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The Impact of the Plague on Human Behavior in Seventeenth Century Europe

by Judy Staiano

(Honors History 1120)

Ring a ring o' roses, a pocketful of posies. ah-tishoo, ah-tishoo. we all fall down.

The popular nursery rhyme and folk-lore tale, usually sung by children, is said to have derived from the Bubonic Plague; also called the Black Death, due to the color of the victim's skin. This was a widespread disease which killed millions of people in Europe in intermittent and recurring bouts until the late seventeenth century. The disease affected the lymph system, causing the lymph nodes to swell, particularly in the groin; the lumps felt under the skin were called buboes, hence the *pocket full of posies*. Once contracted, the disease was usually fatal.

In medieval Europe, the Black Death claimed one-third of the total population (Merriman 4). The outbreaks were frequent, and by the turn of the sixteenth century the pattern was a recurrence every fifteen to twenty years. The last major outbreak of the plague in Europe was in Russia, where it killed officially 56,672 people, but unofficially an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 died of the plague in and around Moscow between 1770 and 1772. The death toll varied from place to place, depending on the actual population, but the epidemic had a profound effect on the demographics of Europe and the daily life of the people until the seventeenth century (Moote 8: Byrne 281).

Many cities across Europe show a varied record of the deaths due to the Plague. Some cities records seem to have been recorded more accurately than others, but all show great reductions in their census figures. In France, the small town of Digne had only a population of 10,000 before an outbreak in 1629, and it was estimated to have lost up to eighty five percent of its inhabitants, recording only 1,500 – 2,000 people after the outbreak. In London the last and worst outbreak began in 1665; killing twenty percent of the inhabitants. Another city in England, Colchester, lost an estimated fifty percent of its population. Venice kept the most accurately recorded numbers, showing a drop of one-third of inhabitants after the outbreak of 1633. However, the statistics accounted for the reduction through death and migration, so it may be that many inhabitants fled the city (Moote 8-11).

Many of the wealthier people fled the cities and retreated to their country residences. This flight of people began in earnest in London, in June 1665, creating much confusion and a dramatic change in social and economic conditions. As reports of increased plague deaths appeared in London's Bill of Mortality, an exodus was recorded of 200,000 people (Moote 8-11). An entry in the diary of a Londoner, Samuel Pepys, who lived and worked in London during that time reported on 21st June, "I find all the towne almost going out of towne, the coaches and wagons being all full of people going into the country" (Bartel 5). Pepys, a middle class principal officer in the government Naval Office moved his wife to the safety of the country. Entries in Pepys diary report that every day on his travels to work in a carriage, he saw more and more homes shut up, which were "marked with a red cross upon the door and "Lord have mercy upon us writ there" (Bartel 4).

The plague was spreading rapidly in London during this time. Pepys describes how the bell tolled five or six times on one particular day, indicating that number of deaths or burials. On 3rd July, Pepys reported that the Bill of Mortality figures for plague deaths the previous week in the district of Greenwich was 2,020 (Bartel 7). In another entry on the 8th July, he observed as he traveled about his business "The streets mighty empty all the way, even in London, which is a sad sight" (Bartel 8). The elite area of Whitehall, which reportedly housed twenty five thousand people, connected by service to the royal court, was vacated. Also in the parish of Covent Garden, a Reverend Patrick declared "all the gentry and better sort of tradesmen being gone" (Moote 89). As a result those who could afford

the transportation left the city; leaving behind the masses, which generally consisted of unskilled and domestic workers, and the impoverished (Moote).

The decision to go however was not easy, as there were many perils en route, plus the added risk of leaving behind all possessions. There was much suspicion and protectionism from the villages and towns outside the city walls. A school headmaster in Westminster, a Dr. Busby, transported his pupils to a country retreat by boat, as he feared the “pitchfork-wielding vigilantes on the road” (Moote 90). King Charles had also left the city by boat with the Queen and other members of the royal family. The four bridges around Oxford, at night were lit with the torches of mounted guards, as locals attempted to stem the flow of contagion. The coastline of England was also on alert, and ships were turned away (Moote).

At the time, the real cause of the plague was not yet known, but trade and commerce were blamed for the spread of the plague, which consequently affected many cities across Europe. Rome built walls around its city-limits and all merchandise was quarantined, or burnt, and the twelve gates of the wall were patrolled by guards who detained any travelers from the plague regions. Galileo, the mathematician and scientist (1564-1642), was forced to delay and reschedule the printing of his life’s work, the *Dialogue* in Florence, rather than face restrictions and the potential confiscation of his hand-written volumes which had originated “from regions tainted by the epidemic” (Sobel 217). The plague had spread through Milan, Turin and reached Florence, where it claimed the life of many of Galileo’s neighbours in 1630 (Sobel).

In the small town of Monte Lupo, in Florence, the plague recurred several times forcing certain restrictive measures. The death of a woman in September 1630 set off a series of events which caused mayhem in the town and its surrounding area. The woman had died of the plague at an inn just outside the gates of Monte Lupo, and within a month there were many more deaths within the innkeeper’s family, and amongst the clientele. A stockade was placed in front of the gate, which cut off the village. The expense of feeding and caring for the sick caused the authorities to impose extra taxes on the already poor villagers. With little or no income from trade, the villagers had no means to pay and therefore resistance and lawlessness ensued (Cipolla 9).

The quarantine and confinement of the victims and their families restricted movement within the small town at night, whereby many opportunists took advantage. Thieves forced their way into homes, one of which belonged to a Sandra di Boba who was ill in hospital, where they “took millet and two shirts” (Cipolla 20). Off duty gravediggers were supposed to stay at home, as they were considered probable carriers, but a Father Dragoni, the assigned caretaker of the impoverished town, reported that they “have transgressed the edicts and ordinances, and have gone about Monte Lupo day and night bearing arms” (Cipolla 21). The padre also described the effects of the enforced isolation on the people in a letter to the health authorities, who were trying to impose further quarantine; he wrote “I saw with my own eyes crowds of poor wretches gathering all kinds of weeds that one would not even give to animals” (Cipolla 24).

Many Friars, and other clergy, particularly in Italy, assisted the authorities in the care of the sick and the enforcement of confinement during outbreaks of the plague. The aforementioned Father Dragoni, was placed in an impossible position by the authorities. Orders were given to impose a state of general quarantine, which meant that the populous limit themselves to their houses for at least forty days. Whilst he understood the need to uphold the law, he also understood that it would cause “a greater degree of misery when the prevailing levels of poverty were already intolerably high” (Cipolla 24). His letters show his great confusion as his allegiances to the needs of the people conflicted greatly with the demands of the law. In recognition of the plight of the townspeople, and considering that the winter seemed to have quelled the disease, the Magistracy in Florence agreed to enforcement of a lesser degree (Cipolla 24).

It was through the higher power of the Catholic Church that many measures were taken to contain the plague. Pope Urban VIII appointed his nephew, Cardinal Barberini, as head of the

Congregation of Health. Taking orders from this health authority, the civic authorities helped to enforce plague control. In towns across the country restrictions were placed on gatherings and sermons, which caused outrage amongst the Tuscan clergy, who in turn appealed directly to the Pope to intervene. Penance was then demanded of these health workers, who had done nothing more than their duty (Sobel 203).

Health monitors were hired to patrol the streets watching for plague victims. These monitors sent the plague victims to the pesthouses, had their belongings burned and their homes disinfected and boarded up; very often with other family members still inside. However, the people fought back by withholding reporting plague cases to the authorities, risking *strappado*; a punishment of having their hands bound behind their backs, and then being hung by the wrists. People became adept at hiding their sick relatives or even co-workers, in the hope that the victim may be spared the pesthouse or that a false death certificate might allow burial within a sacred churchyard (Sobel 203).

Europeans lived in fear and terror of not only falling victim to the disease, but of the authorities finding out that the household had been infected. Moscow denied the existence of the plague in 1770, despite at least 4000 deaths that year, to its European traders; in an attempt to maintain trade as normal. The consequences of having their possessions burned on discovery, lead some people in Russia to throw their dead relatives on to the street to avoid detection; some buried their dead secretly and others were so afraid they buried them whilst still alive (Byrne 293).

Pesthouses, a term used across Europe, were specially designated hospitals for the plague victims. Six thousand patients were admitted and subsequently died in the San Miniato and San Francesco monasteries, turned plague hospitals, in the autumn of 1630 (Sobel 205). The monastery of San Miniato must have been overwhelmed, as it had enough staff to care for only 800 patients (Byrne 147). A second pesthouse was opened in Monte Lupo, due to the extent of the epidemic in June, of that year. Father Dragoni wrote of the inadequacy of even those two facilities, “if I have to let the sick people here die in their own homes, the whole of Monte Lupo will be but a pesthouse” (Cipolla 38).

Of course the care-givers and physicians often became victim to the disease themselves. One newly appointment physician, namely Jean Pernet, who had undergone rigorous questioning for the position, died after two weeks. The workers would have had to endure dreadful conditions with just the stench and the fleas. One Genoan Father Antero Maria described his position in 1657, “I have to change my clothes frequently if I do not want to be devoured by fleas, armies of which nest in my gown” (Byrne 147). Some staff, who carried or buried the bodies were given waxed or oil-cloth gowns; others carried oranges, lemons or pomanders. Whatever their strategy, the staff usually lived together in assigned rooms, and had no interaction with the outside world. In Germany and Holland, pesthouses which survive today, still have the special little doors through which supplies were passed (Byrne 146-147).

Conditions in the confines of any pesthouse or locked up private house during quarantine became as rancid and tortuous as the disease itself. Once locked in, the windows were shut, enclosing the stench of bodily fluids, human and animal; the burning of materials for heat and fumigation, such as tar, gunpowder and sulfur. Many people fled their imprisonment to the countryside, if they were able, later to be found dead in barns, as three men from Hamburg were. Many pesthouses became a breeding ground for abuse and lewdness, as many orderlies used female patients for sex, reported a tanner from Barcelona, Miquel Parets. A woman in Wales complained of being treated “worse than a whore” (Byrne 148: 135).

Treatments and preventative measures varied from region to region; most of which may have had more of a placebo effect. The diary entry for June 7th 1665, of Samuel Pepys, described his mental state after he had seen for himself his first marked plague house, he wrote “It put me in an ill conception of myself and my smell, so that I was forced to buy some roll-tobacco to smell to and chew, which took away the apprehension” (Bartel 4). As previously mentioned staff caring for the

sick, carried citrus fruits, other methods were more obscure and dependant on local sources; a Cardinal Gastaldi of Rome recommended dried toad powder (Byrne 146).

Local apothecaries would mix up weird and wonderful concoctions to ward off illnesses, and the plague was no exception. A common and trusted mix from Venice, was a theriac or treacle which comprised 64 components, the main one being “roasted viper flesh” (Byrne 39), and it took 40 days to mix; then the theriac itself needed to age for 12 years. The Grand Duke of Tuscany’s court used boiled scorpions as its main ingredient (Byrne 39). A surgeon, John Woodall, wrote in 1639 as he recommended theriac for “provoking sweat...and thereby opening obstructions, and by evaporation expunging venom” (Bartel 39). The theriac was usually foul tasting and therefore dissolved in wine or syrup. Of overall importance in curing ills, was the purging of any and all bodily fluids; and “the more often the better” (Byrne 41).

Women played a role in the care and treatment of the families struck with many ailments, including the plague. Some women were considered surgeons, others were merely folk-healers used by the poor who could not afford doctors fees. Parliamentary Laws were passed in 1604, which suggested and therefore outlawed any sorcery or witchcraft. Mid-wives were well respected across the social spectrum, as they assisted women during childbirth, deemed especially dangerous during the plague. In order to combat the poisons, measures were taken to protect the babies: the afore mentioned Miquel Parets, the tanner in Barcelona, described the experience of his sons birth when the newborn was “washed in vinegar and rubbed with lavender and other soothing herbs and passed over the flames in the fireplace” before being wrapped in new cloth (Byrne 43).

Galileo’s eldest daughter, Suor Maria Celeste, became the convents apothecary from 1623. She became adept at treating illnesses with natural remedies and looked after the ailing often from within the convent walls. She also counseled her father, warning him of the plagues local presence, and suggesting and requesting various ingredients for its prevention. Although the Catholic Health commissioners had sent an order to the monastery that “two nuns at a time, pray continuously day and night beseeching His Divine Majesty for freedom from this scourge” (Sobel 269), the devout nun continued also to make her cures. The devoted daughter sent her father a bottle of healing water, and a mix of dried figs, nuts, rue leaves, and salt, bound by honey, with instructions to take a certain amount every day with wine (Sobel 209).

Although the countryside had outbreaks of the plague, it was the squalid, overcrowded conditions of the cities which harboured and spread the disease. The majority of London’s population was crammed into decaying, wooden houses, which burnt coal for heat. John Evelyn, a Londoner during the time, wrote in 1661 “This horrid smoke obscures our churches [...] it fouls our clothes and corrupts the waters” (Cowie 11). Attempts to purify the air lead to instructions by the Lord Mayor to light bonfires in the streets which burned for four or five days. Along the riverbanks fires were lit to fumigate the piled up refuse, and drive out the rats and vermin they harboured. The Lord Mayor also ordered the slaughter of all cats and dogs in the city (Cowie 11).

The cause of the plague was not known at the time; that the infected fleas killed their hosts, the black rats, then moved on to live human hosts (Byrne 285). Superstition, folklore, and religion, held more credence than science did at that time. Many people saw the appearance of a comet in November 1664 over Europe as an omen. An astrologer, John Gadbury wrote that the comet “portends pestiferous and horrible windes and tempests” (Moote 20). Another astronomer saw the comet as “Gods Judgement” (Moote 21). Others predicted that the following year, 1666, would be the year “to look out for, because 666 was the number of the Beast of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelations” (Moote 21).

The plague claimed many thousands of lives all over Europe in the mid seventeenth century alone. The accounts of those who lived during the plague are both harrowing and enduring. Whilst many fled, others did not and witnessed stricken families who gave their healthy children to friends. The stories of children howling, who stood beside their dead parents, as men in carts traversed the

city in the night crying “Bring out your Dead!” (Cowie 39). Daniel Defoe was only five during this time; later in his life he recalled scenes such as these in his diaries. He described the mass graves dug out of necessity, as the graveyards were full, and often reserved for non-plague deaths, for fear of contagion. He wrote “Into these pits they had put perhaps fifty or sixty bodies” (Cowie 39). Defoe also tells the story of a drunken piper who was picked up, considered dead, who rose from the cart dazed and confused and declared “But I an’t dead though am I?” (Cowie 41).

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