

Chapter 9

The Graves When They Open, Will Be Witnesses Against Thee: Mass Burial and the Agency of the Dead in Thomas Dekker's Plague Pamphlets



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9.1 Introduction

In 2015 archaeologists accompanying the construction of the Crossrail railway line—cutting through London on an east-west axis—were tasked with the excavation of the New Churchyard (also known as Bethlem or Bedlam burial ground), a municipal cemetery in use from 1563 to 1739. In the southeast corner of the former graveyard (now the site of Liverpool Street Station), they discovered a seventeenth-century mass grave containing plague victims (confirmed by molecular paleopathologists at the Max Planck Institute, Jena, Germany). It was notable that those buried in the grave (originally circa one hundred individuals) had been placed in orderly stacks and rows and that care had been taken to ensure that uncoffined individuals and child burials would not be disturbed by subsequent coffin placements (cf. Hartle, 2017). Recent work by Cessford et al. (2021) also suggests that, contrary to previous perception, victims of the second plague pandemic not infrequently received funerary treatments indistinguishable from non-plague burials. Their analysis of Cambridge gravesites from the later medieval period, moreover, revealed that

[i]ndividuals in mass burials, at least those dating to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, were generally laid out in a careful and respectful manner in an extended supine position with their heads to the west replicating the practice of individual burials as far as possible. (Cessford et al., 2021, p. 513)

Contrary to the respectful and orderly treatment of the plague dead suggested by these finds, Thomas Dekker's descriptions of plague-time burial emphasize practices so dehumanizing that even the dead themselves perceive them as shameful

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211

and humiliating. Inconsistencies and contradictions almost inevitably arise where archaeology meets literary studies yet these do not attest to the incompatibility of the disciplines. Rather, the complexities of thought and practice they hint at clearly show the desirability of synergetic engagement. In the following pages, an examination of Dekker's plague pamphlets demonstrates how the written word—neither to be discounted nor to be taken at face value—engages with mortuary practices and artifacts in a way that may not, after all, be so foreign to the archaeological enterprise.

Dekker's pamphlets recount devastating, large-scale outbreaks of bubonic plague in early modern London, chronicling a metropolitan state of crisis in which normality is suspended and a majority of Londoners live in mortal fear of the dead and the dying—while country folk live in mortal fear of Londoners. *The Wonderful Yeaere* (Dekker, 1603/1924) is Dekker's account of the terrible 'visitation' that reached London in 1603 and which, by the time it had run its course, had killed at least 20% of the city's population.¹ Dekker collaborated with Thomas Middleton on *Newes from Graves-end: Sent to Nobody*, a further literary processing of the 1603 plague (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a). The pair combined their efforts once more on *The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinarie* (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925b). Dekker's satirical solo-effort *The Seven Deadly Sinnes of London* (Dekker, 1606) contains illuminating references to the plague and to burial practices though the text is not first and foremost a plague text and was not published in a major plague year (still, the plague continued to claim victims in London from 1606 to 1610). While his *A Rod for Run-awayes* (Dekker, 1625/1925) commemorates the urban catastrophe occasioned by the epidemic of 1625 when the plague killed upward of 15% of the ever-increasing metropolitan population, *London Looke Backe* (Dekker, 1630/1925) is a retrospective handling of that year's great mortality. There were both practical and ideological impulses compelling Dekker to pen and publish these pamphlets. First of all, plague in the city inevitably led to the cessation of much public life, including theatre-going. To secure their livelihoods, playwrights had to adjust their output to the circumstances and many turned to writing poetry, prose or verse narratives directly for the print market. In addition to these practical financial imperatives, Dekker used the medium of the pamphlet to communicate his unease (in a variety of styles and voices) about goings-on in the disease-ridden city. He indicts sins—committed in a climate of utter crisis—against the infected and their mortal remains. In his pamphlets Dekker laments that plague victims may be treated in death like convicted criminals or suicides but his especial horror is reserved for

¹ The plague often entered via seaports and was subsequently carried along trade routes. The 1603 London epidemic was anticipated by outbreaks in Hull and Great Yarmouth in 1602 (Slack, 1985, p. 13); the 1625 epidemic was preceded by an outbreak in Scarborough in 1624, while an epidemic in 1635 in North Shields preceded the 1636 outbreak in London. The plague was once more in Great Yarmouth in 1664 before the final major London epidemic of 1665 (Slack, 1985, p. 66). Still, Slack also notes that "even if we ignore years in which less than hundred casualties were notified, plague was present in 28 of the 64 years between 1603 and 1666. It was therefore endemic in London for much, perhaps most, of the early seventeenth century" (Slack, 1985, p. 147).

the mass grave which he understands as the worst possible affront to the dignity of the deceased.

9.2 Narrating the Plague

As a ‘plague narrator’ Dekker adopts a stylized personality matching his melancholy role. The dead—with whom he claims to have an intimate connection—haunt and inspire him and they reveal their late and ongoing suffering to him. Not only is Dekker their mouthpiece and advocate, he is equipped with all the paraphernalia befitting that position. Fittingly, his ink is kept in a human skull and consists of “teares of widowes, (black as Stix),” while for parchment he makes use of “a folded winding sheete” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 82). As ‘advocatus mortuorum’ Dekker’s self-professed aim is to solicit compassion for the dead and induce even the most hard-hearted to “shead / One drop (at least) for him that’s dead” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 82). Dekker-the-plague-writer is well aware that the dead have unfinished mortal business and he is eager to help communicate this to the survivors.

Furthermore, Dekker levels harsh criticism at well-off city-dwellers who desert London, their “disconsolate Mother (the City) in the midst of her sorrowes” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 145), to seek personal safety in the country.² The reasons for this condemnation are twofold: first, the plague-time exodus from London is characterized by social injustice (the poor must remain behind and the toll it takes on them is disproportionately high) and, secondly, it demonstrates insufficient faith in divine omnipotence. The plague is God’s scourge, after all, and the wrath of the deity neither can nor should be outrun. Dekker does not give credence to the idea of plague-spreading miasma (toxic fumes in the air), nor does he subscribe to the idea of contagion, i.e. the interpersonal transmission of the disease. If the plague really were in the air (miasma), he argues, it would “[i]n flakes of poyson drop on all” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 83) and there would be no survivors at all. If it were passed directly from person to person—by infectious breath, for instance—contact with the infected would always result in illness and, quite possibly, death. Since some people do survive close contact with plague victims, however, and since it is impossible to trace the disease back to a specific human originator, Dekker concludes that the contagionist position must also be inaccurate (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 84).³ Instead, sin at the core of each individual

²Luther’s *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (1527) discussed the same conundrum, as did Calvin in 1560 (Slack, 1985, p. 41).

³While theoretically incompatible, in practice there was no conflict between concepts of miasma and contagion in English discussions of plague until the later seventeenth century (Slack, 1985, p. 28).

(conceivable like a ‘plaguey worm’) provokes the disease.⁴ What is more, a disease which is not transmitted by natural means is not curable by natural means. Instead of seeking medical help, so Dekker, one should rather look toward Christian humility and repentance as the true “Physitian” (Dekker, 1630/1925, p. 188).⁵ Although his refutation of contagion was at odds with the establishment credo—which generally sought a compromise position between religious and natural explanations and sought to contain the plague by containing the infected—Dekker’s perspective was not uncommon. As a matter of course, his contemporaries pondered the relative importance of first causes: direct divine intervention, and second causes: natural channels through which God works indirectly; they applied themselves to questions of theodicy and the earthly responsibilities of men and women.⁶ On the one hand, despite the risk of infection, one was duty-bound to administer Christian charity to those in need. On the other hand, self-preservation and the protection of one’s family were powerful, legitimate motives and biblical evidence for both positions was cited. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, the voice of the clerical elite, argued for avoiding infected people and places (Gilman, 2009, p. 146), while low-church writer Henoeh Clapham fervently opposed this stance (Gilman, 2009, p. 150, 174).

Plague orders, first printed in 1579, introduced measures intended to check the spread of the disease in London by identifying the infected and isolating entire households for a minimum of 4 weeks.⁷ Self-interest—the wish to avoid economic disaster and, at its most basic, the will to survive—meant that many cases of plague were not made known to the authorities so as to avoid the misery of quarantine.⁸

⁴Thomas Moulton’s c. 1475 adaptation of John of Burgundy’s fourteenth-century plague treatise popularized a view of the plague as divine retribution that was to be dominant throughout the following centuries across Europe (Keiser, 2003, p. 300).

⁵There are rare exceptions to this strictly pious attitude, however, such as the dedication of *A Rod for Run-awayes* to surgeon Thomas Gilham, whose surviving patients are likened to works of art: “Many of your excellent Pieces haue benee (and are to bee) seene in this City” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 137).

⁶Gilman surmises: “At the point of its inadmissible failure, theodicy can only fall back on Luther’s argument that as long as there is no higher standard of justice against which the divine conduct can be measured, ‘[w]hat God wills ... must be right because He so wills it’” (Gilman, 2009, p. 145).

⁷As early as 1518 infected houses in London were to be marked by straw bundles hung from windows for 40 days and anyone who left a marked house was to carry a white stick when out (Slack, 1985, p. 201). The first book of plague orders was reprinted with only minor alterations in 1592, 1593, 1603, and 1625 (Slack, 1985, p. 209). It was included in statutes on social policy in 1609, 1630, 1636, 1646, and “radically revised” only in May 1666, when the plague had run its course in the British Isles (Slack, 1985, p. 209). The Plague Act of 1604 introduced sanctions against the infected. Any inhabitant from an isolated house found in the street could be treated as a vagrant rogue and whipped, while a person found with plague marks on their body was principally a felon and could face death by hanging (Slack, 1985, p. 211). However, there is no evidence that any plague victims were in fact ever punished as felons (Slack, 1985, p. 212).

⁸In William Muggins’ *London’s Mourning Garment* (1603), a father laments, “I cannot sell today, / One jot of work that all of us have wrought. / In every shop, I have for money sought, / And can take none, your hunger to sustain” (Muggins, 1603/2012, ll. 556–559); waterman John Taylor confirms that in plague time, “[a]ll trades are dead or almost out of breath, / But such as live by

Even if one was so lucky as to escape death (as roughly one third of those infected with bubonic plague did), the experience of the disease itself was an ordeal to say nothing of the trauma of enforced quarantine. While fear of the plague could be the reason for wary estrangements between all manner of people, servants, both male and female, and apprentices were especially vulnerable. While, in general, masters were deemed responsible for their ailing underlings, plague jeopardized all social ties and dependents often found themselves turned out when they were suspected of carrying the infection. This, laments Decker, led to people dying “in the open Streets,” in “Entries, and Stables,” “in the common High-wayes, and in the open Fields, on Pads of Straw [...], vnpittyed, vnrelieued, vnknowne” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 166). Having been turned out from their own abodes, these unfortunate outcasts would have been hard pressed to find charity elsewhere, with all of London and the surrounding counties wary of potential sources of infection.

In his pamphlets, Dekker illustrates sin and suffering in plague-ridden London both by reference to the exploits and hardships of individual city-dwellers (husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, merchants, servants, or physicians) and with the help of a common personification metaphor: the infected urban body of the anthropomorphic city can become a proxy for the populace.⁹ This she-city delivers ailing or stillborn children and suffers widowhood—again and again—while her own diseased corpus struggles to reabsorb her dying offspring. Whereas anthropomorphic London is celebrated in paeans and pageantry—Dekker himself had penned the Lord Mayor’s Shows of 1627, 1628 and 1629—it is this morbid version of the metropolis that Dekker is concerned with in his guise as a plague narrator. London’s metaphorical widowhood and general state of bereavement are recurrent images in his pamphlets (and early modern writing on the plague in general). Ernest Gilman has argued that, in the absence of plague saints like Palermo’s Rosalia and Venice’s Thecla, London itself becomes “a pale replica of these powerful female saints” (Gilman, 2009, p. 248). Yet London is never wholly saint. ‘She’ is always a dual entity—saint *and* whore: chaste wife, caring mother but also depraved, licentious hag. Nor does plague-time London have the power to intercede with an angry god. The city is as much at the mercy of the disease as her constituents are.

sickness, or by death: / The Mercers, Grocers, Silk-men, Goldsmiths, Drapers, / Are out of season, like noon-burning Tapers” (Taylor, 1625/2012, ll. 257–260).

⁹The personified city, as the feminine face of the infection, frequently serves as an illustration of urban corruption by reference to pregnancy and childbirth: The year 1625—witnessing both the death of James I and a major plague epidemic—is described as “a yeare, great with Childe of wonder,” moving toward a “Prodigious Birth” (Dekker, 1630/1925, p. 176). In the epidemic of that year, “[t]he City so much of her Body lost, / That she appear’d, a ghastly, headlesse Ghost” (Dekker, 1630/1925, p. 178). In *The Seven Deadly Sinnes*, Dekker accuses: “There is a Cruelty within thee (faire Troynouant) worse and more barbarous then all the rest, because it is halfe against thy owne selfe, and halfe against thy Dead Sonnes and Daughters. Against thy dead children wert thou cruell in that dreadful, horrid, and Tragicall yeere, when 30,000 of them (struck with plagues from heauen) dropt downe in winding-sheets at thy feet” (Dekker, 1606, p. 87). The city is rendered “[d]isrobd’e, disgracte” and “scornd of all the world” in the outbreak of 1603, a prisoner inside her “owne walles” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 90).

As a citizen waiting out the epidemic in his London quarters, Dekker occasionally highlights his precarious position, arguing that “albeit, no man at any time is assured of life, yet no man (within the memory of man) was euer so neere death as now” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 166). He stresses a nearness in space and time to the recounted events and remarks on his vulnerability vis-a-vis the destructive force of the disease. Whereas, in principle, this vulnerability should be unaffected by proximity to infected people and places (after all, Dekker sees in the plague the direct hand of God), in practice he cannot entirely discount the empirical evidence. Flight did offer protection from the plague, as did affluence. The poor were hit hardest by the plague and not—as authorities warned—because of their lewd morals.¹⁰ Crowded housing and the greater presence of rats in poorer neighborhoods contributed to the high incidence of plague there. Especially in seventeenth-century epidemics poor parishes were hit harder than prosperous ones. There were also notable differences in mortality within parishes depending on such local features as the construction of buildings and population density (Slack, 1985, p. 168). By the 1660s the correlation of poverty and plague was common knowledge, to the point that the town clerk of Norwich noted: “We are in greater fear of the poor than the plague” (cit. in Slack, 1985, p. 143).¹¹

The disproportionate presence of the disease among the poor—combined with the knowledge that it could not be relied on to respect social distinctions—certainly had an influence on the countermeasures devised and implemented by the Crown and civic authorities. Like the plague itself, they hit the poor the hardest.

The combined effects of epidemic disease and social inequality all too often left the poor “in sorrow, in sicknesse, in penury, in vnpietied disconsolations” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 147), prompting Dekker and Middleton to dub the plague of 1603 “the Beggars plague” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 97). It is before this background that the recent warnings of historian Paul Slack and bioarchaeologist Sharon DeWitte are pertinent: Slack points out—recalling the argument laid out forcefully by Susan Sontag (1978/2009) in *Illness as Metaphor* with regard to cancer—that in discourses of disease we should beware of inadvertently (and erroneously) scapegoating its victims (Slack, 2012, p. 117). DeWitte, meanwhile, takes a stance against the misinterpretation of the work of bioarchaeologists as demonstrating the ‘benefits’ of epidemic disease for the surviving population—supposedly illustrated by general improvements in health post-Black Death (DeWitte, 2019, p. 114). In truth, living standards improved after 1350 but the plague never functioned remotely like a Malthusian check on insupportable demographic growth.

¹⁰At the same time, the mass flight from the metropolis of the well-off contributed to the relatively higher plague mortality among the poor in seventeenth-century outbreaks. In previous centuries mass flight had not been as common a phenomenon (Slack, 1985, p. 167).

¹¹Rat fleas transmitted plague bacteria (*Yersinia pestis*) from rodent to human. It is unclear whether human fleas might have played a role in interhuman transmission (Slack, 1985, p. 11). In any case, contemporary medical discourse is free of references to rats and fleas in discussions of epidemic transmission (Slack, 1985, p. 11). Domestic animals (cats, dogs, pigs), on the other hand, were suspected of spreading the disease and culled regularly during epidemics.

For DeWitte speculation on the alleged boon of the plague loses sight of the most important observation, namely

that decreased social inequities in access to food or other resources might have resulted in lower mortality rates during the epidemic. (DeWitte, 2019, p. 119)¹²

Dekker—though generally sympathetic toward individual plague victims—also rehearses contemporary views eerily akin to the Malthusian fallacy criticized above. Together, Dekker and Middleton state:

We would conclude (still vrging¹³ pittie)
A Plague's the Purge to cense a Cittie:
Who amongst millions can deny
(In rough prose, or smooth Poesie)
Of Euils,¹⁴ tis the lighter broode,
A dearth of people, then of foode! (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 102)

In lines of iambic tetrameter, the duo argue that the plague wipes out a 'surplus' of people whose very presence supposedly constitutes the threat of famine—a fear-mongering scenario not borne out by contemporary records relating to agricultural production and epidemic disease at all. Furthermore, it is a certain kind of people who comprise an 'expendable' overpopulation: the poor and idle who would rather give

Themselves to wast, deface and spoyle,
Than to increase (by vertuous toyle) [...] (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 103)

Writing on his own two decades later, Dekker invokes the common argument that the plague strikes when countries or cities "grow ranke and too full" (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 143), but insists that it strikes first and foremost in punishment of collective sin, not as a means of population control. Yet, despite this acknowledgment of general human culpability, when he recounts the fates of ordinary Londoners affected by the disease (like a poor servant mistreated by his master or an ailing mother and child abandoned in the street), his attitude becomes immeasurably more humane. The stories Dekker recounts, however, are for the most part based on report and rumor (many hailing from a familiar stock of plague anecdotes), notwithstanding Dekker's first-hand knowledge of plague-time London and the eye witness persona he cultivates as a narrator. While this was a common writerly tactic, not all of Dekker's observations—especially those relating to funerary practices—are commonplace.

¹² Furthermore, misperceptions of their work may paint bioarchaeologists "as callous scientists, impervious to the loss of life and psychosocial trauma associated with disease and other crises in the past and present" (DeWitte, 2019, p. 120), and more generally serve to discredit and vilify scientists in an increasingly anti-intellectual climate (DeWitte, 2019, pp. 121–122).

¹³ "urging"

¹⁴ "Evils"

9.3 Shaming Dead Bodies: Criminals, Suicides, and the Plague Dead

The plague fundamentally affected the relationship of the living to the dead. Burials were conducted under the cover of night, the number of mourners allowed at the gravesite was limited, and rituals of mourning and separation, such as wakes and funeral sermons, were curtailed. Dekker laments that

the poore man is hurried to his Graue¹⁵ by nasty slouenly Bearers, in the night, without followers, without friends, without rites of buriall commonly vsed in our Church (Dekker, 1625/1925, pp. 144–145).

According to John Davies' *The Triumph of Death*, the dead were collected on plague carts, conveyed to already crowded cemeteries "by cartloads" (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 346), and deposited in mass graves. Under normal circumstances, the dead were buried in single graves oriented toward the East (i.e. Jerusalem) (Tarlow, 2010, p. 105–106, 107).¹⁶ At the height of plague epidemics, however, coffins and single graves could become luxuries. Even shrouds, laments Dekker, might be denied to plague victims. With supplies depleted, trade suspended, and demand sadly increasing, it is impossible for some to come by

linnen fold
To make (so farre is pittie fled)
The last apparell for the dead: (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 93)

This is not a minor snag but a serious breach of protocol. For Dekker, hasty, pared down interments are despicable on two counts: first of all, they are a disservice to the dead and, secondly, those who assume complicity in this disservice inevitably commit sins against their fellow Christians and therefore against God—ultimately increasing his wrath and, thus, perpetuating the plague. Dekker notes with unease how "there were neuer so many burials, yet neuer such little weeping" (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 145), so many casualties of the plague but "not one eye [...] so tender to wet the ground with a teare" (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 159). As deaths increase, survivors are increasingly numb to the pain of bereavement. Emotions that persevere are of an overwrought, crazed variety. There is fear. There is despair. There is hysteria. There is much "wayling" but little weeping (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 145).

It is of particular concern to Dekker that the plague dead are routinely subjected—so he claims—to stigmatized forms of burial. They may, for instance, be treated like murderers and traitors. Having committed no crime except for sharing in the nation's general sinfulness, the infected, i.e. "the innocent Malefactors of *Troynouant*," are nonetheless turned into criminals and this is reflected in their interment (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 170). Hauled to the grave on carts and denied the honour of a proper Christian funeral, plague victims—though innocent—share the

¹⁵"Grave"

¹⁶By the mid-sixteenth century coffin use had become the norm even for the poor (Tarlow, 2010, p. 107).

fate of “many a Fellon, after hee is cut downe from the Gallowes” (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 145). Often found unworthy of churchyard burial, the bodies of executed felons were transported on carts—as lesser loads, even animal carcasses, would be—rather than carried respectfully to their final resting places (Dekker, 1625/1925, p. 145). This made sense in view of the fact that the treatment of the criminal body after death was understood as an extension of the punishment exacted on the living body (Tarlow, 2010, p. 54). The plague dead, however, have not been convicted of any crime (by human agents) and still their treatment, i.e. their conveyance on plague carts, notably echoes the punitive handling of the criminal body.¹⁷ The infection renders its victims untouchables, their remains “noysome carion” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 93). The indignity of this weighs so heavy precisely because—against Anglican dogma—a belief in the continuation of individual, material existence—tied to one’s mortal remains—suffuses Dekker’s plague pamphlets. When plague victims are treated like “felons that are cut downe from the tree of shame and dishonor,” when they “receiue vnhandsome buriall” (Dekker, 1606, p. 87–88), this constitutes such an injury to them because their individual identity is not removed by death.¹⁸

The same applies when the bodies of the plague dead are handled like suicides—an unfortunate category of the dead who were understood to have forfeited any hope of salvation by committing the grievous sin of self-murder. In *Newes from Graves-end*, the narrator argues that many plague victims and suspected plague victims, (especially in the country) are buried

as the fashion is for those
Whose desperat handes the knot vnlose
Of their owne liues, [...] (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 93)

While other writers condemn the quick and improper burial of bodies, *Newes from Graves-end* is an unusual text in making the connection between suicide and plague burial explicit.¹⁹

Before the year 1823, individuals who had committed suicide could be denied space in the churchyard and consigned to roadside burial (Tarlow, 2010, p. 183). This posthumous punishment was augmented by the confiscation of their property (Tarlow, 2010, p. 147). Plague victims, like suicides, might be buried not in

¹⁷On the topic of maltreating the dead, Rebecca Totaro has proposed an interesting comparison: “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” (Totaro, 2012, p. 19). In the early modern period, too, the refusal of a decent (Christian) burial signaled extreme contempt. Philip Schwyzer has noted: “To deny the dead the decency of burial was perhaps the deepest as well as the final rejection of which early modern society was capable” (Schwyzer, 2007, p. 121).

¹⁸A counter-position to Dekker’s is embodied in the Gravedigger in *Hamlet* who denies the individuality of the dead—a dead body is no longer woman or man but only dehumanized matter (cf. Schwyzer, 2007, p. 135).

¹⁹John Davies writes of dead bodies in the road which are raked in “a rude hole” (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 574), and of “Ditches and Highways” which “must receive the dead” (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 654).

consecrated ground but “[i]n some hye-way / Or barren field” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 93) condemned and expelled from Christian society. Dekker bemoans that many travelers who sicken on the roads around London are

buried neare vnto hye-waies [...] in their cloaths as they were, booted and spurde euen as they lighted off, rowld into Ditches, Pits and Hedges [...] (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925b, p. 133)

Fear of contagion prevents these unfortunates from being transported to more appropriate resting places, and it prevents them from receiving any of the customary preparations for burial: they are not undressed, not washed, not shrouded, not placed in coffins. Instead they are discarded as quickly and with as little contact as possible. This treatment is so

vnchristianlike, that it would haue made a pittifull, and remorsefull eye blood-shot, to see such a ruthfull and disordered Obiect: [...] (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925b, p. 133)

A 1641 woodcut (Fig. 9.1) laments that the “Countries Crueltie” is such that Londoners who succumb to the plague by the side of the road are pulled into ditches by locals who will not come near them, using ropes, poles, crude carts or sleds.



Fig. 9.1 This woodcut from the title page of a short anonymous tract called *Londons Lamentation, or, a fit admonishment for city and countrey* [...] (1641) contrasts the proper treatment received by plague victims in London (“Londons Charitie”) with the shameful handling of the dying and the dead outside the city (“the Conuntries Crueltie”). While this pro-urban propaganda neither accurately reflects the situation in the country nor the city, it offers illuminating representations of forms of burial deemed decent (upper part) and indecent (lower part) (Wellcome Collection; Creative Commons license CC BY 4.0)

This sad routine is contrasted with the proper handling of the dead: They should be dressed appropriately and placed in coffins—which, in turn, are covered in fabric—and respectfully carried to a place of interment, mourners following behind. Hasty roadside burial is deplorable to Dekker even for those cowardly escapees who would abandon the infected city, leaving the poor behind, but his especial horror is reserved for the mass grave. In the pamphlets mass graves figure as places where all privacy and all boundaries are lost.

9.4 Horrors of the Mass Grave

While parish authorities and all those who collude in rushed mass interments are to blame for the indignities which individuals are exposed to in the plague pit, the places of burial, too, are rhetorically implicated in the action. Dekker compares burial pits to hellmouths and has the animate earth itself actively gobble down dead bodies. In *The Wonderfull Yeare* he declares that

a hundred hungry graues stand gaping, and euery one of them (as at a break-fast) hath swallowed downe ten or eleuen liuelesse carcasses: before dinner, in the same gulfe are twice so many more deuoured: and before the sun takes his rest, those numbers are doubled: (Dekker, 1603/1924, p. 40)

Graves voraciously feast on bodies and those bodies are reduced to mere fodder. This description is widespread among plague writers: John Davies characterizes graves as “ravenous” and “insatiate” (Davies, 1603/2012, ll. 51 and 395), George Wither writes of the “greedy Grave,” eager for more bodies to come its way (Wither, 1628/2012, l. 1563), and William Austin envisions “Graves’ mouths gap[ing] wide” (Austin, 1666/2012, l. 979). Even greedy graves can reach a point of saturation, however. In Davies’ *The Triumph of Death* (1603) the ground not only swallows the dead, it also emits them again: “The Graves do often vomit out their dead” (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 568); urban streets “vomit out their undigested dead” (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 345). This notion is echoed by John Donne—installed in 1621 as Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral—in a sermon preached in 1626. With reference to the previous year’s epidemic, Donne notes that “the dead were buried, and thrown up again before they were resolved into dust” (cit. in Gilman, 2009, p. 202). Gravediggers must reopen ground that is already full of bodies and disturb human remains as they undergo the deeply troubling process of decomposition.

In *London Looke Backe*, Dekker writes of plague pits, still eager for more human fodder, which remain open of their own accord “[f]rom morne, till next morne, gaping still for more” (Dekker, 1630/1925, p. 177).²⁰ Pits could be seen ‘gaping for

²⁰Thomas Vincent, a nonconformist clergyman who preached to deserted London congregations during the 1665 epidemic, describes cemeteries “stufft so full with dead corpses, that they are in many places swell’d two or three foot higher than they were before” in *God’s Terrible Voice in the City* (1667) (cit. in Miller, 2016, p. 100). To Miller, Vincent’s description turns the graveyard into a “Bakhtinian grotesque body” (Miller, 2016, p. 101).

more' when the expectation of more bodies for burial made their quick closure impractical. Mass graves might then be left open until filled to capacity—with multiple corpses already inside them and only a thin layer of earth or sand covering them, their bodily decomposition exposed to the living in sight, smell, and sound. This practice could be a source of frustration for neighbors exposed to the stench of decay and—for writers—a source of inspiration. Humorous anecdotes featuring drunken passers-by stumbling into pits were the stock in trade of metropolitan pamphleteers. For the dead in the grave, however, to be deposited thus without ceremony and left exposed was a serious slight. In a culture that valued the dignity of the dead body, the collection of bodies in open pits flouted all conventions and equaled utter humiliation. Kathleen Miller has argued insightfully that stories about accidental premature interment in the plague-ridden metropolis “strip[...] away the black and white division between life and death” (Miller, 2016, p. 47), hinging as they do on “a moment when the living and dead exist in a single body” (Miller, 2016, p. 46).²¹ Yet, in Dekker’s plague pamphlets there is no such “black and white division” in the first place. Individuals are in death precisely who they were in life and to mistreat dead flesh—for instance, by denying it proper burial—is therefore essentially the same as mistreating living individuals.

Irrespective of the orderly, respectful placement of bodies in the New Churchyard mass grave, referenced above, Dekker’s vision of the plague pit is one in which bodies, without coffins or even without shrouds, are hastily and “rudely throwne” into pits and left to rot where they land, entangled with other bodies in grotesque positions (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 93). Individuals buried in this fashion must face the utter disgrace of being “thrust altogether into one close roome: a litle noisome roome [...]” (Dekker, 1603/1924, pp. 40–41). Dekker’s description of the grave as a room emphasizes the individuality of the ‘inhabitants’—even after death—and posits the grave as a continuation of mortal existence. One room is merely exchanged for another. These grave-rooms, however, are often far from adequate. When “twentie shall but haue one roome” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 94), and a tiny sequestered one at that, even a modicum of privacy is impossible. When “nine and tenne” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925b, p. 78) or even three-score must “be pestred together, in one litle hole, where they lie and rot” (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 72), then the grave-room becomes a stifling torture chamber. Dekker’s notion of the grave as a room is congruent with a new, post-Reformation “determination to lay claim to one’s last resting place as permanent private property” (Schwyzer, 2007, p. 112).²² However, the rooms allotted to the plague dead are an affront and the dead perceive them as such. The maltreatment of

²¹ Before this background, Miller applies Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection to plague writing (Miller, 2016, p. 7).

²² The desire to preserve the privacy of the body after death is evident in the plays of Shakespeare as well as in the inscription on the playwright’s own grave (cf. Schwyzer, 2007, pp. 114, 122). Yet, contrary to Dekker’s belief in the potential agency of the dead, “the notion of the dead still being capable of interaction with the living and with one another [...] seems to have aroused the scorn and horror of Shakespeare” (Schwyzer, 2007, p. 125).

bodies on their way to the grave and in the grave is so upsetting because Dekker conceptualizes the individual human being as persisting in the dead body. While bodies “rot” in their improper graves—adding insult to injury—the ongoing processes of decomposition, the eventual complete loss of flesh is not addressed in Dekker’s pamphlets. After all, when bodies are reduced to bones (or even dust) it is hard to persevere in ascribing life-likeness, sentience, and individuality to them.

While it was acceptable and desirable even for family members to be buried close together, even to share one grave (Tarlow, 2010, p. 108), to be buried in close contact with strangers was an entirely different matter. The contemporary horror of forced but undesired and inappropriate proximity is exemplified by an emblem titled “Impar coniugium” in Geoffrey Whitney’s popular *Choise of Emblemes*. The emblem employs the image of a living person bound closely to a corpse as a metaphor for marriage between mismatched partners (Whitney, 1586/1988, p. 197). In his ‘proto-novel’ *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Thomas Nashe employs the same horrific but fairly conventional conceit in his description of a battle:

as the tyrant Roman emperors used to tie condemned living caitiffs face to face to dead corpses, so were the half-living here mixed with squeezed carcasses [...]. (Nashe, 1594/1987, p. 228)

Similarly, the mass grave also forces together what does not belong together. In its cramped confusion “[t]he gallant and the begger lay together; the scholler and the carter in one bed” (Dekker, 1606, p. 87). A husband may see “his wife, and his deadly enemy whom he hated, within a paire of sheetes” (Dekker, 1606, p. 87); enforced intimacy is experienced by

friend, and foe, the yong and old,
The freezing coward, and the bold:
Seruant, and maister: Fowle and faire: (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 94)

Social hierarchies and distinctions, even bodily boundaries, all become void. A rich man may have to intimately support the body of a pauper in the grave. In a poetic articulation of this grotesque inversion, Dekker writes of

one, who in the morne with gold
Could haue built Castells: now hee’s made
A pillow to a wretch, that prayde
For half-penny Almes, (with broken lim)
The Begger now is aboue him; (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 95)

Not only rich and poor are forced into close communion, mortal enemies may find themselves in unwelcome proximity. In *The Wonderfull Yeare* Dekker asks his readers to imagine themselves in a crowded grave,

bruisde and prest with three-score dead men, lying slouenly vpon thee, and thou to be vndermost of all! yea and perhaps halfe of that number were thine enemies! (Dekker, 1603/1924, p. 41)

In this fashion rich and poor, scholar and laborer, male and female become involuntarily and obscenely entangled and inverted. Worse, they are locked up indefinitely in this condition, conveniently out of the sight of survivors. While the trope of death

as the final great equalizer is evoked in these descriptions, it is also undermined. True that, in the words of emblemist Geoffrey Whitney, “[t]he Prince, the Poore, the Prisoner, and the slave, / They all at length, are summonde to their grave” (Whitney, 1586/1988, p. 182), but, in Dekker’s estimation, they remain prince, pauper, prisoner, and slave for all that.²³ Death does not make all alike. Individuality is perpetuated in the grave but severely humiliated by the undignified handling of the deceased and the involuntary intimacies inflicted on them. When strangers (and enemies) are buried together without any “elbow-roume” between them (Dekker & Middleton, 1604/1925a, p. 72), this is tantamount to living persons being held in horrendous captivity and experiencing physical molestation. Echoing Dekker’s wording, George Wither describes a scene in which corpses “[t]hrust out their arms [from crowded, shallow graves] for want of elbow room” (Wither, 1628/2012, l. 956), but whereas Dekker is indignant on behalf of the dead, Wither is strengthened in his notion of the vanity and insignificance of everything that is of the world, including human bodies which are prone to sin in life and gross matter in death (cf. Wither, 1628/2012, ll. 951–967).

9.5 Rising from the Grave

The promise of resurrection did not in any real sense resolve the situation. As there was no consensus on when exactly the souls of the dead would face divine judgment and what sort of body they would assume on the occasion (spiritual or material), the unfortunate individuals deposited in mass graves were faced with the prospect of a potentially very long hiatus spent in cramped, unwished-for company. Conversely, Dekker’s ideal grave is a private shelter. It may be shared with family in the manner of a household but it is always a space where individual existence is safeguarded. In *The Seven Deadly Sinnes* Dekker deplores the use of mass graves, the general unavailability of sufficient burial space, and the indecently crowded conditions in many urban cemeteries. There is an incontestable need, he states, for “conuenient Cabins to lay those in, that are to goe into such farre countries, who neuer looke to come back againe” (Dekker, 1606, p. 88). The good grave, the appropriate grave, then, is a cozy abode for the dead body: a room, a house, or a cabin that may be enjoyed in private or shared with family. In such a locale the waiting period between death and resurrection becomes bearable. When bodies arise from ideal graves come Judgment Day they can do so with dignity. They can get up as from a bed and leave their tomb as they would leave their house. Preacher Jeremiah Dobson endorsed this scenario in his 1665 spiritual discussion of the plague. Although Dobson stresses the severity of divine vengeance, he is also adamant about the promise of resurrection, quoting from 1 Corinthians 15: “and as for the *Body*, though

²³Cf. Job. 3.19 (*King James Version*): “The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master.” In this biblical passage the grave is a place where earthly distinctions are dissolved.

it be laid in the dust and sown in corruption, yet it shall be raised in incorruption [...]" (Dobson, 1665, p. 17). Decomposition will not get in the way of bodily resurrection from the very grave where the body is laid to rest.

This immediate connection between the grave and resurrection may also help to explain why the dead body and its final resting place are of such great significance to Dekker and his contemporaries. In *The Relique* John Donne, too, emphasizes the importance of the grave and its role in the resurrection. In Donne's poem the speaker envisions meeting his beloved at his grave site come Judgment Day. Aided by a bracelet of hair he wears on his wrist, his lover should be able to find her way to his side and,

at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (Donne, 1633/1931, p. 40, ll. 10–11)

Elsewhere, for example in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne also parallels the resurrection with waking from sleep: rising from the grave is only a version of rising from the bed (cf. Gilman, 2009, p. 192). This notion not only partakes in the death-as-a-long-sleep metaphor, it also evokes a certain familiar domesticity which is congruent with Dekker's description of the good grave as a private room. In *The Funeral*—a companion poem to *The Relique*—soul and body part upon death and the lock of hair functions as a material placeholder for the lover's soul on earth (Donne, 1633/1931, p. 43). Across his oeuvre, Donne imagines physical disintegration in the 'whirlpool' of the grave. The scattering of human fragments, of dust and ashes, and their intermingling with other substances and other bodies is a natural process for him. Yet, on Doomsday all bodies destined for resurrection will be reassembled from their original elements (cf. Schwyzer, 2007, p. 141).

In two poems dealing with the deaths of a son and a daughter respectively, Ben Jonson conceptualizes the state of the dead in two different ways. In *On My First Sonne* (Jonson, 1968, p. 20, ll. 9–10), he imagines his 7-year-old son Ben (dead of the plague in 1603) as a presence in the grave, capable of speech, whereas the body of his infant daughter Mary in *On My First Daughter* is a 'shell' only, her soul having ascended to heaven immediately upon death—to be reunited with her body at a later date (Jonson, 1968, pp. 11–12). In plague writing, this latter conception was not uncommon: Both John Davies (1603/2012, ll. 440–441), and John Taylor in *The Fearful Summer* (Taylor, 1625/2012, ll. 155–156) envision the soul and the body parting ways at the moment of death. For Dekker, however, the plague dead are not inanimate, sensationless objects, severed from their spiritual essences. Opposing the Protestant wariness of the flesh and the "instinctive reluctance to imagine the dead as being in any way active in their relationship with the living" (Schwyzer, 2007, p. 122), Dekker's descriptions place great value on the bodily constitution of the dead and suggest an ongoing union of body and soul in the grave. This vindication of dead flesh may owe something to the reformatory severance of ties with the souls of the dead in purgatory—an unintended consequence of which was an increase in the importance of bodies as the only accessible aspect of departed loved ones (cf. Tarlow, 2010, p. 26).

9.6 Agency of the Dead

It is not only those left behind who cherish their social ties to individuals beyond death, the dead themselves demand dignity. In *The Seven Deadly Sinnes* Dekker ponders the ramifications of a future plague epidemic. If a great multitude of Londoners should die suddenly then the culpable failure of authorities to properly prepare for (predictable) emergencies might mean that graves—containing victims of previous plague epidemics—might have to be reopened to receive yet more bodies; these reopenings would reveal ghastly scenes (cf. Dekker, 1606, p. 88). The dead inside the graves would be revealed to the living in humiliating postures, in indecently close embrace with strangers, robbed of their privacy and dignity. Inevitably, the sight would bear testament to the shameful maltreatment suffered by the plague dead. Out-of-sight wrong may easily be put out of mind. Immobile and buried (often less than) six feet underground, the dead can ‘do’ nothing about the wrong done to them. They can neither physically resist nor verbally protest against their burial. They must endure what is done to them and they must lie indefinitely where they are placed.

Should the graves be opened again, however, the dead become visible once more and this renewed visibility returns agency to them. Though they cannot speak, the silent tableau of their bodies will speak volumes. Their material presence will be an accusation against inept magistrates and against those innumerable frightened, selfish, carelessly indifferent Londoners who view the plague dead as contemptible criminals or even contaminated animal carcasses and dispose of them accordingly. It is these Londoners that Dekker addresses when he warns that “the graues when they open, will be witnesses against thee” (Dekker, 1606, p. 88). The plague dead may not have the ability to raise their hands and point at their abusers, a skill that folk belief attributed to murder victims (cf. Tarlow, 2010, p. 164), yet their devastating presence is in itself a form of agency. This potential of the plague dead to instruct the living is echoed—in muted form—in Daniel Defoe’s early eighteenth-century documentary fiction *A Journal of the Plague Year* in which the semi-anonymous narrator H. F. encounters the “[i]nstructing” and “speaking Sight” of a plague-time graveyard, which, so he is told, “has a Voice with it, and a loud one, to call us all to Repentance” (Defoe, 1722/1969, p. 61).

Dekker’s dead will certainly use their ‘voice’ to testify against the living should urban authorities not acquire enough land for the future casualties of epidemic disease “to dwell in” (Dekker, 1606, p. 90). If the dead are not laid to rest adequately in “convenient Cabins,” they will not rest easy and they might eventually make their displeasure, their suffering, known and indict their abusers. Along these lines, in *The Seven Deadly Sinnes*, Dekker imagines visibility as the due of the dead and as a means for them to affect the living. He proposes that poor individuals whose deaths were hastened by the unkindness of creditors should be buried on the doorsteps of the latter (Dekker, 1606, p. 83). That way, forced to step over their debtors’ graves upon leaving the house, creditors would be confronted with the consequences

of their own unkindness on a daily basis. This, in turn, would bring some slight vindication to the dead and subject the offenders to a deserved ‘haunting’ of the material kind.

While the speaking sight of the New Churchyard mass grave tells a somewhat different story than Dekker’s pamphlets do, the final word on plague burial has not been spoken. At the same time as the excavation site revealed an orderly placement of the dead, it also confirmed the presence of a hundred bodies in one grave. Certainly, contemporary plague writers unanimously mention pits in which the plague dead are deposited en masse. John Davies writes of “trenches ram’d with Carcasses” (Davies, 1603/2012, l. 16) in his epic vision of the 1603 epidemic and William Austin asserts that “we’re crowded in the tomb” (Austin, 1666/2012, l. 984) once again in 1666. Abraham Holland reports that the poor “in their Graves together lie by ten / By twenties or by more” (Holland, 1626/2012, ll. 70–71) and a real-life clerk for the parish of St. Saviour’s Southwark reported finding 20 to 30 corpses in the local churchyard, simply placed there with no explanation (Slack, 1985, p. 149). In his plague pamphlet, John Taylor ups the ante, noting that “fifty Corpses scarce one grave doth fill” (Taylor, 1625/2012, l. 124), and Holland triples his own numbers later in the text, writing of

Hundreds that never saw before but, dy’d
At one same time, in one same Grave abide. (Holland, 1626/2012, ll. 587–588)

These voices unanimously testify to the “hungry” plague pit, yet, none of them shares Dekker’s acute horror at the fate of the dead inside the grave.

9.7 Conclusion

Ultimately, the value of Dekker’s pamphlets as expressions of his engagement with mortality lies beyond any claim to factual accuracy. Dekker demonstrates striking conceptions of postmortem agency and individuality; he does not turn away in horror from the dead body but values it in its capacity as a continuation of the living person. He recalls the dead from the convenient concealment of the grave and makes them visible once more (to the mind’s eye) and it is in this visibility that their agency resides. In this way, the archaeological project blends fortuitously with Dekker’s. When archaeologists function as revealers of hidden truths (cf. Schwyzer, 2007, p. 113), when they render the dead visible, not to disturb their rest but to enter into dialogue with them and, thus, to return agency to them, they do exactly as Dekker hopes to do in his writing.²⁴

²⁴ Contradicting Dekker’s positive portrayal of the visible dead, the message in *Romeo and Juliet* is that the living should not see the dead: “To open tombs and lay bare the dead is to deny and to destroy whatever may be left of their individuality” (Schwyzer, 2007, p. 133).

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