

Defoe's journal and the English plague writing tradition.

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Literature and Medicine

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 22, Number 1, Spring 2003

pp. 25-44

10.1353/lm.2003.0006

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Literature and Medicine 22.1 (2003) 25-44

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Were it possible to represent those Times exactly to those that did not see them, and give the Reader due Ideas of the Horror that every where presented it self, it must make just Impressions upon their Minds, and fill them with Surprise. *London* might well be said to be all in Tears.

—*A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722 ¹

In 1720 London was in a state of panic: bubonic plague was causing havoc in Marseilles and predictions were rife that it would soon reach England. The government acted quickly, issuing proclamations enabling ships from infected countries to be quarantined, drawing up new regulations including policed *cordon sanitaires* for the control of any epidemic, and ordering a day of national fasting and prayer. On December 16, 1720 the nation was duly called to repentance and ministers railed from their pulpits and in print, detailing the sins of avarice, political discord, and slovenliness in religion that were likely to bring down the wrath of God on England unless a "Reformation of Manners" was promptly enacted. ²

A second public fast of December 8, 1721 produced further, often more pointed, vituperative outbursts, some of which were directed against the alleged sins of the Hanoverian establishment. ³ Walpole's government was in trouble. Finding itself condemned from many quarters for the harsh segregation measures it had put in place for the management of any outbreak—measures that were said to threaten the liberties and rights of the people—it was forced to retract. A milder Quarantine Act, which replaced the first, received royal assent in February 1722. ⁴ Just a month later, Daniel Defoe launched his fictional masterpiece, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, into this charged political atmosphere. Its concerns were certainly topical. ⁵ **[End Page 25]**

Indeed, masquerading as a true account ("observations and memorials") ⁶ of the 1665 plague epidemic as witnessed by a citizen of London, the saddler "H.F.," Defoe's *Journal* is actually dynamic history, harnessing the past in order to confront the anxieties and mediate and shape the debates of the author's own time. Defoe seems, for example, to have been in the pay of the government in 1722 and broadly supported its ship quarantine policies. ⁷ One of the *Journal's* designs, then, was likely to have been to bolster public support for the government's unpopular embargo on trade with plague-stricken countries, and even to help shore up a failing political regime. ⁸ If the populace could be made to appreciate the devastation caused by a deadly plague epidemic, they might tolerate the necessarily harsh preventative measures. This is undoubtedly one reason why the *Journal* strives persistently, as illustrated by the epigraph above, to represent the terrible plague of 1665 forcefully, so as to convey "horror" sufficient to "impress" and "surprise" people's "minds."

Literary critics have a tendency to ascribe Defoe's preoccupation with capturing "horror" to journalistic sensationalism, emphasizing his commercial concerns ("the most vivid warning of the terrors of plague was also the most marketable"). ⁹ Even his pioneering rendering of "fictional subjectivity" has been recently attributed to "systematic commercial exploitation." ¹⁰ Like the hack pamphlet writer Thomas Dekker over a century before him, who similarly struggled to capture "the *Horror of a Plague, the Hell*," ¹¹ Defoe is understood as desiring primarily to "record" the "real" situation, to produce a newspaper-style report with an added touch of ghoulishness to enhance the sell. ¹² Yet this is undoubtedly too limited a conclusion to draw from Defoe's plague-inspired propensity for chilling gothic expression. Indeed, Defoe himself attacked news writers who exaggerated the horrors of plague in France, terrifying people and injuring trade, merely for "the Pleasure of Writing Dismal Stories, Exciting Surprise and Horror" (*Applebee's Journal*, November 23, 1723). ¹³

Certainly, both these prolific writers, Dekker and Defoe, were motivated by commercial factors, which I do



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Literature and Medicine 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003) 25–44
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Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year, i must say that the zone of differential subsidence

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