

The Plague Epic in Early Modern England

Heroic Measures, 1603–1721

Edited by
Rebecca Totaro

THE PLAGUE EPIC IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

For Greg

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Edited by

REBECCA TOTARO

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Acknowledgments

This book initially grew out of research conducted for *Suffering in Paradise: The Bubonic Plague in English Literature from More to Milton* (2005), an examination of the practical effects of hope that enabled and sustained literary responses to pandemic disease. Conversations deriving from a fortuitous seat assignment next to Linda McJannet, as we were both returning from the 2006 World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane, Australia, led me to think in new ways about scholarly editions. With the assistance of knowledgeable, generous Folger Shakespeare Library librarians, the bulk of the research for this volume occurred while I was a member of the Folger Institute Year-Long Colloquium on “Vernacular Health and Healing” (2006–2007) and as a short term fellow on sabbatical there (2007–2008). The vast and largely untapped resources I discovered led me to produce two books: this one, on plague poetry in the seventeenth century, and *Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603* (2010), a representative sample of genres of plague writing codified in the sixteenth century, showing the predominance of prose. I revised earlier versions of Part 1 of the current volume in response to research for the Introduction to *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England* (2011); for an essay, “Mother London and the Madonna Lactans,” forthcoming in *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, Practices*; and as a result of my participation in the Early Modern Studies Research Group at University of Miami’s Center for the Humanities. I extend my gratitude, respectively, to Ernest B. Gilman; Jutta Sperling; and Mihoko Suzuki, Jeffrey Shoulson, Karl Gunter, Susanne Woods, and Mary Lindemann. Thanks also to members of the 2010 Renaissance Society of America session “The Bubonic Plague in Art and Literature: England, Spain, Italy,” especially Sheila Barker. With great appreciation, I also acknowledge the generous efforts of my research writing group colleagues Kimberly Jackson and Delphine Gras, and Patricia Rice, each of whom read Part 1 in various forms during the last two years of its revision; their comments markedly enhanced its organization in particular. At final draft, Wendy Furman-Adams and Amy Tigner offered scrupulous, clarifying comments. University graduate student Dane Olsen provided diligent, insightful review of the majority of transcriptions; English major Jessie Carcamo read each of the current transcriptions for sentence-level comprehension with an eye toward the usefulness of the appendices and footnotes; independent researcher Evdoxia Kolydaki provided the translations of Greek passages in the poems; and the beautiful index is the work of Pat Rimmer. Last and certainly not least, I thank the Ashgate Publishing Company team: external reviewers for their invaluable comments, which they will see have improved the work immensely; editor Seth F. Hibbert, for his scrupulous and comforting attention to detail; and Erika Gaffney, Publishing Manager for Ashgate, who led the way with her warm support and essential advice, from proposal to cover image and title.

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Part 1

An Introduction to the Plague in Heroic Measures, 1603–1721

Between 1603 and 1611, England endured unrelenting visitations of bubonic plague. No other span of years saw the same persistence of the disease. It was as if the plague had taken up residence, testing the people's resolve, in many ways to an even greater extent than during what are currently the better known plague years of 1348–49 and 1665–66, what we have come to call the Black Death and the Great Plague of London, respectively. A rude awakening to the new century, the 1603–1611 series of outbreaks set something of a standard for the next fifty years. Between 1603 and 1666, a total of fourteen years were among the deadliest for plague in England's history: 1603–1604, 1609–10, 1625–26, 1630, 1636, 1638, 1643, 1657–58, 1665–66.¹ With a visitation every five years on average, England was sorely challenged, even before factoring in the effects of the civil war, the London fire of 1666, the Anglo-Dutch wars, and increased rates of maternal mortality. Decades later, in the summer of 1720, the plague struck Marseilles, France, where it ravaged the population for more than a year. The English had become accustomed to reports of plague on the Continent preceding its visitation to the island, and they feared the worst. The government mobilized, shoring up plague orders. Ready for what they feared was the beginning of yet another century of epidemic disease, England was spared. But it was years before the nation would know this, and in those early decades of the eighteenth century, the threat of another visitation was enough to revive an active writing campaign that included medical treatises, sermons, and disputations regarding quarantine law.²

¹ These dates are compiled from Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985; reprinted with corrections, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 146–47—currently the preeminent source on British historical analysis of the plague; Charles Creighton, *History of Epidemics in Britain: From AD 664 to the Extinction of the Plague*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891–94), 1:229–303, 575; Charles Mullett, *The Bubonic Plague and England: An Essay in the History of Preventative Medicine* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1956), 31–210; and *English Short Title Catalogue* listings under “England, Proclamations” for 1604–1609, 1625, 1636. Among the many gruesome causes of increased mortality in the seventeenth-century were childbirth-related injuries; see the award-winning study, *Milton and Maternal Mortality*, by Louis Schwartz (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially chapters 1–2.

² On the written response to the threat of plague in England in the 1720s, see Paula R. Backscheider, ed., *Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year*; A Norton Critical Reader (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), ix–xiii, 218–30.

In the early seventeenth century, as England felt the blows, one visitation after another, the plague epic emerged as a new literary genre. Showcasing unusual combinations of passion and restraint, heartrending lamentation and nation-building fervor, the plague epic functioned as a call to active faith and as a literary memorial for the fallen. Consisting primarily of brief epics, typically less than 1000 lines each, and written in the heroic prosody associated with the epic, the plague epic testifies powerfully to the need for shared but still flexible and complex discourse in times when individuals endure overwhelming affliction together. Although it may not speak to us in the form or in the words we would currently use to articulate catastrophic suffering, the early modern plague epic invites us to consider the ways that we give shape to our disaster narratives. In the plague epic, poets voice concerns regarding topics we now call medical malpractice, end-of-life care, economic recovery, national healthcare, homeland security, and individual liberty. Such large-scale and relevant issues find pronounced representation in scenes of visceral, solitary misery and, ironically at first glance, in the heroic measures of epic poetry. In the very same measures, poets invoke muses, pay tribute to the fallen, and express outrage as they describe London's plague-time transformation. They advance causes for the plague, track its course through the human body and the streets of London, and proclaim England's potential for immediate, complete, material recuperation. Standing as witness to scenes of personal physiological and psychological horror, the poets admit their own failings and the fears that afflict them as they write, at the same time providing didactic accounts of the plague's meaning within English, world, and Christian history. As they redefine heroism in post-Reformation plague-time, they also cry out against corrupt medical practitioners, prophets, and civic leaders, and they articulate an urgent theodicy. For over 100 years, the epic was the literary form comprehensive and serious enough to contain the many rhetorical modes needed to render in a single creation the complex experience of and views on the plague—the most physiologically alarming, historically recurring, and baffling cause of human agony England had ever known.

In *The Plague Epic in Early Modern England: Heroic Measures, 1603–1721*, I provide the first examination of this genre. In Part 1, I identify the specific features of the plague epic, consider the broad range of authors who took up this distinctly heroic form of plague writing, and offer the first scholarly examination of the genre's content, with special attention to the function of the poems in their post-Reformation, post-Elizabethan context. As a symptom of shifting needs arising over the course of more than a century of plague visitations, the plague epic emerged in response to the very same cultural conditions that led to war and that compelled John Milton to write his epics, *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671).³ In Part 2, I present ten of the most fascinating and representative

³ With respect to the research of other scholars on these subjects, my most direct debts are to Paul Slack; Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, especially for *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Regained* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1966); Raymond A. Anselment for *The Realms of Apollo: Literature and Healing in*

of these plague poems—each transcribed and edited with critical commentary and endnotes, including the original marginal notes. Preceding each poem are the record of its publication history, details regarding any relevant materials published in the same volume as the original poem, and the location of the poem now with respect to library holdings. The volume concludes with a General Glossary of Terms and an Index of Names, to expedite queries, as well as a Works Cited section that includes additional plague epics not transliterated here and an Index keyed to the entire volume, including the transcribed poetry.

“Proper for an Epic Poem”: A Consideration of Generic Form

Writers in the seventeenth century represented the plague as an unstoppable force that surprised its victims and exposed them to unfathomable hardship. In their accounts, all sources of security fail as mothers watch their infants die, grieving fathers bury their sons, friends avoid friends, religious and civic leaders neglect those in their care, even the best of physicians and other caretakers are unable to offer relief to those in their charge, and dishonest practitioners of physic prey on people who are desperate for aid. Adding to the misery, people die in flight from infected areas, refused lodging by those in the country who fear them; prayer fails; graves fill to overflowing; and those who survive face the concomitant challenges of famine, poverty, and the temptation of quick money offered by pawn brokers and usurers. Such events signal the end of an era of prosperity, at best. These are the stable elements of the plague visitation narrative, which appear in European plague literature as early as the fourteenth century.⁴ The steady appropriation of these narrative elements derives from their observable relationship to real plague-time events, observable in written form from as early as the fifth century B.C.E., when Thucydides recorded details of the plague at Athens in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.⁵ As successive generations faced the disease without any

Seventeenth-Century England (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1995), especially chapter three on the plague, which is the only other treatment in one place of most of the poems contained here; Ernest B. Gilman for *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially on the concept of what he calls the “plague theodicy” of the seventeenth century (64–69); and Margaret Healy for her powerful yoking of *De Rerum Natura* and *Paradise Lost*, in the first pages of *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (Houndmills, UK and New York: Palgrave, 2002, 1–2).

⁴ On plague literature from the fourteenth century, see Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994)—an ideal starting point, because among the many documents it includes are plague-specific passages from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*, and letters by Petrarch, whose beloved Laura died of plague, thus inspiring Petrarch in his writing of sonnets.

⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Volume I: Books 1–2*, trans. C. F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library (1919, 1921; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). See especially book 2, pages 343ff.

marked change in its prevention or treatment, plague literature grew in volume, length, and complexity, but in its essential content, it changed by relatively small degrees.

In England, a marked increase in plague writing followed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I. Her survival through a near-fatal battle with smallpox early in her reign suggested that England might finally have secured for itself a fit head of state and church—one more likely than her most recent predecessors to endure great hardship but live a long life, and even produce viable heirs. Under Elizabeth I, England again distanced itself from its Catholic past, eliminating prayer to saints, processions, and pilgrimages from their arsenal of defenses against the plague, and investing in nationwide schedules for special common prayer and plague orders, the latter based on Continental practices. The English imagined they might join their European colleagues as leaders in healthcare—this, the early hope of humanists Thomas Linacre, Thomas More, and John Colet, who had helped found the Royal College of Physicians under Elizabeth's father in 1518. Plague writing flourished, with the printing press placing medical regimens, sermons, prose pamphlets, plague bills, and prayers—all in the vernacular—in the hands of readers, who were eager to do what they could to help themselves through the next visitation.⁶

By 1603, with the death of the queen, decades of plague visitations, and regular reissue of plague prayers and orders, there had been no noticeable reduction in plague-related deaths or improvement of other conditions during visitations. As a comparison of plague writing from the beginning and the end of Elizabeth I's reign suggests, hope diminished. By way of brief example, physician and writer William Bullein (c. 1515-1576) appears far more certain in 1563 of the salubrious effects of his plague literature than Thomas Dekker (1572–1632) does of his in 1603. Although both of their works—Bullein's *A Dialogue of the Fever Pestilence* and Dekker's *The Wonderful Year*—have been classified as Elizabethan prose satire, their conclusions alone illustrate the gap between them. After a lengthy narrative that includes medical and theological advice, as well as humorous husband-wife banter and animal fables, Bullein provides a morality tale ending in which the protagonist's soul is secured passage to heaven. His tone is hopeful, he has drawn his medical and moral instruction from the latest manuals, and his conclusion is certain and positive. In contrast, Dekker closes anti-climactically (if he can be said to close at all), offering only a string of absurd, grotesque stories uttered

⁶ On plague in Tudor literature and culture, see Rebecca Totaro, *Suffering in Paradise: The Bubonic Plague in English Literature from More to Milton*, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), especially chapters 1–3, and 5; Rebecca Totaro, *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603*, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), especially the Introduction; and Rebecca Totaro and Ernest B. Gilman, editors, *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England*, Routledge Studies in Literature and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2011), especially the Introduction.

in exasperation.⁷ By its end, Dekker's entertainment contains enough bile to diminish even his early promise to help the reader secure mirthful distraction from plague-time sorrow and fear. Dekker offers a brutal form of entertainment, not consumable in large quantities. It would not sustain readers over the next century of plague visitations—a fact Dekker himself may have admitted by way of his later choice to partner with fellow playwright Thomas Middleton (1580–1627) in the writing of a plague epic.

Few at the close of the sixteenth century could have anticipated the many changes that would lead men like John Milton to turn to epic poetry to “justify the ways of God to men.”⁸ The need for theodicy grew in urgency beginning in 1603 with the death of Elizabeth, the long-ruling, self-styled mother to her people. This alone was enough to send tremors through the nation, but making matters worse, the plague had struck so soon after her death that King James VI of Scotland had not yet been crowned King James I of England, and this exacerbated anxieties. This visitation would kill an estimated 25,000 in London alone—20 percent of the population. And plague would linger, outbreak after outbreak, through the first full third of James' reign.⁹ Almost as soon as it began to recede, it would return, and in 1625, it again followed the death of a monarch, killing another 20 percent of London's population. Slightly more than ten years later, in 1636, the plague returned once more, leaving the population reduced by an additional 10,000. In 1665, its full force was felt, as it killed an estimated 55,750. As Paul Slack notes, “in terms of the gross number of deaths” this last plague was the most deadly (*Impact of Plague*, 151). In many other ways, however, including the percentage of the population that died and the number of towns within England that were affected in any given visitation, other years were just as deadly (including 1630, 1638, 1643, and 1657–58 as mentioned earlier). In addition, in between each major, London-based visitation, the plague was often endemic in human and epizootic in

⁷ On Bullein's satire, especially in relationship to Dekker's *Wonderful Year*, see William Kerwin, “Writing the Plague in English Prose Satire,” in Totaro and Gilman, 37–53; R. W. Maslen “The Healing Dialogues of Doctor Bullein, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 38.1 (2008): 119–135; see also Lawrence Manley *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 118–122, 352–66; Totaro, *The Plague in Print*, especially the introduction and chapters 1 and 6; and Healy's chapters 2 and 3 on “The Plaguy Body.” On the reputed health value of mirth, especially in plague-time, see Nichole DeWall, “‘Sweet recreation barred’: The Case for Playgoing in Plague-Time” in Totaro and Gilman, 133–40.

⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton: The Complete Poems and Essential Prose*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007), 1.26.

⁹ Slack 151, 13, 62. On mortality rates and the perception of monarchs in these years, see also Richelle Munkhoff, “Contagious Figurations: Plague and the Impenetrable Nation after the Death of Elizabeth” in Totaro and Gilman, 99 and 109 n. 12; and James D. Mardock, “Thinking to pass unknown”: *Measure for Measure*, the Plague, and the Accession of King James I, in Totaro and Gilman, 113–130. On the concept of the “great years of plague,” see Totaro, *Suffering in Paradise*, 32–5.

animal populations elsewhere in England, making its reemergence at any point a possibility. It also traveled in figurative form by rumor and in rhetoric, increasing fear as regularly as it increased mortality rates.

In response to these and many other mounting concerns, and desperate to assert meaning where little common understanding existed, people pondered the meaning of the plague, and they considered the nation's future. Giving voice to these discussions in 1625, Richard Milton (n.d.) explains in his plague epic,

We study now and often cast about
And call to mind what heretofore fell out
Upon the Death of any Sovereign Prince,
Or in Successor's reign hath hapned since.
There's many of us do remember yet
It was so late, we can it not forget,
When first King *James*, came here this Crown to sway,
How many by the plague were caught away (124)

Remembering the nationally debilitating 1603 visitation, and having suffered through many smaller visitations in the intervening years, Milton places himself among the "we" who "study" the past to try to make sense of the present. The outcome of this reasoning is not a positive one. The conclusion can only be that England had not learned from its prior mistakes. As Milton reviews the plague bills, seeing the death toll continue to rise, he fears that, finally, this time, in 1625, conditions might reach apocalyptic pitch: in fact, "now we think the sickness will not cease / Because we find it weekly doth increase" (124).

In the same year, John Taylor (1578–1653) confirms this general rationale for the plague's return and speculates further. Known as the Water Poet, Taylor was a waterman who plied the Thames, taking passengers to and from their destinations. Some suspect that it was in conversation with his patrons that he found his literary calling and a vast audience, leading him to achieve greater notoriety than is currently appreciated.¹⁰ In *The Fearful Summer* (1625), he suggests that visitations coinciding with the deaths of Elizabeth and James function as a form of national purgation:

The ways of God are intricate, no doubt
Unsearchable and past man's finding out.
He at his pleasure worketh wondrous things
And in his hand doth hold the hearts of kings,
And for the love, which to our *King* he bears,
By sickness, he our sinful country clears,
That he may be a patron and a guide
Unto a people purg'd and purifi'd:
This by a precedent is manifest,

¹⁰ As James Mardock makes clear, "Taylor was one of the most prolific popular writers of the seventeenth century" and he would go on to become "the most popular and prolific royalist propagandist in England" ("*The Spirit and the Muse: The Anxiety of Religious Positioning in John Taylor's Prewar Polemics*," *The Seventeenth Century* 14 [1999]: 1, 11).

When famous late *Elizabeth* deceast:
 Before our gracious *James* put on the crown
 God's hand did cut superfluous branches down. (153)

In something approaching a Malthusian argument for the natural reduction by disease of populations that exceed their bounds, Taylor advances an oddly positive interpretation of the disease: God has brought the plague “for the love, which to our *King* he bears.” In 1625, Taylor imagines, God has “purg’d and purify’d” England for Charles I just, he explains later, “As *He* did for his Father formerly / A sinful nation cleanse and purify” (153). Each death of a monarch is an opportunity to “cut superfluous branches down,” and give the new king a better chance to govern effectively.

This etiology for plague is inherently dissatisfying, of course, because it fails to account for plague visitations that cause high mortality in years when a sovereign does not die, and it suggests that England deserves each time to feel again the wrath of God. It does nothing to help relieve anxieties or to account for the deaths of the innocent, faithful, or otherwise beyond reproach. Such thinking likely instead helped to fuel discontent and a lack of trust in England’s religious and civic leadership. Citing the loss of the “exclusive control of the cultivation of memory,” that had allowed former kings and queens (and at one time the Catholic church) to maintain support for the versions of history that legitimized their own power, David Cressy explains that in just these years, “English history became contested among competing religious and political groups.”¹¹ As the Stuart government sought to hold on more and more tightly to its power over the people, the result was less control and increasing factionalism that would lead the nation to the religious and political identity crisis of civil war.

In the absence of trust in the kind of medical, religious, and governmental security offered early in the reign of Elizabeth I, people filled in the gaps with revised beliefs and rituals that helped them account for the past, endure the present, and anticipate the future. Seventeenth-century poets did so by appropriating the epic form to suit what they imagined was their own “epochal change,” which Van Kelly explains in this way: “For Tolkien, *Beowulf* bears resemblance to the *Aeneid* because the respective heroes witness major epochal changes, from the Hellenic to the Roman world in one case, from the pagan to the Christian world in the other.”¹² The poets of England’s plague epic saw their own stories bearing this very resemblance to the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Unlike the *Beowulf* poet or Virgil, however, these poets found themselves living through the epochal change about which they wrote. As John Davies of Hereford (1565?–1618) exclaims in 1609, “Never came there like Mortality, / Since Death from Adam to his Children

¹¹ David Cressy, “National Memory in Early Modern England,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

¹² Van Kelly, “Introduction: Criteria for the Epic: Borders, Diversity, and Expansion,” in *Epic and Epoch: Essays on the Interpretation and History of a Genre*, eds. Steven M. Oberhelman, Van Kelly, and Richard J. Golsan, *Studies in Comparative Literature* 24 (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1994), 20 n. 14

came”; and still almost three decades later, George Wither (1588–1667) claims with all seriousness, “A braver Subject, *Muses never had*.”¹³

In concert with this opportunity for poets to write about epochal change from a first-hand perspective, the century saw a new primacy placed on the authentic experience of the plague-time author. Readers stuck in London did not want to hear about the plague from pampered poets who had afforded escape to the country, and those in the country likewise wanted news they could believe, coming from within the infected city. The increase in literacy and in the number of printed texts available in the vernacular supported this call. As London poets participated in an epic discourse that extended the story of England’s great trial beyond the boundaries of their cultural moment, they rooted their accounts distinctively in local detail that would speak to their seventeenth-century English readers. The poets describe the streets of London, abandoned but for those who pass through quickly, their noses stuffed with tarred rope and other agents thought to prevent them from inhaling plague-tainted vapors. In as much detail, poets turn their attention to their own afflicted bodies, overcharged with grief and fear, as they witness and record the catastrophic alterations wrought by plague.

In the seventeenth-century plague visitation experience, as in the literary epic, the marvelous and mundane appear side by side in ways poignant and problematic, creating tensions between classical and Christian thinking about the purpose of disease as well as between public expressions of faith and the solitary, unique experience of extreme suffering and bearing witness to it. To give correspondingly sublime voice this set of tensions, poets of the seventeenth century turned consistently to the epic—the genre trusted to direct their tragedy and lamentation toward a heroic, hopeful conclusion.¹⁴ The many epic markers in these plague

¹³ John Davies, *The Triumph of Death* (1609), 93. George Wither, *Britain’s Remembrancer* (1638), 214. Wither also wrote, ‘History of the pestilence’ (MS 1999, Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge) and a revised version of the *Remembrancer* entitled, *A memorandum to London* (1665; Wing [CD-Rom, 1996], W3170). On the *Remembrancer* in its plague-time context, especially with respect to memory and Reformation politics, see Gilman, *Plague Writing*, 101–109. On Wither’s life, see Michelle O’Callaghan, ‘Wither, George (1588–1667)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29804>, accessed 16 March 2010].

¹⁴ As Sir Philip Sidney argues in *The Apology for Poetry*, the epic was considered “not only a kind, but the best and most accomplished kind of poetry,” ed. R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 99. With respect to “why Milton incorporated so complete a spectrum of literary forms and genres in *Paradise Lost*,” for example, Lewalski explains, “a partial answer must be that much Renaissance critical theory supports the notion of the epic as a heterocosm or a compendium of subjects, forms, and styles” (“The Genres of *Paradise Lost*: Literary Genre as a Means of Accommodation,” *Milton Studies* [Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983], 77). See also her *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). One might say, as S. Clark Hulse has for the Elizabethan minor epic, that the plague epic “is by nature metamorphic verse” (“Elizabethan Minor Epic: Toward a Definition of

poems in particular—from *praepositio*, invocation, and epic simile to martial and navel themes, digression, moral exempla, and allusion to other epics—offered layers of assurance that the narrative would not slip too far into the fear-producing realm of tragedy or the grief-inducing territory of lamentation. By these methods, inscribed in the heroic measures of their metrical form, the poets forcefully appropriated their gravest enemy, Death, making him serve their turns.

In heroic measures, the metrical feet and rhyme scheme of their poems, these seventeenth-century poets approximated the dactylic hexameter verse form of those they considered the world's master poets, the classical authors of martial and didactic verse, including Homer, Hesiod, Aratus, Lucretius, Virgil, Manilius, Ovid, and Lucan. Through iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets, they demonstrated their own literary kinship and fitness. The plague epic, like its biblical and secular siblings in the same century, deviated little from this form, particularly as the century advanced and brief epics grew in popularity. Even those few poets who did adopt a slightly altered verse form appear to have done so to call attention to their choices, thereby highlighting the heroic purpose and content of their poems. William Muggins' (n.d.) *London's Mourning Garment* (1603), for example, appears in rhyme royal, the standard meter in Chaucer's time, which Chaucer used for *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385) and Shakespeare used for *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594)—poems since identified as “brief” or “minor” epics.¹⁵ John Davies wrote

Genre” *Studies in Philology* 73.3 [Jul., 1976], 279). On mixed modes in early modern literature, see Sir Philip Sidney, *The Apology for Poetry*, 97; Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* (Berkeley, London, and New York: University of California Press, 1973), 20–31; John M. Steadman, *Epic and Tragic Structure in Paradise Lost* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976); Kenneth Borris, *Allegory and Epic in English Renaissance Literature: Heroic Form in Sidney, Spenser, and Milton* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially 57–8; John T. Shawcross, “Milton and Epic Revisionism” in Oberhelman, Kelly, and Golsan, 186–207; Jennifer O’Meara, *Alchemists, Epics, and Heroes: The Rhetorical Construction of the Seventeenth Century Experimental Philosopher* (Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007), 11. As a starting place for consideration of the epic sublime in this period, see David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 140, 208, 304.

¹⁵ On the brief epics of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and others, see Elizabeth Story Donno, *Elizabethan Minor Epics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Hulse, “Elizabethan Minor Epic,” pp. 302–319; and Paul W. Miller, “The Elizabethan Minor Epic,” *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Jan., 1958), pp. 31–8. For a list of common characteristics of minor and brief epics, see Paul W. Miller, *Seven Minor Epics of the English Renaissance (1596–1624)* (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), xvi. On the popularity of the brief epic among poets, see especially Hulse: “Except for Sidney, every major Elizabethan poet, and most of the minor ones, wrote minor epics” in *The Metamorphic Verse: The Elizabethan Minor Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). On Chaucer’s poem as a five act “minor” epic, see Richard H. Perkinson, “The Epic in Five Acts,” *Studies in Philology* 43.3 (1946), 465–81. On the dating of Chaucer’s poem, see Larry Dean Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1020.

his plague epic, *The Triumph of Death* (1609), in iambic pentameter with heroic quatrains rather than couplets—a form of English heroic verse that John Dryden and William Davenant, among others, utilized for their epics.¹⁶ And although *News from Graves-end* (1604) by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton appears in the ballad form of iambic tetrameter with heroic couplets, their choice of meter creates an undoubtedly intentional contrast between the poem's common prosody and its many other overtly heroic markings.¹⁷

As these poets crafted their plague epics, they contributed to an international discourse that was increasing in popularity in those years. Abraham Cowley, John Dryden, and John Milton were among the many involved in debates over what constituted an epic. These debates grew in part, as Barbara K. Lewalski has shown, because of the century's preference for Christian over classical subject matter, and because such content created what Judith Kates has called “the problem of Christian epic.”¹⁸ As Tobias Gregory most recently explains, the problem faced by Christian poets who attempt to write epics is exactly the problem of theodicy: “How can the poet generate tension within the epic plot when one omnipotent character holds all the cards? How does the violence the poem relates reflect on the ostensibly benevolent deity who orders all?”¹⁹ Classical poets had not faced quite the same dilemma: “The motives of the Olympian gods are perspicuous to the reader; we know the reasons for Neptune's ire, or Juno's” (7). Like Kates, Gregory addresses the problem of a Christian God in the martial epic, and, when applied to the plague epic in particular, the questions are all the more salient. Moreover, in the early modern martial Christian epic, violence comes to God's chosen and to their adversaries, but we know the ending: the Christians will win, due to a “Mosaic distinction” that is “ubiquitous” in the Renaissance epic (13). That distinction exists in *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, and in the seventeenth century's biblical epic, a popular close cousin to the plague epic.²⁰ The

¹⁶ On the relationship between the seventeenth-century heroic quatrain used for epics and the very same form called the elegiac quatrain in the eighteenth century and used more often for elegies, see Henry Weinfield, *The Poet Without a Name: Gray's Elegy and the Problem of History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 93; Peter Thorpe, *Eighteenth Century English Poetry* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), 161–62; and Paula R. Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 271–72.

¹⁷ The Dekker and Middleton blending of epic and ballad elements is in keeping with the contrasting but linked modes of satirical correction and saturnalia that Lawrence Manley finds in Dekker's early plague pamphlets (352–66).

¹⁸ See Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, and Judith Kates, *Tasso and Milton: The Problem of Christian Epic* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Tobias Gregory, *From Many Gods to One: Divine Action in Renaissance Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9. See also Gregory Machacek, *Milton and Homer: “Written to Aftertimes,”* *Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 76–81.

²⁰ See Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, and, in this volume, notes 53 and 55.

Mosaic distinction does not, however, appear in the plague epic. All who suffer in these plague epics are Christians, and plague is the only clear victor. In fact, poets regularly employ the saying that a Londoner, regardless of his or her particular faith, was more feared in plague-time than any Spaniard, Jew, or pagan.²¹ The chosen people in the plague epic appear at times to be their own worst enemies, a plague upon themselves.

How, then, might one depict the plague in an epic for Christian readers? Certainly, the plague appears at the heart of classical epics, plainly available for appropriation. Homer's Greeks in *The Iliad* experience Apollo's anger as a plague, a sign of disapproval they cannot ignore or circumvent.²² Their decisions regarding how best to appease Apollo, and thereby lift the plague, exacerbate the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon and set the stage for protracted battle with the Trojans, who would otherwise have had little chance against the Greeks. In the *Aeneid*, Apollo sends a plague to prevent Aeneas from settling in Crete, forcing the hero to move on, eventually founding Rome. Even in *The Metamorphoses*, the jealousy Hera experiences when she learns of yet another of Zeus' dalliances results in a plague on one of his favorite towns. These representations of plague could not be appropriated by seventeenth-century Christian poets without serious adjustment; their readers knew a very different plague, which came to many more people in an array of forms and with far less warning or (satisfying) explanation, and these readers were also raising questions regarding God's involvement.

To account for suffering wrought by this unique adversary, without diminishing the epic quality of their poems or stumbling over how to depict God's role in the action, poets of the century appropriated additional depictions of the plague from another form of classical heroic verse, the didactic.²³ As in martial epic poems,

²¹ For instances in plague writing that show Londoners more feared or hated than the historical enemies or groups perceived to threaten Christianity, see in this volume Dekker and Middleton, who write that one "does a Jew or Turk prefer, / Before that name of Londoner" (82); and Taylor, "to be thought a *Londoner* is worse / Than one that breaks a house or takes a Purse"; moreover, "in his house (to harbor) he'll prefer / An Infidel before a *Londoner* (145).

²² On early modern conceptions of anger and plague as related to the bodily humor of cholera, externalized during the act of cursing, see Rebecca Totaro, "'Revolving This Will Teach Thee How to Curse': Lessons in Sublunary Exhalation," *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 135–51. See also in this volume notes 43 and 56. War and plague were considered symptoms of fiery, overheated humoral and meteorological systems, as Homer had related centuries earlier in *The Iliad*. On the infectious nature of wrath and plague in Homer's epic, see Daniel R. Blickman, "The Role of the Plague in the *Iliad*," *Classical Antiquity* 6.1 (1987): 1–10. See in this volume's poems the many representations of plague as spreading like fire: for example, Dekker and Middleton (76); Austin (232), and Davies (108–9).

²³ For current discussion regarding genres of epic and didactic verse, see Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic*; Monica Gale, ed., *Latin Epic and Didactic Poetry: Genre, Tradition and Individuality* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2004); Monica Gale,

written likewise in dactylic hexameter, didactic poets invoke muses and mention gods, but the plague does not emanate from these gods, nor is it associated with emotion. In the didactic account, the narrator reports the plague as a matter of fact, to be understood as part of life experience and considered in the way that the farmer studies the thundercloud and the positions of the sun and moon. The didactic plague is not associated with individual characters, such as Agamemnon or Apollo, and it is not concerned with the merits of those it smites. In the didactic arena, the plague comes on the air to all people and often to all animals and other forms of life. In *De Rerum Natura*, for example, Lucretius closes his treatment of the natural world with a description of the great plague of Athens, the bringer of dissolution to all matter that ensures that new life may combine out of the newly released atoms.²⁴ These representations of plague informed the writing of poets and natural philosophers from the period who were eager to teach their readers what they believed were the most compelling truths about the plague they were experiencing.²⁵

Lucretius and the Didactic Epic (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001); Monica Gale, *Virgil on the Nature of Things: The Georgics, Lucretius and the Didactic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Philip Hardie, *Lucretian Receptions: History, the Sublime, Knowledge* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially page 2 and chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8; Peter Toohey, *Epic Lessons and Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Alexander Dalzell, *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry: Essays on Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and M. Owen Lee, *Virgil as Orpheus: A Study of the Georgics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

²⁴ See the end of book six of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, tr. W.H.D. Rouse, rev. M.F. Smith, The Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1975], 576–91). See also Virgil's *Georgics*, the end of book three in (*Virgil in Two Volumes: I, Eclogues Georgics Aenied I–VI*, ed. H. Rushton Fairclough, The Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1942], especially pages 192–95); and see Manilius' *Astronomica*, the end of book one (*Manilius, Astronomica*, trans. G.P. Goold, The Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1977], especially pages 74–7). According to Ian Green, *De Rerum Natura* was available in English translation by Abraham Fleming as early as 1589. It had been available as early as the 1550s in Latin, common enough to be used for sample passages in Thomas Cooper's Latin-English dictionary of 1565 (*Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* [Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009], 1). Grammar school boys read Virgil's *Georgics* in Latin in their fourth year (Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, *Jonson, Shakespeare and Early Modern Virgil* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 44).

²⁵ On the relationship between depictions of the plague in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and in Virgil's *Georgics*, see Gerard Passannante, "The Art of Reading Earthquakes: On Harvey's Wit, Ramus's Method, and the Renaissance of Lucretius," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (2008): 820–821; David West, "Two Plagues: Virgil, *Georgics* 3.478–566 and Lucretius 6.1090–1286, in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*, ed. David West and Tony Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 71–88; Richard F. Thomas, "Prose into Poetry: Tradition and Meaning in Virgil's *Georgics*," in *Oxford Readings in*

When appropriating representations of the plague from classical, didactic verse, seventeenth-century poets altered what they found, suiting it to a Christian paradigm for creation.²⁶ In this teleological model, the didactic cycle of life in which plague is naturally recurring gives way to something more like path that begins in a sin- and disease-free Eden, leads to a postlapsarian world of hardship, and ends with apocalyptic purification. Whereas in the classical didactic poem the

Vergil's Georgics, ed. Katharina Volk (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65. On the relationship between the depictions of plague in *De Rerum Natura* and in Lucretius' source, Thucydides' description of the plague of Athens within his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, see E. J. Kenney, "Lucretian Texture: Style, Metre and Rhetoric in the *De rerum natura*," *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108–110. On the interpretation of plague by natural philosophers of the seventeenth century, with special attention to the role of Lucretius' writings in their interpretations, see Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003), 16; and Totaro, *Suffering in Paradise*, 115–16. On the blending of cosmological and national themes in classical didactic verse, see Philip Hardie, "Cosmology and National Epic in the *Georgics* 2.458–3.48," in Volk, 161–81.

²⁶ In *Of Education*, John Milton includes the didactic poems of Lucretius, Manilius, and Virgil in his list of required reading for all English students (cited in Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, 976); see Richard J. DuRocher, who adopts the term "didactic epic" for these works by Lucretius, Manilius, and Virgil, as Milton would have done (*Milton Among the Romans: The Pedagogy and Influence of Milton's Latin Curriculum*, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001], 1–34. See also John Dryden's discussion of epics in "Letter to Sir Robert Howard," in the prefatory material to *Annus mirabilis, The year of wonders* (1667), sig. A1r–A8v. Dryden's poem is something of a plague epic, but because it equally takes up war and fire as subjects with the plague, I have chosen not to transliterate it for this volume. The same applies for John Tabor's *Seasonable Thoughts in Sad Times* (1667). On Bede's classification of the epic and the history of this criticism in England, see Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, 15–16. Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas' enormously popular *Divine Weeks* (1605)—an hexameral biblical epic translated into English heroic couplets by Joshua Sylvester (1563–1618) and championed by John Milton and King James I and VI—is an important example of a Christianized didactic presentation of plague. Du Bartas takes his readers through the six days of creation and then forward in time to show that although God created a bountiful earth, humans have quickly forgotten to whom they owed thanks and obedience. The latter portion of his hexameral epic is what Marie Loretto Lilly might call a "town georgic," describing a depleted, non-rural, and in many ways post-georgic environment (*The Georgic: A Contribution to the Study of the Vergilian Type of Didactic Poetry* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1919], 43). In the English translation, as Joshua Scodel notes, Du Bartas' translator, Sylvester, emphasizes the especially poisonous excesses of the city (*Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002], 91). On the role that Du Bartas' works played in the securing interest in Lucretius in this period, see Stuart Gillespie, "Lucretius in the English Renaissance," Gillespie and Hardie, 247–49. See also Anne Lake Prescott, "The Reception of Du Bartas in England," *Studies in the Renaissance* 15 (1968): 144–73.

plague is constitutive of the created world, in the Christian version the plague is a feature only of the postlapsarian version of the created world. Plague had not existed before Adam and Eve fell, and it only came into being with their sin. In the postlapsarian world, the plague is recurs not because it is inherent in nature itself but because it is the result of sin that will accompany humankind until the world's literal end. The plague might then be seen as sewn into the fabric of human life. Furthermore, Protestants generally believed that this plague visited humans by working its way through nature. It was not sent directly from God to humans but seemed to arise out of miasma, travel through the air, or spread person to person by breath—versions of natural transmission similarly representation in the didactic poetry of Lucretius, Virgil, Manilius, and others.

By turning to Lucretius in particular, early moderns reinforced a relatively new turn toward rational accounts of material conditions and causes and away from what they considered the superstitious fictions that claimed magic where none existed. In *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materialism in Renaissance Representations*, Jonathan Goldberg calls this turn to Lucretius a “turning to the world” and finds ample evidence of Lucretian materialism in paintings of the period—evidence of a belief that all matter, in all forms large and small, enduring and transient, derives from a common material substance and warrants attention.²⁷ This Lucretian turn, some have recently argued, would eventually help pave the way for the scientific revolution and for the novel.²⁸ In the meantime, in their serious, elevated measures, seventeenth-century poets made room for the viewpoint of the material witness, a plague that more closely resembled their own, and a God that was far less involved. Their plague was a metamorphic monster that stalked them in dreams, made their bodies quake (or

²⁷ Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 7–31. On this Lucretian turn in the writings of Edmund Spenser, Margaret Cavendish, and John Milton, see also his chapters 3–5.

²⁸ On the Renaissance appropriation of Lucretius, paving the way toward a new materialism, the scientific revolution, and challenging the concept of tradition itself, see especially Gerard Passanante, *The Lucretian Renaissance: The Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Gerard Passanante, “The Art of Reading Earthquakes,” 792–832; and Gerard Passanante, “Homer Atomized: Francis Bacon and the Matter of Tradition,” *English Literary History* 76.4 (2009): 1015–1047. See also John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Anthony Low, “New Science and the Georgic Revolution in Seventeenth Century English Literature,” *English Literary Renaissance* 13 (1983): 231–59; Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and also recently, Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). On early modern didactic literature in general, see Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell, Introduction to *Didactic Literature in England, 1500-1800: Expertise Constructed*, ed. Glaisyer and Pennell (Aldershot, England; Ashgate, 2003), 4–18.

worse), sent even their kings on the run, and threatened to upturn civilization itself. It demanded correspondingly vast, complex, and close-up treatment. As classical poets had attested to the plague's essential presence in world history, seventeenth-century poets demonstrated why the epic form was still the cage most fit to hold their own century's plague.

“Grim Death, Hold not my pen”: Plague-Time Poets

By writing of the plague in heroic measures, poets in the century distinguished themselves from their peers, contributing to what was considered the most serious and comprehensive of literary forms. Taking the plague as their subject, they distinguished themselves further by the degree of experience, knowledge, attestation of faith, or special insight they provided on the subject. Some of these poets were tradesmen, some remain anonymous but for their single poetic contribution, and others were already or fast becoming well-known poets, dramatists, and pamphlet writers. A short sketch of some of their lives and works delineates many differences among them as well as the degree to which their poems and purposes are of a kind. Given the range of poets who wrote plague epics, the coherence among the poems is all the more striking.

William Muggins wrote one of the first brief plague epics in English, and, as is the case for Richard Milton and Thomas Clark, we would know nothing of certainty about him were it not for his poetry. Some scholars believe he was a weaver, perhaps imprisoned with Thomas Deloney in 1595 for circulating a protest on behalf of the Company of Weavers.²⁹ What is more certain is that while many Londoners evacuated the city during plague outbreaks, many more, like William Muggins, stayed and became witness to London's transformation. In *London's Mourning Garment* (1603), Muggins takes London's plight to heart, personifying the city as an abandoned mother who speaks to her citizen-children of her grief at their departures and deaths during this visitation. This specific trope of mothers,

²⁹ Scott Oldenburg speculated in “*London's Mourning Garment: An Epidemiology of Class*,” a paper delivered as part of the 2006 Renaissance Society of America conference (25 March 2006), that Muggins was a weaver and sometime cellmate of Thomas Deloney—imprisoned for their parts “in a 1595 petition to bring French immigrant weavers into line with guild ordinances. The petition was signed by three weavers who described themselves and the weavers they represented as the ‘Yeomanry of the Company of distressed Weavers.’” On Deloney, with special examination of his depiction of women in his own writings, see Mihoko Suzuki, *Subordinate Subjects: Gender, the Political Nation, and Literary Form, 1588-1688, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 27–74. On Muggins, see also Patricia Phillippy's chapter “London's Mourning Garment: Maternity, Mourning and Succession in Shakespeare's *Richard III*,” in *Women, Death, and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109–138; and Totaro, “Mother London and the *Madonna Lactans* in England's Plague Epic,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations—Images, Rhetorics, and Practices*, ed. Jutta Sperl (forthcoming from Ashgate).

fathers, and infants separated from one another appears in plague writing that dates to at least as early as Lucretius' account of the plague in Athens, and here it is all the more compelling when delivered in London's voice and, later in the poem, in the voices of London mothers who step forward to tell their own stories.³⁰ Initially, London describes herself as all but fully human, suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that result in overt, physiological signs of grief:

With heavy heart and sighs of inward Cares,
 With wringing hands, explaining sorrow's woe,
 With blubbered cheeks, bedewed with trickling tears,
 With mind opprest, lamenting griefs that flow—
 London, lament, and all thy losses show. (54)

"Opprest" with "griefs" that affect her mind and body, London wrings her hands and cries out alone in a lament that, she will show, is the product of child loss. Muggins has given his London a voice, heart, lungs, hands, cheeks, and copious tears. She is London and a London mother; she is also his *alma mater*. In the next lines, he then adds epic content to this scene of maternal loss, as London challenges her own claim that she might "*all thy losses show*" (my emphasis): "What all? Nay, some. All were too much to tell; / The learned Homer could not pen it well" (54). At once, London plays the part of poet, muse, and Christian hero. She is the grieving every-mother who recalls the details of birth and nursing, and she keeps the company of Homer, Agamemnon, Jupiter, Caesar, Venus, Icarus, and King David. By the end, mother London also recasts her didactic role, moving from teacher of London's mothers to teacher of London's civic leaders, instructing them in the art of compassionate governance that will ensure their mutual return to glory.

Writing from outside of London, and in many ways from the opposite side of the proverbial track, John Davies of Hereford, author of *The Triumph of Death* (1609), trained at Oxford where he became a writing master with an unquestionable reputation. As P.J. Finkelpearl explains, "Thomas Fuller in his *Worthies of England* called Davies 'the greatest master of the pen that England in her age beheld' (Fuller, *Worthies*, 2.79), and his renown reached as far as Germany according to a commendatory poem in Davies's *Microcosmos*."³¹ He taught at Magdalen College at Oxford, tutoring the elite and moving within circles that included John Donne, William Shakespeare, Inigo Jones, Lady Mary Wroth and many of England's most prominent families. Among his students, for example, was Elizabeth Cary (1585–1639), the first woman to write a full-length play (*The Tragedy of Miriam* [1613])

³⁰ From Lucretius: "Sometimes you might see the lifeless bodies of parents lying upon their lifeless children, and contrariwise children yielding up their life upon the bodies of mother and father" (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, in Rouse, 587).

³¹ P.J. Finkelpearl, 'Davies, John (1564/5–1618)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7244>, accessed 13 March 2010].

and a political history in English (*The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II* [published in 1680]). Davies is also familiar to those who now believe that he, and not Shakespeare, wrote “A Lover’s Complaint.”³²

Davies wanted to be a great poet, and in the years leading up to his writing of *The Triumph of Death*, he wrote many poems in high style, with lengthy dedications, heroic prosody, invocations, and ponderous marginal reference notes. None of these poems gained him the notoriety he sought, but he persisted and found perhaps his greatest success with his didactic epic mentioned above, the full title of which is *Microcosmos, The discovery of the little world* (1603). In this poem, which was published several times through 1631, Davies begins by invocation and sings of England’s fortunes and failures, all delivered in heroic quatrains. In *The Triumph of Death*, he uses the very same heroic elements and prosody to offer a close-up of such failures, showing plague as a hungry tyrant who justly brings prideful London to her knees, such that, in the height of the catastrophe, “The London Lanes (themselves thereby to save) / Did vomit out their undigested dead, / Who by cartloads are carried to the Grave, / For all those Lanes with folk were overfed” (101). London is sick on her own inhabitants, made violently ill by their swarming prosperity. In the ensuing narrative, family members betray or otherwise abandon each other in death, and it appears that God’s wrath will lead to utter destruction of the nation. Davies also likens London to Troy with the name “Troynovant” (112), employs epic similes, and uniquely supplies the personified antagonist, Death, with a lengthy monologue recommending a number of unappealing methods for spreading the plague more quickly: among them, “Beblaine the bosom of each Mistress / That bares her Breasts (lust’s signs) guests to allure; / With a plague, kiss her (that plagues with a kiss)” (97). Davies also uses marginalia heavily to cite biblical passages; call attention to epic similes on autumn leaves and ships at sea (each marked “similitude” [109]); and offer the occasional plague fact. In the margin beside a reference to plague as “like a Jerffe” (103), for example, he explains that the exotic Jerffe (giraffe) is “A Beast never but feeding, and when he hath eaten as much as his paunch hold, goes to a forked tree, and there strains out his food undigested between the twist of the tree, and so again presently falls to feed, and being full, again to the tree, and so eftsoons to feed” (103n33). Now known to be a ruminant animal (thus accounting in part for Davies’ depiction), the giraffe was only just becoming the kind of beast one might hear about in a tall tale of travel or see in a royal menagerie. Its penchant for eating here represents the strangely bulimic behavior of an ever gorging and purging, ever-hungry, plague. In another marginal note, Davies offers an early modern medical aphorism: “If the botch break not the Patient liveth not. It kills others with breaking” (107). This note highlights the belief that the plague acted like a poison that the body was

³² For more on Davies and his work, see Finkelpearl and Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, ‘A Lover’s Complaint’, and John Davies of Hereford* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

trying desperately to expel by the pushing out of buboes.³³ Lancing and draining of buboes (“botch”es) was thought to help the process along, but the treatment itself could expose the victim to another lethal threat, recovering from plague only to die from an infected wound; thus, the saying makes plain the danger in either case. Even when Davies cites the Bible, his choices are memorable, as in his associating the oft-repeated observation that many in flight out of London die on the highways, with a marginal note citing Lamentations 4.5: “They that feed delicately perish in the streets; they that were brought up in scarlet, embrace the dung” (107n42). These are some of the many reasons to return to the writings of Davies.

The plague epic of Thomas Clark is equally engaging for many different reasons, among them that Clark’s personal experience with the plague is enormously compelling. The only record we have of Clark is the poem in this volume, but its title alone offers more of a record of the man than the full poems do for other poets: *Meditations in my confinement, when my house was visited with the sickness: in April, May and June, 1666. In which time I buried two children, and had three more of my family sick* (1666). This is a rare account; few if any people other than Clark were quarantined, witnessed the deaths of their children, and then were able and willing to write about it, let alone in heroic couplets. No other account like this exists in print, and perhaps it is the title of the poem that has prevented scholars from considering Clark’s intention to contribute formally to a body of heroic literature. In dedicatory verses to his “much Honored Friends, whose kindness and Affection hast been Expressed to me in my late Affliction,” Clark explains his serious, scripted purpose:

*Give ear (my courteous friends) and lend your vote,
To this my doleful and Swan-like note;
Though not so sweet (as that is said), more true,
Which causeth me my cheeks with tears bedew:
That, is a Poet’s fiction of the Swan;
This, sobs and groans of an afflicted man,
One that with sorrows God doth castigate,
That he may fit him for a better state.
Expect not now in these lines Melody,
Nor shall I promise any Harmony.
Where grief predominates, it is a rein,
To check the Fancy and Invention’s strain.
This Piece at best is rough and impolite,
Not burnish’d o’re with art to make it bright* (258)

By calling attention to the poem as song, Clark places his poem among other epics, which “claim at the outset,” as Alison Higgins explains for Carolinian heroic

³³ On the belief that plague acted as a poison, see Totaro, “Chicken Soup (and Orange Juice) for the Plague-Time Soul?: Francis Bacon’s Utopian Prescription.” *English Language Notes* 47.2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 25–33. On the Medici giraffe, for example, see Belozerskaya, Marina. *The Medici Giraffe*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006.

verse, “that the subject of the poem shall be ‘sung.’”³⁴ Distinguishing himself from the other epic poets of the century, however, Clark claims that his song will not contain “Melody” or “Harmony,” because it is composed of “*sobs and groans of an afflicted man.*” His epic will be “*at best . . . rough and impolite.*”

This representation of his own work is inaccurate, of course; so much of his content, and his heroic measures themselves, testify to a poetic polishing of experience to “make it bright.” Hardly the product of anguish alone, Clark’s representation of the plague here, for example, reinforces the place of his song among epics:

This Sickness also, after Death, doth seem
To trample o’re the dead with disesteem,
And (Victor-like, o’re Captives) with despite,
Denies such Obsequies and fun’ral rite,
Which in a solemn manner is most due,
As we have seen in this late time, not few. (262–3)

The plague’s denial of funeral rites for the dead recalls the many famous classical episodes in which heroes and the sons of kings are refused burial by the enemy—the most egregious, final, and enduring form of military aggression, an act that makes clear there will be no mercy, forgetting, or forgiveness. The plague is this ruthless enemy of epic scale. This is also the enemy that challenged Clark physically, spiritually, and emotionally as an individual, forcing him to rethink roles as father, husband, friend, and citizen. In *Meditations in my Confinement*, Clark inscribes his own account into English and world history while anchoring the epic in the specific, private trauma experienced within his home.³⁵

Unlike Clark, Abraham Holland was a noted poet by the time his plague epic, *A Description of the Great, Fearful, and Prodigious Plague, 1625* (1626), was published. He was the son of Philemon Holland (1552–1637), who had translated into English the essential Galenic medical distillation, *Regimen sanitatis Salerni*, as well as Pliny’s *The History of the World* and the works of Livy—the *Regimen* and Pliny being especially important texts for natural philosophers and physicians of the time.³⁶ Abraham Holland might have seen his reputation flourish had he outlived his father, or at least survived the plague. He died in the year his plague epic was published. His brother Henry, a publisher, paid to bring Abraham’s poem

³⁴ Alison I. T. Higgins, *Secular Heroic Epic Poetry of the Caroline Period*, Schweizer Anglistische Arbeiten 31. (Bern: A. Francke, 1953), 13.

³⁵ In his treatment of his own house as the space of suffering, Clark adds to the many accounts of the home turned pest-house in the period; see especially Barbara Traister, “‘A plague on both your houses’: Sites of Comfort and Terror in Early Modern Drama” in Totaro and Gilman 169–82.

³⁶ Abraham Holland, *Regimen sanitatis Salerni* (1617); *The history of the world* (1601). On Philemon Holland’s reputation in his lifetime, see William Winstanley, *The lives of the most famous English poets* (1687), 146–7.

to press as part of *Hollandi post-huma*, the posthumous works that include “The author’s epitaph, made by himself.” Reprinted by Henry during the next two London plague visitations of 1630 and 1636, Abraham’s *A Description* was retitled *London look-back: a description or representation of the great and memorable mortality*. Part of its appeal, according to the new full title, derives from its “heroic matchless lines.” In these later editions, Henry combined his brother’s poem with medical prescriptions translated from French sources by physician Thomas Phayer and a set of meditative exercises written by the now unidentified “I.D. Preacher of God’s Word.” In this combination of texts, Henry offers a compendium intended as suitable recreation to assuage fears and thereby improve health through the creation of mirth. Abraham Holland’s *A Description* (later, *London look-back*) functions in this way itself, offering a variety of literary diversions for the reader, including a digression on the “age of gold” that was “happy” because free of disease (162); a catalog of animals and their plague-time behaviors (166–7); and epic similes on the court, war, falling autumn leaves, and the plague in *The Iliad* (157, 159, 162, 165).

In the last of England’s plague epics on record, Christopher Pitt (1699–1748) articulates many of the concerns expressed in previous plague epics, despite the fact he could not have witnessed firsthand an English plague visitation. Pitt’s father, also named Christopher (1662–1723), was a physician who may have introduced his son to accounts of plague recalled from his own childhood or from medical regimens of the day, most of which included a chapter on plague prevention. He may also have aided Thomas Creech in the translation of Lucretius’ account of the plague in *De Rerum Natura* (*T. Lucretius Carus the Epicurean philosopher; his six books De natura rerum done into English verse, with notes*, 1682). The younger Pitt certainly encountered the plague in literature, while a student at Oxford. An early university exercise resulted in his translation of all of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, and after he had completed *The Plague of Marseilles* (1721), he translated the works of Virgil, including the *Aeneid* in heroic couplets (1740), which was received with great acclaim and often compared to Dryden’s translation of 1697.³⁷

³⁷ On Pitt and his father, see Anna Chahoud, “Pitt, Christopher (1699–1748),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22327>, accessed 24 Feb 2011]; and Theophilus Cibber, *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (1753) Volume V. Interest in epics and medicine seemed to run in the family: brother Robert Pitt (1693–1730) was a physician who translated part of *Paradise Lost* into Latin and wrote five medical tracts on illness, among them *The craft and frauds of physic expos’d*. (1703; first printed in 1702 with a shorter title). On other contributions from the Pitt brothers, see William Bridges Hodges, *A Milton Encyclopedia*, vol. 8. (New York: Associated University Presses, 1979), 79; and John T. Shawcross, *John Milton: The Critical Heritage Volume 2 1732–1801* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5. On Pitt’s *Aeneid*, see the original complete text in Joseph Warton, ed., *The Works of Virgil in Latin and English*, (1753), and see Mark Thackeray, “Christopher Pitt, Joseph Warton, and Virgil,” *The Review of English Studies* 43.171 (1992): 329–46. For the English translation of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* available at the time, see *Lucan’s Pharsalia: containing the civil wars between Cæsar and Pompey. Written in Latin heroical verse by M. Annæus Lucanus. Translated into English verse by Sir Arthur Gorges Knight* (1614).

The last great plague in England's history had struck in 1666, more than three decades prior to Pitt's birth, but Pitt was surely reading more than epic literature when reports of plague began to come to the island from France in 1720. He seized the opportunity to place into circulation an epic of his own, on what many feared would be the worst large-scale visitation yet. In Pitt's heroic measures, Marseilles is the "Queen of Nations fall'n from high" (279) due to that "Insatiate Tyrant" plague, "whose unbounded Will, / [is] Not yet contented with the Pow'r to kill" (279). Pitt's narrator endures verbalized struggle to give words to the horror he witnesses, including the murder of whole families who embrace as they die. Early on in the poem, then, it is clear that Pitt has taken upon himself the mantle of the plague-time poet, expressing full astonishment and rage at what he reports. In addition, although the poem is about the plague in Marseilles, France, as the poem closes, the plague approaches England's shores, and Pitt's narrator acts in desperation to call for aid:

Genius of *Britain*, with Indulgence hear,
 The sighs of *Albion* and the Poet's Prayer:
 Exert thy utmost tutelary care,
 To curb this purple Tyrant's lawless Pow'r.
 Stretch thy auspicious Wings from Shore to Shore.
 To guard her Natives from the dire Disease,
 Oppose the watery Bulwark of her Seas.
 Screen all her Kingdoms from the fierce Attack.
 Bid the kind Tempests blow her Poisons back.
 Bid the devouring Plague this Island spare,
 Nor stretch her Circle of Destruction here.
 Or if thy delegated Pow'r is gone,
 Fall low before Heav'n's everlasting Throne,
 And make the Cause of *Britain's* Realm thy own.
 To stay the Vengeance of thy God, appear
 Armed with the sacred Violence of Pray'r.
 Present the Incense of thy *Britain's* Vows.
 Weigh down eternal Justice with her Woes,
 Till her Repentance wrests away the Rod,
 And sheath the Sword of an offended God. (282)

Pitt implores Britain's animating spirit to take action against the plague and to protect the island: to "exert," "curb," "stretch," "guard," "oppose," and "screen." Then he requests that Britain strike an equally active, militarized pose that is nevertheless a prayerful one: "To stay the vengeance of thy God, appear / armed with sacred violence of prayer." The Genius of Britain is invoked not as a muse but as the generalized heroic spirit of the British people—a figure we might misread by associating it with an eighteenth-century detachment made possible only after decades of plague-free living, were it not for the tyrant plague that throughout the poem has menaced France and is poised to destroy Britain. Joining his seventeenth-century predecessors, Pitt also puts into motion the tension between

faith and doubt, explicitly rendered as a monster disease that is both part of God's plan of "Vengeance" and, more disturbingly, the result of "this purple Tyrant's lawless Pow'r" (emphasis mine).

The poets writing England's plague epics were clearly not of a kind by class, education, profession, political position, or religious persuasion. In their poems, they speak distinctively with voices marked by unique sets of local circumstances. What they share is the plague, a unique subject for appropriation which cut across most lines of demarcation and entirely frustrated definition. They also share a compulsion to capture the rage, grief, exasperation, doubt, faith, and hope of their moment—all in heroic verse. The result is a body of literature that uniquely expresses what no other artistic, literary, or cultural form could at the time. These epics are the nation's monuments and elegies to the Protestant plague-time dead.³⁸ They are the collective burial stones for those nameless, faceless scores in the plague pits. And they are a call to action, to do whatever it takes to return England to glory after so very many brutal defeats.

³⁸ For a discussion of the vexed issue of funerary monument building in post-Reformation England, see especially chapter four in Peter Sherlock's illuminating study, *Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008); and Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter four. See also Wither's position on the subject in this volume (220–23). Although elegies for those who died of smallpox were popular in the period, no set of plague elegies exists—the poems here are the closest equivalent. On the seventeenth-century smallpox elegy and the art of memory, see especially chapter three of David E. Shuttleton's *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination, 1660–1820* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and chapter five of Anselment's *The Realms of Apollo*. On elegies, memorials, and grief management in the period, see Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jeffrey A. Hammond, *The American Puritan Elegy*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jameela Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies Series (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 80–90, 147–50; P.G. Stanwood, "Consolatory Grief in the Funeral Sermons of Donne and Taylor," *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 197–216; G.W. Pigman III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ralph Houlebrook, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750*, Oxford Studies in Social History (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 220–254; W. Scott Howard, "'Mine Own Breaking': Resistance, Gender, and Temporality in Seventeenth-Century English Elegies and Jonson's 'Eupheme,'" in *Grief and Gender, 700–1700*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynn Dickson Bruckner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2003), 215–30.

“Fair London that did late abound in bliss”: London’s Metamorphosis

In a quest for bodies to consume, the ever-hungry plague always seemed to begin with London. There it would feed unchecked, and once it had run its course through that population, it could expand its assault into the country. In Lawrence Manley’s words, London was “the center of a complex network of changing relationships” due in large part to the printing press, and the plague made use of the very same routes for communication and trade that had allowed London to flourish (*Literature and Culture*, 2). In other words, London was the epicenter of plague and of print, and, as such, it figured as an essential setting in all early modern plague literature in England. After years of unremitting plague, for example, John Davies of Hereford chooses London as the setting for his plague epic and lays the blame for England’s illness at London’s feet:

At *London* (sink of Sin) as at the Fount,
This all-confounding Pestilence began,
According to that Plague’s most woeful wont,
From whence it (flowing) all the realm o’reran (100)

It is an internal condition of sin in London that leads to the plague “flowing” over the entire realm. Given that the *Oxford English Dictionary* records “sink” in this period as meaning a cesspool pit, the metaphor turns the nation into an ill attended sewer system that spreads rather than clears away corruption, infecting itself from within.³⁹ This thinking about contagion also suited the dominant humoral theory that, as Margaret Healy has noted, led most people to imagine that England’s own condition of internal imbalance was to blame for visitations, rather than foreigners from the Continent, for example (*Fictions of Disease*, 122). A number of the writers of plague epics blame London in similarly strong terms, but we might in part account for Davies’ particularly vehement tone by considering that, as a Hereford man, he could not quite claim London as his *alma mater* in the way that other poets could and proudly did.

Among the majority of London poets who describe the capital’s Ovidian metamorphosis in more empathetic terms is John Taylor the Water Poet.⁴⁰ In *The Fearful Summer* (1625), he assesses London’s current woes by comparing them to her former glory: “Fair *London* that did late abound in bliss, / And wast our Kingdom’s great *Metropolis*” has become “dejected, low in state, / Disconsolate, and almost desolate” (144–5). Once, his personified “Fair London” had been,

³⁹ OED *s.v.* sink, noun, A1.1. As Ernest B. Gilman explains, some writers acknowledged the relationship between the press and the plague by representing the press as an agent of the disease, spring sinful ideas that in turn brought plague to bodies and the nation (“Afterword: Plague and Metaphor” in Totaro and Gilman, 221–223, 230–231).

⁴⁰ On John Taylor, the Water Poet, see Bernard Capp, ‘Taylor, John (1578–1653)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27044, accessed 13 March 2010].

. . . the Queen of Cities nam'd,
 Throughout the world admir'd, renown'd, and fam'd;
 Thou that hadst all things at command and will,
 To whom all *England* was a Handmaid still.
 For raiment, fuel, fish, fowl, beasts, for food,
 For fruits, for all our Kingdom counted good.
 Both near and far remote, all did agree
 To bring their best of blessings unto *thee*.
 Thus in conceit thou seem'dst to rule the *Fates*,
 Whilst *peace* and *plenty* flourish'd in thy Gates. (145)

As mentioned above, Taylor was a waterman, earning his living as a product of London's prosperity, and this placed him in a credible position to assess the city's condition before, during, and after the plague. London's positive reputation prior to the visitation was proclaimed widely, he asserts. All materials and blessings for the island passed through London. Yet, she only "seem'dst to rule the *Fates*," because, of course, Taylor is writing about the fearful summer of her terrible transformation. As Taylor and others announce in some despair, Fortune's wheel has spun London, "Queen of Cities," down from on high, making her case all the more pitiable.

Although earlier in the poem Taylor cites London's "pride of Heart and deeds unjust" as reason for God "justly" correcting her (145), he is short in such statements and long in his expression of concern for London's wellbeing. It seems to pain him to see London in her dejected state, and he speaks to her in lines that seek to provide her with comfort:

Could I relieve thy miseries as well
 As part I can thy woes and sorrows tell,
 Then should my Cares be eas'd with thy Relief,
 And all my study, how to end thy grief. (145)

London becomes Taylor's "thy" for whom he respectfully, devotedly wishes relief. He wants to help her in her affliction, wishing he could tell at least a part of her story and thereby lighten her burdens, her heavy "woes and sorrows." Moreover, if he could help her, then his own burden would be "eas'd." Poetically, this is a moving image: poet and London/loved, hero and damsel in distress. Her rescue is his. From a material perspective this image is apt as well, because London had given Taylor his livelihood. But he can only tell those woes and sorrows in "part." Her burden is so great he cannot even articulate her sorrows fully, let alone relieve her of them.

In 1603, William Muggins had already gone more than one step further, with his full personification of London, who performs Muggins' song in first person. Beginning with a retrospective look at herself during what had only recently been the very height of her fortune, London cries out,

Ay me poor London, which of late did flourish,
 With springing MARCH, the tidings of a King,

And APRIL showers, my blossoms so did nourish,
 That I in MAY was called a famous thing.
 Yea, Towns and Cities did my glory ring.
 Nay, through the world my golden fame so grew
 That Princes high crost Seas, my seat to view.

And like to AGAMEMNON'S gallant train,
 Throughout my streets, with stately steps did go,
 Where them with welcomes, I did entertain,
 Pleasing their liking, with each several show,
 Where they in me, much treasure did bestow,
 Honoring the Church with Prayers, the Change with gold,
 Where Princes bought, and beauteous Virgins sold. (54)

London relishes her former, “golden fame” that “through the world” made her the desired destination of the princes of all nations. But she does so by opening with “Ay me poor London,” because this glory has been entirely compromised. Like Taylor and others, Muggins takes readers from London’s fall to her remembered glory, then through the fall again before lingering in the horrors of metamorphosis. Here, in recounting the conditions of the fall, Muggins shows a plague that is disquietingly invasive, as London explains, recounting something of a flashback:

But oh, a sudden qualm doth cross my heart.
 Twixt cup and lip are dangers oft we see.
 Unwelcome death approacheth with his dart,
 Yelping, “Oh, LONDON, thou must yield to me.
 I must have roots and branches for my fee.
 The fruits full ripe and blossoms that might grow
 Are mine, not thine; the Fates decreed it so.” (55)

Muggins has London recall the words of “Unwelcome death,” who comes to her not only “with his dart” but also as a male tyrant demanding that she “yield” to him because the “Fates decree’d it so.” This is a scene of tragic *peripeteia*, bringing about London’s reversal of fortune, and all without clear cause.⁴¹ God does not appear in these lines as the prime or otherwise justified mover of events. Moreover, although Muggins makes London’s Christian faith apparent elsewhere in the poem, here she is on her own, subject to an alteration of state so profound that little can account for it.

In an effort to assess London’s metamorphosis in 1625, Richard Milton likens England’s capital to her sister cities in world history:

. . . let us call to mind
 What mighty City we in writings find,
 That heretofore for glory bare the bell,

⁴¹ On Aristotelian elements of tragedy embedded in the early modern epic, see John M. Steadman, *Epic and Tragic Structure in Paradise Lost* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

And through the world did far and near excel
 The Famous *Nineveh*, *Jerusalem*,
Troy, *Carthage*, *Rome*, and many more with them,
 Which for their sins were wholly overthrown,
 Their standing places hardly to be known. (140)

Blending Christian and classical history, Milton places London in the grandest of company. In fact, her “glory . . . did far and near excel” them, these most “Famous” of sister cities of the world. But so too, he cautions, were these sister cities “wholly overthrown.” If London persists on course, she will become like them in their fatal errors, “their standing places hardly to be known,” their glories remembered only through literary memorials—like the one Milton imagines he is writing.

For John Taylor, London’s overthrow is graphically rendered, occurring viscerally around him: “grieved London, fill’d with moans and groans,” he explains, “Is like a *Golgotha* of dead men’s bones” (150). London has become “the field where death his bloody fray doth fight / And kills eight hundred in a day and night” (151). Taylor had been the one earlier to remind his readers that “Fair London” it was that “did late abound in bliss” (144). She is nothing like that later in his poem, reduced to a place of bones—*Golgotha*, one massive plague pit, one *danse macabre*, one “field” of unidentified, unburied corpses, just as they appeared in the plague bills. As Michael Neill explains in his magisterial study, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, “The death most to be feared . . . is the mass death because of its extravagant multiplication of disfigured bodies”—all of these bodies without faces or names.⁴²

“Too much Matter for my Muse to form”: Seeking Inspiration

These epic poets give voice to the psychophysiological burden that it is to witness the suffering that comes with a plague visitation. In the first line of his poem, for example, William Muggins explains that London herself is weighed down “With heavy heart and sighs of inward Cares”—a weightiness reinforced by the use of anaphora to describe her “with heavy heart,” “with wringing hands,” “with blubbered cheeks,” and “with mind opprest” (54). This is the kind of emotion that in a Galenic paradigm must be purged, or it will only make the body more susceptible to illness.⁴³ In lines soon after, London comes forth to ask for help in

⁴² Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

⁴³ On humoralism and its psychophysiological basis, see as a starting place, Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). On the glutted body, unpurged and pestilent, see Healy, chapter 6. On the belief in the health value of disgorging harmful bodily heat through speech, see Totaro, “Revolving this will teach thee how to curse”; and Stephen Pender, “Rhetoric, Grief, and the Imagination in Early Modern England,” *Philosophy and Rhetorica* 43.1 (2000): 54–81—