

# Locating God in the Time of Epidemic: John Donne's Plague

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In sixteenth-century England, Simon Forman, a magician, healer, and astrologer who had survived an outbreak of plague, would distinguish between the “natural” and the “supernatural” origins of the epidemic. He designated the alignment of the planets as the realm of the former and placed the wrath of God in the latter category.<sup>1</sup>

This differential schema is testimony to the drastically different connotations these terms had for the early modern readership, as opposed to what they would have for a contemporary one. In the former context, no clear binary could be drawn between the two. The concept of the supernatural in early modern times was “suffused with the signs of the divine.”<sup>2</sup> However, the world of nature, being God’s second book, was also, in a sense, inherently supernatural.<sup>3</sup> The concept of the *supernaturalis*, first appearing in the thirteenth century, implied a boundary between ordinary phenomena and the direct acts of God. A true miracle would be one that contravened the laws of nature in a manner that could only be accomplished by the divine hand that had created these laws.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenon of plague poses an interesting problem here in that it represents the opposite of the miracle, as an instance of God’s intervention in the created world.<sup>5</sup> Forman’s belief in supernaturally caused plague as one where natural medicine was rendered useless was, however, not a popular one. Plague was seen as divine will working through natural forces, against which God had sent precautions and medicines for human usage.<sup>6</sup> Science and religion worked together as physical and spiritual remedies to corruption, with the physical being

regarded by both as God's secondary mean. Fatalism was seen as un-Christian and so unacceptable that it could result in imprisonment.<sup>7</sup>

Against this attitudinal background to plague in early modern England, this paper seeks to read the manner in which John Donne engages with the theme of plague. With particular attention to his text, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,<sup>8</sup> the paper seeks to read Donne as an interesting case study of, and a highly atypical intervention in, the contemporary discourse around plague and its religious significance.

Ernest B. Gilman acknowledges 1625 as a year that saw an outpouring of plague sermons, official orders, medical pamphlets, and plague broadsheets—a year which, for John Donne, is correlated to a transformative personal crisis, occasioned by his own near-fatal illness two years earlier.<sup>9</sup> Another aspect that should be kept in mind while contextualising Donne's work on plague is his position as a convert from Catholicism. In this position, the ambivalences that characterise his consciousness are, in many ways, co-incidental with the ambivalences that characterise the consciousness of post-Reformation England. Donne's contemporary religious milieu was one where plague had emerged as a site of discursive conquest—one for the establishment of a correct, reformed theological position.

The discourse of plague in post-Reformation Europe, then, has to be understood through the early modern registration of plague itself in highly textual terms, by which it was a form of divine utterance. The textualisation of plague in Reformation culture was carried out against the disappearance of the pictorial regime of the Catholic setup, which had for so long enabled the therapeutic interventions of the plague saints to be represented. The result was an unmediated theology that had to confront plague as an infliction of God's Word.<sup>10</sup>

The motif in Donne's plague writing that Gilman sets apart for investigation is the function of translation—a highly textual function. Kathleen Hines reads the textualisation of plague against

the interpretative framework of religion, which provides a well-defined, familiar body of language upon which the proper terms of the plague are grafted.<sup>11</sup> Against this reading, Donne's re-imagining of disease through metaphor in the sacred and symbolic order of language makes it one possible to confront. Gilman also sees Donne's integration of plague into larger human experience as an exercise that relieves it of its traumatic connotations.

Just as the post-Reformation theological universe Donne inhabits is a diminished one, it is one that is influenced by a reformation of healing. Natural medicine is prioritised to older, more alchemic methods of spiritual cure, with the latter inviting suspicion for their Catholic connotations.<sup>12</sup> Thus, physicians appear as fixtures in Donne's landscape of illness in *Devotions* rather than as entities whose existence calls for justification or negation through debate. The necessity of physicians and, by extension, that of the institution of medical practice are factors incidental to Donne's exercise.

As opposed to other plague writings, the treatment of plague in Donne's *Devotions* is integrated into a larger discourse of sickness and death, with pestilential disease emerging only as a specific type of disease. Donne's treatment of the figure of the physician reflects his own engagement with the contemporary culture of sickness and medicine, and the complexity of understanding it in theological terms. So, while the physician's fear is seen as a limit to human agency, and man's dependence on him as a limitation upon human nature, the former is also understood as a spiritual example for emulation. In Donne's writing, the human presence emerges with the subtextual isolation that plague entails. This loss of community is also one that is playing out in Donne's contemporary theological milieu with the disappearance of the plague saints, until they survive only in the symbolic realm. The Elizabeth Drudy memorialised in the Anniversary poems is a shadowy survivor of the plague saints.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Donne's physicians retain an intermediary function and

ultimately point to Christ. The physicians are also testimony to the need for community that human beings are deprived of when an outbreak of plague hits. This need for community is ultimately resolved in the uniting of the martyrs and the saints in the figure of God, as the dictates of Reformation demand that the spiritual drama of pestilence be played out in psychological terms.

If plague is seen as a violation of nature,<sup>14</sup> Donne enters its discursive space through a tripartite understanding of his own life in terms of a natural, a supernatural, and a preternatural birth. The second refers to his entry into the Church and is in keeping with his understanding of religion, in his *Anatomy of the World*, as supernatural fruit. The third, in referring to his recuperation from illness, highlights the spiritual framework through which he is already seeing all disease. This is befitting of a man of religion, but it also characterised medicine at large in the late medieval and early modern contexts, where physicians would borrow from religious discourse and even become preachers in their own right.<sup>15</sup>

Donne's integration of the topic of pestilence into his *Devotions* results in a sharp deviation from the prevalent religious rhetoric around plague, by which it is framed as an instrument of the wrath of God. This brought puzzling questions to be grappled with—questions of theodicy as well as those pertaining to individual affliction. Preachers sought to provide explanations as to why plague infected the good, and what succumbing to plague meant as far as it was a reflection of individual dispositions, both spiritual and physical. In this context, spiritual sin came to be tied to physical intemperance. These questions become irrelevant to Donne, as he imposes standardisation upon an individual event<sup>16</sup> to arrive at the question of pestilential disease and ultimately proceed to a meditation upon the human condition. In his 1625 sermon, he will use the plague as an entry point into a discussion of the human condition in relation to sickness and death.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, questions of theodicy<sup>18</sup> become irrelevant

when human mortality is attributed to human sin, with God as the mere executioner of death. In addition to this, Donne's exceptional treatment of plague is evinced in his refusal to see it as a state of exception. If anything, it is a testimony to the true frailty of human nature, and an accident to remind us of the hollowness of mortal happiness. In his 1625 sermon, the plague epidemic besetting London is compared to the exodus from Egypt. Plague, then, emerges as something underpinning sacral understandings of human history.

Alongside the aversion to seeing epidemic disease as an extraordinary event<sup>19</sup> that brings with it questions of divine wrath incurred by specific sins, Donne's meditations on plague are also characterised by his refusal to see it as an unmitigated evil. If plague, alongside all depletion of human health, is for Donne a symptom of universal corruption,<sup>20</sup> it is also, in its relation to death, a reminder of the linkage of mortal death to immortal life. In extending the idea of sickness as visitation—already the stuff of prayer books<sup>21</sup>—to the plague that was almost universally read as divine wrath, Donne can “produce life out of death,”<sup>22</sup> reading both his own disease and the ensuing epidemic as ultimately therapeutic events.

As Donne invokes sacred history to naturalise plague and relate it to human nature, he severely undermines the popular view of plague as punishment for sins that could be “identified and rooted out.”<sup>23</sup> Rather, as he reminds the reader in *Devotions*, curing the root of disease is up to God alone.

Donne's single-minded emphasis on the inevitability of death is disruptive to a specific post-Reformation context, where the development of modern religion and modern medicine are closely, though not unproblematically, intertwined. Acknowledging the “physician's necessary deceit and its futility,”<sup>24</sup> Donne undermines a cure-oriented approach to plague, as Death is seen as just as much, if not more of, a physic. However, as already discussed, the medical order is not so much negated for its limitations as integrated into a

symbolic order so as to be transcended. The pragmatics of dealing with affliction does not concern Donne so much as the integral role death plays in human life and, ultimately, salvation. At the same time, Donne's spiritualisation of disease undermines any easy binary that can be drawn between the spiritual and the physical. Donne's preoccupation with the Incarnation and the Crucifixion means an intense awareness of the frailty of human physicality as part of Christ's experience on Earth. Ultimately, suffering and death hold the potential of liberating us by tying us closer to Christ. At the same time, Donne's preoccupation with bodily resurrection means an apprehension of spiritual liberation in highly physical terms. Donne's work, even in its exceptionality, is thus a testimony to the ways in which plague and medicine lie at the heart of Reformation history. He also signals a moment in post-Reformation England where the psycho-spiritual drama of liberation is not divorced entirely from concerns of the body.

As the world grapples with a pandemic today, we are forced to re-assess our worldviews at a fundamental level. Science and religion have emerged in positions of both contestation and cooperation. Against this backdrop, plague historiography plays an important role as a reminder of the connected history of the "supernatural" and the "scientific," which we understand as de-linked entities today. Donne's work is important as a reminder of the multiplicity of interpretive frameworks and the possibility of understanding them beyond a simplistic position of mutual antagonism.

In *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, Gilman eerily apprehends the possibility of subsequent epidemics that might threaten to cast his time of writing as an "anomalous blip in the history of epidemic disease." The current pandemic is indeed forcing us to "reimagine our connection to the rest of the human community, including historical communities such as that of Donne and Jonson," as well as to the "microbial community" at large.<sup>25</sup> Today, we are

indeed, as Gilman predicted, at a juncture in history where the bounded proprietary subject of the liberal imagination is facing violation by microbial incursion.<sup>26</sup> In such a situation, Donne's reflections remain significant, perhaps most strikingly for the manner in which they shed insight upon the human condition.

Even as a contemporary, largely secular readership may, for the most part, fail to identify with Donne's specific hope of resurrection and liberation, it remains important to us. Our hope for turning the pandemic to recuperative ends may lie in the manner in which it provides glimpses into the commonality of human experience. Epidemic disease thus continues to retain the possibility of shedding insight into a universally shared human condition that transcends spatio-temporal boundaries in an increasingly fragmented world. Paradoxically, in Donne's understanding, this human condition is one that can be grasped by grasping the human state, and the human community at large, as a lapsed and limited one.

## NOTES

- 1 Darren Oldridge, *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 2016), 12.
- 2 Marcus Harmes and Victoria Bladen, eds., *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 1.
- 3 Harmes and Bladen, *Supernatural and Secular Power*, 1.
- 4 Oldridge, *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England*, 13.
- 5 Graham Hammill, "Miracles and Plagues: Plague Discourse as Political Thought," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23242142>.
- 6 Paul Slack, "Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe: The Implications of Public Health," *Social Research* 55, no 3 (Autumn 1988): 436, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970513>.
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- 8 John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), PDF File,

- <http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/DONNE/DEVOTIONS/Download.pdf>.
- 9 Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 205.
  - 10 Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 39.
  - 11 Kathleen Hines, "Contagious Metaphors: Liturgies of Early Modern Plague," *The Comparatist* 42 (2018): 318-330, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26533661>.
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  - 13 Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 199.
  - 14 Hines, "Contagious Metaphors," 318-330.
  - 15 Eric A. Heinrichs, *Plague, Print, and the Reformation: The German Culture of Healing 1473-1573* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
  - 16 Reinhard H. Friederich, "Strategies of Persuasion in Donne's Devotions," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 9, no. 1 (1978): 51-70.
  - 17 John Donne, "A Sermon Preached at St Dunstons January 15 1625," Digital Collections BYU Library, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JohnDonne/id/2031>.
  - 18 According to Gilman, the grounds for debates on theodicy are untroubling to Donne, whose moral certainty is framed within a rigid typological scaffold that does not leave any room for doubts.
  - 19 Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 213.
  - 20 Gilman, 214.
  - 21 Jonathan Goldberg, "The Understanding of Sickness in Donne's *Devotions*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1971): 507-517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2859378>.
  - 22 Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 225.
  - 23 Slack, "Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe," 436.
  - 24 Friederich, "Strategies of Persuasion in Donne's Devotions," 51-70.
  - 25 Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 34.
  - 26 Gilman, 33.