving statistics from parish registers reveal that the 1563 plague caused far greater mortality in the wealthy inner-city parishes than in the suburbs. Indeed, the ten worst affected parishes were all well within the