PART 4

News in Literary Forms

“This Straunge Newes”

Plague Writing, Print Culture, and the Invention of News in Thomas Dekker's The Wonderfull Yeare (1603)

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Thomas Dekker's contributions to news pamphleteering include a series of plague books dealing with the outbreaks of epidemic that ravaged London between 1603 and 1627. In *The Wonderfull yeare*, his first prose work, Dekker provides a semi-documentary account of the effects of the 1603 pestilence on Londoners. Following his prefatory remarks to the reader, in which he describes the pamphlet writer's precarious role in a marketplace dominated by the whimsicality of the book trade, he chronicles the events of the plague year through a complex narrative that interweaves eyewitness reportage with fictional and perversely comic tales of individuals who have been directly affected by the epidemic. Dekker's narrative approach speaks to the tenuous distinction between reporting and storytelling that underwrites early modern news pamphlets, a technique that contributed to the low cultural status of the pamphlet. In an effort to forestall any objections to his plague book's mingling of eyewitness reporting and storytelling, Dekker explains the origins of news in report or rumour, which, following classical precedents, he equates with fiction-making. Asserting the artificiality of the distinction between fact and fiction, Dekker implicates his plague book in the variable nature of discourse that underwrites early modern print culture.

Early Modern Plague Writing and the News Pamphlet

In their collection of interdisciplinary approaches to the representation of plague from the Byzantium to the Baroque periods, Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester write that “from earliest antiquity,” plague, whether in bubonic form or any other type of acute epidemic disease resulting in calamity, “was one of the enduring facts of everyday life on the European continent,” and among “the most important influences on the development of that continent's society and culture.”¹ During the medieval and early modern periods, from the initial catastrophic appearance of the Black Death in 1347/48, and for

1 Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (eds.), *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), preface, p. xi.

the next four hundred years, plague became a prevalent subject in art, literature, and extra-literary discourses. In England, outbreaks of plague occurred intermittently between 1348 and the 1660s. Particularly virulent outbreaks were centred in London in 1603, 1625, 1630, 1636, and 1665, causing widespread suffering and annihilation and profoundly affecting the cultural life of the city. Plague writing in England had been gaining momentum since the mid-sixteenth century, and proliferated in the early seventeenth century when it entered the repertoire of numerous kinds of printed matter, exploiting for contemporary audiences the opportunities made possible by the increase in literacy and the development of print culture.² The causes of plague remained elusive, giving rise to a spate of publications offering medical advice, spiritual and moral reflection, and social commentary, as well as journalistic and eyewitness accounts that appealed to readers' interest in the experiences and responses of their contemporaries. Plague texts ranged from pamphlets, ballads, play-texts, broadsheets, jest-books, and lyric poetry, to jeremiads and prayer sheets, plague remedies, almanacs, dialogues, and chapbooks. The official plague orders and the weekly London Bills of Mortality have increasingly been included by scholars in the roster of early modern plague writing.³ In her wide-ranging exploration of the representation of disease in early modern England, Margaret Healy observes that the "cultural heritage" of the plague discourse is located in "the way the contending 'voices' (élite, popular, medical, religious, political and poetical) constructed and articulated the plague experience for their times and their culture."⁴

Among the vast array of print that was disseminated on the subject of plague, pamphlet literature produced the most comprehensive account of

2 On the proliferation of the plague discourse in early modern England, see Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 23–25; Philip Seargeant, "Discursive Diversity in the Textual Articulation of Epidemic Disease in Early Modern England," *Language and Literature* 16.4 (2007), p. 329; Margaret Healy, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 50–122; Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), *passim*; and Rebecca Totaro (ed.), *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), introduction, p. xi.

3 See Sharon Achinstein, "Plague and Publications: Ballads and the Representation of Disease in the English Renaissance," *Criticism*, 34. 1 (1992), pp. 27–49; Gilman, *Plague Writing*, pp. 27–70; and Erin Sullivan, "Physical and Spiritual Illness: Narrative Appropriations of the Bills of Mortality" in R. Totaro and E. Gilman (eds.), *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 76–94.

4 Healy, *Fictions of Disease*, pp. 63–64.

pestilence and its effects.⁵ As has been frequently observed, the prose pamphlet flourished during times of national crisis or calamity, sudden and devastating shifts in economic or political conditions, and other disruptions in society. During epidemics, the London theatres, which were the chief employers of professional writers, were forced to close, and playwrights often turned to other genres, most notably the prose pamphlet. Pamphlet-writing, notes Lawrence Manley, was largely the work of the new urban professionals writing "from the literary-social margins of the burgeoning metropolis," who promoted an innovative vernacular prose, counterbalancing the Latin prose tradition with "the colloquial idiom of tavern, marketplace and theatre."⁶ Pamphlets ranged from works of piety, pedagogy, and self-improvement, to polemic and current news. By the 1590s, news pamphlets were in high demand, as readers were eager to learn about the most current developments at home and abroad. The "zeal in purchasing news pamphlets," writes Paul Voss, "suggests a prevailing interest in current affairs"; the "news quartos [...] constitute [...] a type of discourse capturing a variety of concerns important in late-Tudor England."⁷ From the 1590s to the 1630s, plague pamphlets became a staple in the book trade's exploitation of domestic news.

Pamphlets dealing with pestilence began to appear with notable frequency in 1603, the year in which London experienced the most virulent outbreak of plague of the decade.⁸ Thomas Dekker's *The Wonderfull yeare. Wherein is*

5 "The term 'pamphlet,'" writes Tessa Watt, can "be used in a neutral bibliographical sense as a short unbound book, but in popular usage it often has connotations of a topical, 'ephemeral' subject matter," *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 264. By the 1580s, the two aspects of the term had become inextricable. Joad Raymond notes that as "the meaning of the word 'pamphlet' coalesced with frequent use [...] it came to refer to a short, vernacular work, generally printed in quarto format, costing no more than a few pennies, of topical interest or engaged with social, political, or ecclesiastical issues," *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 111–112. On the increasing popularity of pamphlet literature towards the end of the sixteenth century, see Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*, p. 57; Sandra Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers: Popular Moralistic Pamphlets 1580–1640* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), p. 27; and Seargeant, "Discursive Diversity in the Textual Articulation of Epidemic Disease in Early Modern England," p. 329.

6 Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 355.

7 Paul J. Voss, *Elizabethan News Pamphlets: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe, and the Birth of Journalism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 14.

8 From 1486 to 1604, a total of 153 tracts (primarily medical) written in English were printed, twenty-three of which dealt exclusively with plague, and numerous others of which included

shewed the picture of London, lying sicke of the Plague was among the most widely read plague books in its time, and the one most frequently reprinted in ours. Dekker's first prose work – and his first in a series of semi-documentary news pamphlets on the plague that besieged London intermittently between 1603 and 1627 – *The Wonderfull yeare*, was probably written during the summer of 1603 and was printed in the late autumn when the epidemic was reaching its end.⁹ In modern scholarship, *The Wonderfull yeare* has been praised for its complex narrative structure and trenchant exploration of the 1603 epidemic's impact on the city of London and its inhabitants. Michael Neil has described Dekker as “the plague's most eloquent English chronicler,” a view echoed by Ian Munro for whom Dekker is “the preeminent Jacobean plague writer.” John Twyning has noted Dekker's crafting in *The Wonderfull yeare* of an “intricate relationship between the city, writing, imagination, and fact,” and Lawrence Manley has commended Dekker's “mastery of heterogeneous modes of

references to the epidemic; during the plague years 1603 and 1604 alone, as many as twenty-eight books were produced on the subject. From 1625 to 1627, when another major outbreak of plague occurred in England, the number of relevant publications was thirty-six (Slack, *Impact of Plague*, pp. 23–24). On the plague books that were printed during and immediately following the plague years 1592/3, 1603, 1625–27, and 1630, see also Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*, pp. 7–8. On the virulence and social impact of the 1603 plague, see Slack, *Impact of Plague*, p. 13; Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 100–116; and Richelle Munkoff, “Contagious Figurations: Plague and the Impenetrable Nation after the Death of Elizabeth” in Totaro and Gilman (eds.), *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England*, pp. 97–112.

- 9 The pamphlet was initially published anonymously sometime before 5 December 1603. It went through at least three editions within a short period of time, with some irregularities attending its original publication: according to the Stationers' Register entry of 5 December, each of the printers was required to pay a fine of ten shillings “for printinge a booke called the wonderfull yere without Auctoritie or entrance, contrary to thordonnances for pryntinge,” and to surrender any remaining copies in their possession. See E. Arber, *A Transcript of the Register of the Company of Stationers of London; 1554–1640 AD*, 5 vols (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1967), vol. 2, p. 837. The reasons either for the fines or for the confiscation of remaining copies have never been determined. On the dates and circumstances surrounding the original publication history, see F.P. Wilson (ed.), *The Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 220 and xxix–xxxiv; E.D. Pendry, “Notes of Sources and Texts” in E.D. Pendry (ed.), *Thomas Dekker: 'The Wonderful Year,' 'The Gull's Horn-Book,' 'Penny-Wise, Pound-Foolish,' 'English Villainies Discovered by Lantern and Candlelight' and Selected Writing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), pp. 311–313; Cyrus Hoy, “Thomas Dekker” in Fredson Bowers (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography Volume 62: Elizabethan Dramatists* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1987), pp. 60–61, 67–68.

composition," which elicits "the ambiguous, provisional quality of the 'natural' meanings the city may be seen to represent."¹⁰ Dekker's approach to plague writing, the book trade, and the dissemination of news warrants more critical attention. Scrutinizing both the precarious role of the writer in the print marketplace and the complex process of transforming information into news, Dekker affirms the absence of a clear distinction between reporting and storytelling, or between history and fiction, deliberately implicating his plague book in the instability of oral and printed discourse that underwrites early modern culture.

"To be a Man in Print": Dekker and the Book Trade

Dekker's work as a playwright, notes Kathleen McLuskie, demonstrates "the eclecticism of a professional career" that pursued London's "shifting commercial opportunities, crossing the boundaries between elite and popular theatre venues and companies."¹¹ Over the course of his career, Dekker was also extensively engaged in the pamphlet trade, writing over twenty pamphlets in prose and three in verse. In England, as John Feather has illustrated, the marketing of books had by the 1580s become a flourishing and profitable enterprise, and the

10 Michael Neil, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 18; Ian Munro, *The Figure of the Crowd in Early Modern London* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 176; John Twynning, *London Dispossessed: Literature and Social Space in the Early Modern City* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 8; Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London*, p. 357. Eric Wilson contends that *The Wonderfull yeare* is "one of the most notable descriptions of the groaning city," in which Dekker "characterizes with blunt immediacy" the "torturous changes in [the] commonwealth," see "Plagues, Fairs, and Street Cries: Sounding out Society and Space in Early Modern London," *Modern Language Studies*, 25.3 (1995), p. 8. Ernest Gilman argues that from a literary point of view Dekker's *The Wonderful Year*, *Newes from Graues-ende*, and *A Rod for Run-awaies* are the "most notable" of the plague tracts printed in London during and subsequent to the 1603 epidemic, see *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, p. 137. Rick Bowers extols as "unprecedented" Dekker's "ironic narrative strategy" in the epilogue of *The Wonderfull yeare*, *Radical Comedy in Early Modern England: Contexts, Cultures, Performances* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), p. 38. Healy characterizes Dekker's pamphlet literature in general as "accomplished literary productions" that have "deff[ied] post-Enlightenment attempts to categorize and order them" and deserve "re-evaluation and a more prominent place in literary history," *Fictions of Disease*, pp. 99, 12.

11 Kathleen E. McLuskie, *Dekker and Heywood: Professional Dramatists* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 3.

notion of the author who wrote for profit had taken hold, together with the commodification of the printed text.¹² With the steady decline in England's patronage system, many writers felt the pressure to produce timely and saleable reading matter. As book publishing increasingly came to depend upon a broad spectrum of readers and upon authors' participation in the production of books that catered for rapidly changing tastes and fashions, publishers and book sellers mediated between writers and readers, a role that, as Feather observes, "is the very essence of publishing."¹³ Despite the widespread appeal of print, however, it remained generally in disrepute in elite circles, which continued to privilege literary genres. News and other kinds of pamphlets continued to be stigmatized for their interest in popular, ephemeral subject matter, increasing the competitive pressures placed on authors and sparking the convention whereby those who wrote or referred to pamphlets were expected to disassociate their work from that of others. Ben Jonson, for one, often complains about the pecuniary interests of authors and publishers in the dissemination of books on topical subjects, and of readers' unquenchable thirst for news. In his masque *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon*, a printer declares:

I am all for sale, gentlemen [...]. I am a printer and a printer of news, and I do hearken after 'em wherever they be, at any rates; I'll give anything for a good copy now, be't true or false, so't be news.¹⁴

Like the work of most professional writers in late Elizabethan and Jacobean England, Dekker's pamphleteering was susceptible to the continual flux of the marketplace. In *The Wonderfull yeare* and in a number of subsequent prose works, Dekker engages in the complaint voiced by many of his fellow writers against opportunistic booksellers and authors, and indiscriminating readers. In the address "To the Reader" in *The Wonderfull yeare*, he describes the challenges attending his efforts "*To be a man in print*" in a world in which "*Custome*" requires "Booke-sellers" to lure not only the "ranck-riders of Art," who lack

12 John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (1988; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 26–27.

13 Ibid., p. 28.

14 Ben Jonson, *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon* in Stephen Orgel (ed.), *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 293. On the ambivalence towards print culture in early modern England, see Clark, *Elizabethan Pamphleteers*, p. 27; Feather, *History of British Publishing*, p. 26; Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*, p. 57.

"*Gentilitie*," "*Ciuitly*," and "*Learning*," and "dayly flye, humming" over their "Stalls," but also many "good wits" who "dishonor not only their *Calling*, but euen their *Creation*, [...] because of a little false glistering."¹⁵ Dekker emphasizes that his dispute is "not with your good Poets" (p. 5) but with those "whose crest is Pen-and-Inckhorne" (p. 2), and with "*Word-pirates*" (p. 6) and others who "mainteine the scuruy fashion[s]" of the book trade (p. 4). In *Jests to Make You Merry* (1607) he reiterates the complaint, declaring that:

Bookes are a strange commoditie [...]. Go to one [bookseller] and offer a copy, if it be merrie, the man likes no light Stuffle, if sad, it will not sell. Another meddles with nothing but what fits the time[.]¹⁶

In *Lantern and Candlelight* (1608/09) he also disparages "this printing age of ours" as responsible for the incessant production of books, regardless of their aesthetic merits, a phenomenon that in turn feeds inferior writers' thirst for profit:

Two sorts of *mad-men* trouble the *stationers* shops in *Paules Church-yard*: they that out of a *Meere* and *Idle vaine-glory* will euer be *Pamphleting* (tho their bookes beeing printed are scarce worth so much *Browne paper*) [...]: Of the other sort are they that beeing free of *Wits Merchant-venturers*, do euery new moon (for gaine onely) make 5. or 6. *voiages* to the *Presse*, and euery Term-time (vpon *Booksellers stalles*) lay whole litters of blinde inuention: fellowes that [...] spit nothing but ynck, and speake nothing but *Poeme*.¹⁷

Although partly formulaic, Dekker's disparagement of the practices of the book trade inspired some of his most poignant satirical observations. In *The Wonderfull yeare* he points to the volatility that underpins the writer's role in the marketplace, and puns on the analogy between the printing press and an instrument of torture:

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- 15 Thomas Dekker, *The Wonderfull yeare* in F.P. Wilson (ed.), *The Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 4–7. Further references to the text are to this edition and are given in parentheses.
 - 16 Thomas Dekker, *Jests to Make you Merrie* in Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *The Non-Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, 5 vols (London, 1884–1886; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), vol. 2, p. 271.
 - 17 *Lanthe and Candle-light* in Grosart (ed.), *Non-Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 3, p. 178.

For he that dares hazard a pressing to death (thats to say, *To be a man in print*) must make account that he shall stand [...] to be beaten with all stormes [...] indur[ing] to see his lines torne pittifully on the rack: suffer his Muse to take the *Bastoone*, yea the very stab, & himselfe like a new stake to be a marke for euery *Hagler* [...].

pp. 4–5

The thrashers of “*Good*” writing (p. 5) include the “*Satin-gull*,” the “*Puritanicall Citizen*” and his “*Indeede-la*,” and the “*narrow-eyd Critick*” with his “*Aconited sting*” (p. 4).

Dekker nevertheless avows to tolerate readers’ and critics’ shortcomings, asserting that their censure will make his writing even more appealing to discerning readers, who appreciate “a deseruing labour”:

Yet would I haue these Zoilists (of all other) to reade me, if euer I should write any thing worthily, for the blame that knowne-fooles heape vpon a deseruing labour does not discredit the same, but makes wise men more perfectly in loue with it.

p. 7

Yet beneath the bravado, Dekker betrays his anxiety about the reception of his work, as well as his own opportunistic role in the marketplace, acknowledging that the detractors are also readers (and purchasers of books), a readership upon which he depends as a professional writer.

Invention and Dekker’s Wonder Pamphlet

Although plague writing reaches back to antiquity, its evolution from the classical age through to the eighteenth century reveals a striking thematic consistency with regard to the plague’s origins and its devastating effects. The four dominant themes of the plague discourse, all of which inform *The Wonderfulle yeare*, revolve around (1) the widespread suffering and social instability brought about by plague; (2) the association between miasma (noxious air particles) and pestilence; (3) the view of pestilence as a manifestation of divine retribution and as a sign of the need for moral reform; and (4) the debate concerning whether it is appropriate to act out of self-preservation and to escape an epidemic that is the result of divine punishment.¹⁸ The continuity that underwrites

18 Gilman describes the early modern plague discourse as a series of “meditations in an emergency,” a “vast and repetitive outpouring,” *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*,

the plague discourse stemmed in large part from the elusiveness of a disease that, until the nineteenth century, had rendered contemporary medicine powerless in determining its cause.¹⁹ Although uniform in their thematic approach to epidemic disease, early modern plague books, like other contemporary news pamphlets dealing with topical subject matter, could nevertheless demonstrate originality by combining traditional themes with eyewitness reporting, fictional anecdotes, dramatic situations, and authorial speculation.

Having assured the reader that his writing is on the side of the "Army of Poesy" (p. 5), Dekker presents a plague narrative in which he sustains the theme of contingency and variability as conditions that permeate "this altring kingdom" (p. 14), including its textual practices. Announcing that his method is "to paint and delineate to the life the whole story" of the year 1603 by means of "that sacred Aromatically-perfumed fire of wit (out of whose flames *Phoenix* poesie doth arise)," and soliciting "Sorrow and Truth" to "lend [him] Art" (pp. 26, 19), he combines eyewitness reporting with the point of view of the dramatist, poet, and storyteller, producing a plague book that is both a "report" and a "picture of *London*, lying sicke of the Plague" (p. 12, title page). Describing the subject matter of a book as "that which [...a writer] presents vpon the Stage of the world," Dekker constructs, in the manner of a play complete with "Prologue" and "Epilogue," the "Map of a Countrey so pitifullie distracted by the horror of a change" (pp. 5, 13). The Prologue's task is to report on the death of Queen Elizabeth in March, the first in a series of momentous events for which "that title of wonderfull is bestowed vpon 1603" (p. 19). The account of the effects of Elizabeth's death on the nation is bracketed by epigrammatic and elegiac verses in which allegorical figures "step up" to "the Stage," to commemorate the Queen's reign and to "act" out the "feares [...] bred in [...] this altring kingdome," during a year in which one "wonder begat more" (pp. 13–14, 20). The "stage" then shifts to "this straunge newes" of the "wonder" that closed the year, namely "a most dreadfull plague" (pp. 29, 20), which Dekker personifies as an "Inuader" who "plaide the tyrant" and who appeared everywhere "in such strange, and such changeable shapes" (pp. 33, 37). "I am amazed," exclaims Dekker, "This was a rare world" (pp. 33, 34).

p. 57. On the thematic continuity of the plague discourse, see also Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), chaps. 7 and 8; Slack, *Impact of Plague*, pp. 24–25; Thomas N. Corns, "Literature and London" in David Lowenstein and Janel Mueller (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 544; and Totaro (ed.), *The Plague in Print*, introduction, pp. xi–xii.

19 On the general anxiety in the early modern period about the powerlessness of medicine to explain the causes of plague, see Healy, *Fictions of Disease*, p. 55.

Dekker's solicitation of "Sorrow and Truth" to assist him in "paint[ing] and delineat[ing] [...] the story" of the year's "strange" events (the word "strange" occurs thirteen times in the pamphlet), echoes the early modern news or wonder pamphlet's emphasis on the relation between strangeness and truth. Titles of pamphlets about wonders often include the announcement that the contents are "strange and true," a convention that led Ben Jonson in his preface "To the Readers" in *The Staple of News* to condemn "published pamphlets of news [...] made all at home" for having "no syllable of truth in them."²⁰ As Patrick Collinson observes, however, "the word 'true' was a slippery commodity" in the early modern period, and the terms "story" and "history" were generally "interchangeable."²¹ Philip Sidney, in the *Apology for Poetry* (1580), describes the historian's search for truth as invested in hearsay:

The historian [...], loaden with old mouse-eaten records, authoriz[es] himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay[.]²²

Sidney had advocated for the poet's "profitable invention," arguing that "as in History looking for truth" the seekers:

go away full fraught with falsehood, so in Poesy looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention.²³

Although strangeness in the early modern period was generally considered suspect, audiences, as Joad Raymond points out, also recognized that it was "complementary to truth" and that it "could indicate that a true story was expressly significant."²⁴ In some news pamphlets, stories or anecdotes that are clearly beyond the writer's knowledge are added to eyewitness accounts; in

20 Anthony Parr (ed.), *Ben Jonson: The Staple of News* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 153.

21 Patrick Collinson, "History" in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *A New Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, 2 vols (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), vol. 1, p. 56.

22 Geoffrey Shepherd (ed.), *Sir Philip Sidney: An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy*, 3rd edn., revised by R.W. Maslen (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 89.

23 Ibid., p. 103.

24 Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*, pp. 114, 113. On the tenuous distinction between fact and fiction in early modern news pamphlets, see also Malcolm Gaskill, "Reporting Murder: Fiction in the Archives in Early Modern England," *Social History*,

other pamphlets, writers who wish to deflect the charge of fabrication mix detailed reportage with accounts by witnesses whose authenticity cannot be verified, making it impossible to differentiate between fact and representation.

In *The Wonderfull yeare* Dekker underscores the importance of literary invention, together with the humanist obligations of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. In his address "To the Reader," he declares that his complaint is "not with your good Poets," who are versed in the classical tradition (p. 5), as is his plague book, which is replete with Latin phrases, citations from classical texts, and allusions to classical authors, myths, tropes, and theories. And in the opening sentence of his account of the plague year, in which he looks back to the onset of the spring, he invokes a *locus amoenus* or idyllic setting with distinct Ovidian overtones emphasizing the process of change and transformation:

Vertumnus being attired in his accustomed habit of changeable silke, had newly passed through the first and principall Court-gate of heauen: [...] on [he] went [...] with all the wooden rabble of those that drest Orchards and Gardens, perfuming all the wayes that he went, with the sweete Odours that breath'd from flowers, hearbes and trees, which now began to peepe out of prison: by vertue of which excellent aires, the skie got a most cleare complexion. [...] the Sunne likewise was freshly and verie richly appparelled in cloth of gold [...]. for ioy whereof the Larke sung at his windowe euery morning, the Nightingale euery night [...].

pp. 9–10

A term derived from the Latin term *vertere*, meaning "to change," *Vertumnus* (the name of the god of gardens and fruit trees and ruler of the seasons and change) has the power to alter his shape at will.²⁵ The literary source for the figure is Ovid's original tale of Vertumnus and Pomona (*Metamorphoses*, Book 14). Sarah Annes Brown observes that "direct retellings" of Ovid's work "flourished" in medieval and Renaissance literature, in which "allusions to his poems became a pervasive literary presence."²⁶ As in all of the tales in the

23 (1998), pp. 1–30; Susan C. Staub, *Nature's Cruel Stepdames: Murderous Women in the Street Literature of Seventeenth Century England* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), pp. 3–100.

25 In his ground-breaking study of Dekker's prose pamphlets, Frederick O. Waage noted that the figure of Vertumnus emphasizes humanity's disregard of the permanence of change; *Thomas Dekker's Pamphlets, 1603–1609, and Jacobean Popular Literature*, 2 vols (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1977), vol. 1, p. 61.

26 Sarah Annes Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 2. In early modern England, the *Metamorphoses* was made

Metamorphoses in which Ovid invokes the traditional topos of the sensuous garden, the setting becomes the site of violence or destruction, an idealized landscape belying impending danger. Similarly, Dekker's idyllic picture of London in the spring of 1603, when the City was graced with "sweete Odours that breath'd from flowers, hearbes and trees," shifts to "The Map of a Countrey [...] pitifullie distracted by the horror of a change," following the news of the Queen's death (p. 13).

Echoing Ovid's description of the natural world as continually "altring" (*Metamorphoses*, Book 15, l. 279), Dekker develops an original plague narrative around the "chances, changes, and strange shapes that this Protean Climactericall yeare hath metamorphosed himselfe into" (p. 19). The abrupt "alteration of a State" that followed Elizabeth's death is like an "Earth-quake" for the English people, who had not until now "vnderstoode what that strange, outlandish word *Change* signified"; and everywhere one looks, one discovers "nothing but distraction: the whole Kingdome seemes a wildernes, and the people in it are transformed to wild men" (pp. 12–13), as witnessed by "Ciuill Sedition, Vprores, Rapes, Murders, and Massacres" (p. 20). The proclamation of King James I, whom Londoners call Apollo and the healing physician of London, restores order to the kingdom, but the celebration abruptly ceases when plague forces the coronation's delay: "Night walks at the heeles of the day, and sorrow enters [...] now againe in a moment alter[ing] that gladnes to shrikes & lamentation" (p. 25). The chief shape-shifter, the "nimble [...] Sicknes" (p. 39), is the "wonder" that upstages even the future King himself in the drama of this perpetually changing society (p. 14).

"A Certaine Mingled Troope of Strange Discourses": Rumour and the Dissemination of News

Having recounted the final "Tragicall Act" of the year 1603, namely the "horror" of the plague's assault (pp. 28–31), Dekker invites the reader to witness

widely available through Arthur Golding's verse translation, the first four books of which were published in 1562 and the complete fifteen-book edition in 1567. Dekker's familiarity with Ovid is suggested by his frequent allusions to Ovidian texts in his pamphlets and plays. Notable examples include the marginalia in Dekker's *Lantern and Candlelight* (1608), which consist of frequent direct citations or paraphrases of verse from the *Metamorphoses* and other Ovidian works, and the allusion to Ovid's Mermidons (from the tale of Plague at Aegina, in *Metamorphoses*, Book 7) in Dekker and Jonson's city pageant *The Magnificent Entertainment: Thomas Dekker, The Magnificent Entertainment* (London, 1604), sig. B3^r. Dekker knew Latin, and may also have read Ovid in the original.

additional strange occurrences, in the form of "*a mery Epilogue to a dull* [i.e. "gloomy" or "sad"] *Play*" (title page). Comprising over one third of the pamphlet, the epilogue, which Dekker describes both as a series of "Reports" and as "a certaine mingled Troope of strange Discourses, fashioned into Tales" (p. 8), consists of perversely comic stories, in the tradition of the jest-book, about the experiences of ordinary Londoners during the epidemic. The tales include that of a beautiful bride who was rumoured to have been struck by plague during her wedding ceremony and died shortly thereafter, a tale that Dekker explains as being about:

a strange alteration, for the Rosemary that was washt in sweete water to set out the Bridall, is now wet in teares to furnish her burial.

p. 46

In another tale, a group of "Coffin-cutters" who had discovered a "new-found trade" are seen profiting from the calamity (pp. 39, 59). The final tale concludes a series of brief satirical vignettes about the cruelty and inattentiveness of well-to-do Londoners towards the poor: the tale concerns "a poore wretch," who in the morning had been "throwne (as the fashion is) into a graue vpon a heape of carcases, that stayd for their complement," and who "was found in the afternoone, gasping and gaping for life" (p. 61).

Anticipating the objections of some readers that in the often bizarre and satirical "Reports" that comprise the epilogue he may have "either slipt too farre, or falne too short" in their "spredding," causing those readers to "cauill" (i.e. find fault with) "or complaine of iniury" (i.e. "hurtful or offensive speech or words" [*OED* 2: *injury*]), Dekker, in a second prefatory address, had asked the reader to "beare with the error," explaining that the tales originated on the "tongue" of "onely flying Report":

Know, that the intelligence which first brought them to light, was onely flying Report: whose tongue (as it often does) if in spredding them it haue tript in any materiall point, and either slipt too farre, or falne too short, beare with the error, and the rather, because it is not wilfully committed. Neither let any one (whome those Reports shall seeme to touch) cauill, or complaine of iniury, sithence nothing is set downe by a malicious hand.

p. 8

Dekker's defence of the epilogue speaks to the slippery distinction between report, rumour, and fiction. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the

term “flying” referred to the action “Of a tale, rumour, etc.: Circulating without definite authority” (*OED* 5.a: *flying*); from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the meanings of the noun form of “report” included “Rumour” or “common talk” (*OED* 1.a: *report*, n.), and the verb form included the action of “relat[ing], narrat[ing], tell[ing], giv[ing] an account of (a fact, event, etc.)” (*OED* 1.a: *report*, v.). Inspired by the “tongue” of “flying Report,” Dekker’s “mingled Troop of strange Discourses” is thus to be taken as a series of tales or rumours, originating in common talk, with no specific source or clear authority. Dekker further entreats the reader to make allowance for any perceived “error,” since all factual information becomes fiction as soon as it is conveyed and is rendered meaningful only in the telling.

Dekker’s defence of the epilogue, together with his reassurance that “nothing is set downe by malicious hand,” speaks to the broader cultural anxiety about the connection between report and rumour. Walter Ong has pointed out that although early modern Europe maintained “the relationship of print to the orality still residual in writing and early print culture,” print nevertheless exerted “subtle [...] effects [...] on consciousness” in that it permitted, among other significant developments, the dispersion “of knowledge as never before”; print “made universal literacy a serious objective, [...] and otherwise altered social and intellectual life.”²⁷ As a result, knowledge and information, as Keith Botelho writes, were “no longer in the domain of the wealthy, educated, or the elite, for the poor, uneducated commoner could just as readily hear the latest news from at home or afar”; and although information reported in print was often considered to be authoritative, it was not perceived to be immune to corruption by rumour.²⁸ A rumour, or broadly circulated report not based on clear evidence or fact, was seen to contain “the seeds of both truth and falsity,” and in creating doubt about the authenticity of socially sanctioned truth, rumour rendered truth unstable.²⁹ The early modern preoccupation with rumour, hearsay, and false information precipitated a cultural debate that encompassed an extensive textual range, indicating widespread awareness of the fragile distinction between rumour and truth. A significant case in point is the Elizabethan news pamphlet chronicling the devastating effects of civil war. In his study of the war pamphlets, Paul Voss observes that the “various prefaces and epilogues [...] inserted by printers and publishers in the news quartos,” inscribe “an ongoing

27 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literature: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; rpt. New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 115–116.

28 Keith M. Botelho, *Renaissance Earwitnesses: Rumor and Early Modern Masculinity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 12. See also Voss, *Elizabethan News Pamphlets*, p. 4.

29 Botelho, p. xiii.

and intense discussion over fact and conjecture, truth and falsehood, reliability and rumor," a debate that "marks the birth of English journalism."³⁰

The early modern preoccupation with the instability of rumour, together with its portrayal in the figure of Fama (Rumour), has its roots in classical representations. Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were particularly influential in this regard. Virgil's Rumour is a monster who flies with swift wings and has millions of mouths, each of which "is furnished with a tongue" that spreads "disastrous news" and "mingles truth with lies."³¹ Especially significant to Dekker's defence of the tales in his epilogue as originating in "flying Report" is the figure of Rumour as depicted in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid focuses on Rumour's dwelling, which is a boundless place at the centre of the universe where silence is unknown and where the hum of voices never abates. In Golding's translation, the doors of Fama's dwelling:

stand open nyght and day[...]
The house is all of sounding brasse, and roreth every way,
Reporting dowble every woord it heareth people say.³²

Countless truths and lies "ronne gadding every where," as words "confusely flye in heapes" (XII. 58–59). Rumour thus remains unverifiable:

Bruit [rumour] that loves to tell
Uncertayne newes uppon report, whereof he dooth not knowe
The author.

XII. 65–67

And as listeners recount indiscriminately whatever they have heard, the original fiction grows, with each author adding something new:

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- 30 Voss, *Elizabethan News Pamphlets*, p. 4. Ton Hoenselaars notes that in a variety of Renaissance humanist representations, Rumour "hovers between fact and fiction, between literature and news, or between literature and history," see "Rumour, News and Commerce in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News*" in M.T. Jones-Davies (ed.), *Rumeurs et Nouvelles au Temps de la Renaissance* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck; Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Société Internationale de Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur la Renaissance, 1977), p. 145.
 - 31 Howard Clarke (ed.), *Virgil's Aeneid and Fourth ('Messianic') Eclogue in the Dryden Translation* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), Book IV, ll. 264, 271.
 - 32 John Frederick Nims (ed.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation 1567* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), Book XII, ll. 49–51. Further references to the text are to this edition and are designated by book and line numbers in parentheses.

And ever by the way
 The thing that was invented growes much greater than before,
 And every one that getts it by the end addes sumwhat more.

XII. 61–63

For Ovid, the spread of rumour, like the process of storytelling, speaks to the protean nature of all discourse. Dekker's account of the 1603 plague, like Ovid's poem, is informed by a narrative structure that perpetually shifts: in genre and mood, from eyewitness report to drama and jest, and from the tragic and mournful to the comic and macabre, underscoring the tenuous distinction between reportage and storytelling. Implicating his plague book in the "mingled discourses" that underwrite early modern culture, Dekker affirms the role of contingency in human history, including textual practice.