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A Theory for Dekker's Seemingly Scurrilous Depiction of the Plague in
The Wonderful Yeare, Illuminated by Boccaccio

Dylan JONES

解毒剤としてのおもしろい逸話年鑑：

デッカーが『すばらしい年』の中で外見上下品に伝染病を描写したことについて
およびボッカチオによるその解明

ディラン・ジョーンズ

要旨：「逸話の中の解毒剤」デッカーは著書「*The Wonderful Year* (すばらしい年)」で伝染病について引用。ロンドンで発生した伝染病は、数ヵ月後には、死者が、40,000人にのぼりました。デッカーは、1603年に、伝染病を題材とした本を書き上げましたが、彼は、疾病を題材とし、冗談を加えたことに対して、リンチされることも、ましてや、公に非難されることもありませんでした。確かに、衝撃を与え、独善的な近代の批評家たちは、デッカーの作品は、不愉快で、下品だと責めたてました。私は、この論文で、デッカーの論述が伝染病の犠牲者たちの苦痛を一層つものらせるためではなく、むしろ、その苦痛を和らげるためであるという点を主張しています。デッカーは、笑いや軽率さが、疾病の傷や意気消沈した心には、理想の解毒剤であると考えていたと思われまます。また、この概念は、ボッカチオのデカメロンのはじまりでも提唱されています。

Joking about the plague? The dissonance between the theme and the tone of Thomas Dekker's *Wonderfull Yeare* has caused some critical consternation. Certain critics have "never been comfortable" (Bowers 229) with what they perceive as Dekker's distasteful indelicacy in jesting about the plague mere months after it swept through London in 1603, killing "40,000" (Dekker 26)¹. Pendry "apologised for the *The Wonderful Yeare* and its author" (Bowers 229) because of the jocose treatment of the plague, and Waage similarly dismisses Dekker's apparently facetious attitude, in his plague-writings, as "flippant" and "tasteless paradox" (182): a "blatantly inadequate [response] to the situation that called it forth" (79)². Such critics feel that decorum dictates that, particularly during outbreaks of the pestilence, quips about it should be avoided like the plague: they consider Dekker's plague bantering to be as off-colour as the skin of plague victims, disfigured by "black and blew stripes" (38).

However, Dekker seems to be prescribing laughter and levity as the ideal antidote to the disease and depression occasioned by the plague, a notion also suggested by Boccaccio in the

First Day of *The Decameron*. Dekker is most explicit as to his purpose, writing "because mirth is both *Phisicall*, and wholesome against the *Plague*" (3). Dekker seeks to "make the Comicke cheek of Poesie smile" (17), as opposed to the morbid implications of a "pocket full of posies." Dekker will "with a kind of sad delight rehearse the memorable acts" (38).

Dekker's use of the verb "rehearse" signifies a strong theatrical element to *The Wonderful Yeare*: the strange events of 1603 will be what he "presents vpon the Stage of the world" (5). Elizabeth's funeral "was but the dumb shew, the Tragical Act" (13), the "Prologue leaving the stage cleere" (14) for the plague to pounce, "like stalking *Tamberlaiane*" (31): "Oh it were enough to fill a hundred paire of writing tables with notes but to see the parts plaid in the compasse of one houre on the stage of this new found world!" (21). Dekker seizes on the dramatic potential of the situation, at a time when his plays could not be performed as the plague had closed down the theatres. Thus, a theatrical strain permeates *The Wonderful Yeare*, from the talk of "shew tricks like *Bancks*" (6)³ to the farrago of farcical fables at the end.

This theatrical strain seems appropriate for a plague pamphlet because the essential natures of theatre and plague appear somewhat similar, as Antonin Artaud has shown. Artaud avers that both are catalysts for "the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty. . . impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall" (30, 31); "The theater, like the plague. . . releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities" (31) so "that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element" (30), giving "freedom of the city and of existence to acts that are by nature hostile to the life of societies" (28). Artaud articulates his view that, "like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively" (31). Thus, on one level, *The Wonderful Yeare* might be read as a 'carnavalesque' catharsis from the horrors of the plague, exposing the "slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world" (Artaud 31), and ridiculing it.

Less altruistically, Dekker exploits the plague as a medium to display his literary adroitness. Dekker clowns about the plague, showing off his linguistic dexterity as if he were performing a circus act: an amusing logician or verbal contortionist. Dekker delights in personifying the plague/death: a bandmaster (33), a rapist (33, 46), "the best Fencer in the world" (39), a "cunning hunter" (40), a "thiefe" (44), a highwayman (41), and "chiefe waiter" (46). The metaphorical applications of this "Protean" (19) and "Cameleon-like sicknes" (37) are limitless and irresistible.

Dekker is by no means unique in personifying the plague and death, showing the guises of the Grim Reaper, but perhaps Dekker's extension of these metaphors is what some critics find offensive, especially Dekker's droll yet dolorous *jeux de mots*. The Dutchman who caught the plague learnt "there were Low-countries beside his owne" (40). Dekker reports crude burials, attended by "wringing palsie-shaken hands in stead of belles" (31). The plague intervenes to destroy normalcy everywhere. The bridegroom whose bride died of the plague during their

wedding ceremony "was a husband and a widower, yet never knew his wife" (46). Dekker gorges on the literary licence afforded by the paradoxes of the plague. Again though, Dekker is not unique in such literary exploitation of the plague. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio describes the effects of the plague. Though more elevated, Boccaccio's language sounds almost as if it might have come straight out of *The Wonderful Yeare*: plague-stricken people "breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, comrades and friends and that same night supped with their ancestors in the other world!" (16)⁴.

However, Dekker employs such devices far more often than Boccaccio. Dekker revels in such tautological tomfoolery with his focus on the "morbid ironies of this afflicted time. His linguistic virtuosity ensures readers that the treatment itself will be as unsettling as it is paradoxical" (Bowers 235). Dekker unstintingly indulges his "linguistic virtuosity" and preoccupation with paradox and irony: "a *Lee* was *Lorde Maior* when she [Elizabeth] came to the Crowne, and a *Lee Lorde Maior* when she departed from it" (17)⁵. Dekker also mentions "Janus" (9) and relishes such mirror imagery: just as Elizabeth "was appointed to be the mirror of her time" (19), James is the "Happiest of all thy Ancestors (thou mirror of all Princes that ever were or are)" (21). The accession of James provides further opportunity for Dekker to note more paradoxes: "the losse of a Queene, was paid with the double interest of a King and Queene" (21); "upon Thurseday it was treason to cry God save King *James* king of England, and upon Friday hie treason not to cry so" (21).

Dekker's linguistic larks seem to hold paramount position in his consciousness as he writes; he is not overly concerned with scrupulously depicting the pain of the plague *de veritas*. Dekker claims the plague's "dreadfulness. . . is inutterable" (28), but not so ineffable that he cannot fill a pamphlet making fun of it. Similarly, though Dekker claims to desire "that my paper may receive the true pictures" (26) of the plague, his "weeping pen" (25) seems more concerned with the writing process and appropriating the plague for literary benefit and amusement (before he says, finally, almost ruefully, that no more shall the readers "wring out of my pen" 60). Dekker describes the exodus from London caused by the plague: "away they trudge thicke & threefolde, some riding, some on foote, some without bootes, some in their slippers, by water, by land, in shoales swom they west-ward, mary to *Graves-end*" (32). Gravesend is at the eastern extremity of the Thames; almost nobody would travel west to Gravesend. Another macabre example of "irreverent" and "inveterate punning" (Bowers 233, 235) is signified. As Clark states, "Dekker is not a chronicler or reporter but a performer in language" (112), refuting Waage's claim that Dekker "takes the 'humble' approach of the craftsman recording only what he sees" (183).

Dekker admits, or at least intimates, the apocryphal nature of many of his plague stories. In his note "To the Reader", Dekker mentions the "strange Discourses, fashioned into Tales" (8) in *The Wonderful Yeare*. Dekker claims his source for these discourses "was onely flying Report" (8). The tales seem to be mere canards at best. As Dekker confirms at the

pamphlet's conclusion: "I could fill a large volume, and call it a second part of the hundred merry tales⁶, only with such ridiculous stuffe" (60).

Dekker's stories are often so farcical, so raucously ridiculous, that surely nobody could miss the exaggeration, fabrication and transmogrification. For example, the country innkeeper who unwittingly admits a London plague-sufferer to his hostelry, causing a plague on both their houses, is a caricature. The host is a "mad Greeke" (53), obscenely obese, with a comic nose: "an Antiquary might have pickt rare matter out of his Nose" (53), it being "richly garnisht with Rubies, Chrisolites and Carbunckles, which glistened so oriently" that seafarers wanted him to join them on voyages "only to save the charges of candles" (54). When he saw the Londoner had the plague, the "gorbelly Host, that in many a yeare could not without grunting, crawle over a threshold but two foote broad, leapte halfe a yard from the coarse (It was measured by a Carpenters rule)" (55). The claim of scientific verification is surely tongue in cheek; the tone of the tale is so patently ridiculous. Similarly ludicrous is the tale of the drunkard who passes out in a grave, only for the Sexton of Stepney to mistake him for another corpse. The Sexton then throws more bones into the grave, and "one of the skulls battered the sconce of the sleeper" (52) who awakes, furious, to chase the Sexton. The Sexton "ran so fast, that hee ranne out of his wittes, which being left behinde him, he had like to have dyed presently after" (53). Dekker does not seem to be trying too hard to make his stories seem plausible.

Indeed, Dekker's "Sexton of *Stepny*" (51), and his cobbler and tinker, all seem to correspond closely to the stock types found in early English comic *novelle* and jest-books, such as "*The Cobbler of Canterbury* (1590; reissued in 1630... as *The Tinker of Turvey*)" (Wilson 140). Similarly, the fat Dutchman was another stock comic type, as was the fat innkeeper with bogus jewels up his nose. The presence of all these stock characters and tropes surely indicates that *The Wonderfull Yeare* is intended to be comic and absurd rather than a serious, realistic depiction of the plague year.

The "climax of absurdity, subversion and paradox" (Bowers 237) is the tale of the cobbler's wife. Dekker's double-entendres litter this preposterous tale. Following the old pattern of deathbed repentance, whereby, when in the grips of the plague, the "lecher becomes pure" (Artaud 24), the cobbler's wife had the "worme of sinne tickling her conscience" (47) and, "prickt forward with this gentle spur" (49), she divulges a mass of infidelities to her husband: "the bed that she laie upon (being as she thought, or rather feared) the last bed that ever should beare her (for many other had borne her you must remember)" (47). The cobbler's awl had not been enough for his wife as when he slept, "softly out-steales Sir *Paris*, and to *Hellenaes* teeth prou'd himself a true *Trojan*. This was the cream of her confession" (50): "Another hath dischargde his Artillery against thy Castle of Fortification" (48). Dekker's cuckolded cobbler must have regretted any shoemaker's holidays taken *sans* his wife as he grew "a monstrous pair of invisible horns" (48). However, after her confession, the wife makes a highly unlikely recovery and is restored to rude health. In concluding, Dekker deliberates, "now whether this

Recantation was true. . . I leave it to the Jury" (51).

Dekker is almost instructing readers to be sceptical about the veracity of his stories. Dekker's narrative is often so ridiculous that it is surely self-evident he is not telling the unadulterated truth: as Elizabeth's body was conveyed by barge, "fish under water/Wept out their eyes of pearle" (18). Exaggeration, and the inclusion of the miraculous, in ostensibly historical or reportorial accounts was commonplace in the Early Modern period. Some examples are Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*⁷ and "Stowes Chronicle in *Decimo sexto* to huge *Hollinshead*" (20). Hutson argues that "sixteenth-century developments in prose fiction are not part of a teleological evolution of historical consciousness from the scepticism about miracles produced by literacy" and cites William Marshall, in 1534, rejecting any need for "objective likelihood" (85). Dekker's tales are often as far-fetched as those of Marco Polo, and Dekker's London can seem quite as foreign, fabricated and fantastical as the far-flung destinations described by Polo. Moreover, just as wild exaggerations and the incredible could be accommodated acceptably within the genre of serious writing at the time, a feature of the comic writing was also that "it is impossible to tell fact from fiction" (Wilson 137).

Clearly, Dekker goes far "beyond mere record" (Bowers 230). Waage's primary objection to the pamphlet is the "rhetorical distance from reality quoted by laughter" (78). However, a kernel of truth underpins *The Wonderfull Yeare*, exaggerated by Dekker for literary expediency: "whilst I have the quill in my hand, let me blow them bigger" (20). Penning a plague pamphlet in 1603, only for it to be entirely divorced from reality, is hard to credit. Dekker was in a quasi-journalistic position. Thus, a serious undercurrent emerges periodically. The anarchy sparked by the plague is a serious issue addressed by Dekker, though his humour can usually also be discerned.

The plague "created a lethal kind of social mobility" (Smith 28), a classic case of Death the Leveller. Dekker describes how "men, women & children dropt downe before him: houses were rifled, streetes ransackt...rich-mens Cofers broken open, and shared amongst prodigall heires and unthriftie servants, poore men usde poorely, but not pittifully" (33). The plague destroys class barriers: "that weather-beaten sun-burnt drudge, that not a month since fawnde upon thy worship like a Spaniell, and like a bond-slave would have stoopt lower than thy feete, does now stoppe his nose at thy presence" (30). Prices "rose wonderfully, in so much that Rosemary which had wont to be solde for 12 pence an armfull, went now for sixe shillings a handfull" (35), and "all thy golde and silver cannot hire" (30) servants.

Similarly, in *The Decameron*, Boccaccio berates the "greed of servants. . . allured by high and extravagant wages" (12). The plague was a time "without order" (23), when the "reverend authority of the laws, both divine and human, was all in a manner dissolved and fallen into decay" (11). The lack of order meant there "arose a usage before well-nigh unheard of, to wit, that no woman, however fair or winsome or wellborn she might be, once fallen sick, thought anything of having a man tend her, whatever he might be. . . and without any shame would

uncover to him every part of her body" (12). The anarchy was so total that farm animals roamed unconstrained, grazing until they were "glutted": a veritable *Animal Farm*. Boccaccio, resonant of Aristotle, describes the peripatetic animals as "almost like rational creatures" (16)⁸.

For Boccaccio and Dekker, such anarchy is intolerable as it reveals the basest instincts of humans. Dekker reviles the base behaviour of almost everyone during the plague. However, Dekker's disdain is strongest for the parasitic professions that do their briskest business during the plague, the "merry Sextons, hungry Coffin-sellers... and nastie Grave-makers" (31-2). Similarly, Boccaccio berates the "dregs of our city, thirsting for our blood, [who] style themselves gravediggers" (18). Dekker observes that "this was a rare world for the Church" (34) and derides the "three bald Sextons" who, prior to burying corpses, were "tearing money out of their throates" (34).

The behaviour of laymen was scarcely more honourable. Boccaccio bemoans people's "bestial preoccupation" (11), thinking "of nought but themselves" (11) as "well-nigh all tended to a very barbarous conclusion, namely, to shun and flee from the sick" (10) who, "perchance, had they been succoured, would have escaped alive" (13). Yet no help was forthcoming, just the "abandonment of the sick" (12) as people "abandoned their own city" (11). Similarly, Dekker describes "*London*, foresaken like a Lover" (35), echoing with "cries sharp inough to pierce heaven, but on earth no eare is opend to receive them" (28). Boccaccio also describes victims who "made it known to the neighbours that they were dead rather by the stench of their rotting bodies than otherwise" (14) as "people thought no more of men that died than nowadays they would of goats" (15): people "died not like men, but well-nigh like beasts" (15).

Similarly, Dekker mentions people "buried like dogs" (36). The tinker undertakes such a burial. The Londoner with the plague, who so shocked the fat innkeeper, dies in the country, and the burial will cost "fortie shillings" (56). The tinker offers to bury him for just "ten shillings" (58), thrilling the locals as "thirtie shillings was saved by the bargaine" (58). Even in such desperate times, penny-pinching proclivities prevail in the "thriftie citizen" (23). Dekker thus demonstrates with derision how risibly people's basest instincts persevere despite the plague⁹.

This depiction is another serious social statement by Dekker, even though it is couched in characteristically humorous terms. Similarly, Dekker's descriptions of the plague's grotesque physical manifestations can be read as serious and purely reportorial, but at the same time he seems to be enjoying describing them with a little too much relish¹⁰. Boccaccio's descriptions of apple-sized inguinal swellings and pruriginous plague boils, "black or livid blotches" (9), are horrific enough, but he does not say much more than that about the unsightly physical effects of the plague.

In contrast, Dekker is unable to restrain himself. Describing the "blackish sweate" (48) on victims might be considered within the realm of the reportorial as, more tenuously, might the

news that victims of this "*anthropophagized* plague" (26) had "18 sores at one time running upon them" (37). However, Dekker's worm fetish is maybe another case of his oft-indulged artistic licence. Dekker enjoys the image of carcasses as the diet of worms. The tinker who buries the Londoner knows "wormes needed no apparell. . . stript him starke naked, but first diu'de nimble into his pockets" (58), to find "seven pounds in it" (59). Also rather beyond the pale is Dekker's description of the "wild Irish countrey of worms" (39) where victims go. Dekker's nationalistic worm imagery is also clear as he disrespects the dead Dutchman: "his eares by this time are eaten off with wormes" (40), and it seems a shame "to cosen our English wormes of his Dutch carcass" (40). Such "crawling worms" (27) wriggle throughout Dekker's pamphlet: "the wormes that breed out of their putrifying carcasses, shall crawle in huge swarms from them, and quite devoure thee" (29).

Similarly disturbing, yet at the same time rather irreverently amusing, is Dekker's fondness for characterising the plague in sexual terms. Dekker mentions "beautiful maydens throwne on their beddes, and ravisht by sicknes" (33), and he seems to "relish the pallat of lickerish expectation" (38), talking of "breath, which like a harlot will runne away" (39). The plague intercedes during a wedding, embracing the bride before her husband: "Death rudely lay with her, & spoild her of a maidenhead in spite of her husband" (46). The 'groom had been so excited about his wedding night ("*Hymen* was the God to whom he prayed" 44), but, come the big day, the only "ringing of bells" (46) he experienced was that of the church at his bride's funeral. The nature of the bride's expiry during the ceremony again shows Dekker's flair for the dramatic, but again surely at the expense of truth: as soon as the priest comes to the part about "*In sicknes and in health*, there he stopt, for suddenly the bride tooke hold of, *in sicknes*" and "began to loose colour" (45) and died.

The same issue seems to recur throughout Dekker's plague stories. Ostensibly, Dekker is being reportorial, but his anecdotes often seem more farcical than truthful as he indulges his writing skills to the full. Hence, some critics charge that Dekker is disgracefully indecorous in joking about the plague. However, to what extent is this attitude merely a self-indignant construct of the twentieth-century? Of course, gauging the mood of the readers of the *The Wonderfull Yeare's* jests in 1603, just months after the plague ravaged London, seems almost impossible. However, maybe Boccaccio provides some intimation of people's attitude during times of plague, a possible clue towards a better appreciation of what Dekker was trying to achieve.

The similarities between Boccaccio and Dekker's plague descriptions cannot hide the fact the two works are essentially different. Dekker writes as a pseudo-journalist, while Boccaccio uses the plague as a rhetorical device, a fictional frame to encapsulate his hundred stories. Thus, the hilltop palace, where the characters gather, is almost other-worldly: "here are gardens, here are many other delectable places" (25), "beds well made and full of flowers. . . a little meadow, where the grass grew green and high. . . waftings of a gentle breeze" (26).

However, though Dekker's plebeian subjects are more realistic than Boccaccio's in quotidian class terms, Dekker's London can also seem other-worldly at times, just as divorced from reality.

Moreover, Boccaccio was writing about the plague with the same immediacy as Dekker. The Black Death/bubonic plague ravaged Europe from 1334-51, and Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron* in 1349-51. Thus, Boccaccio was probably addressing readers of similar attitudes and sensibilities as Dekker. In fact, the plague of Boccaccio's time was far more deadly, so maybe Boccaccio's readers would have been even more sensitive to his literary treatment of the plague than those of Dekker¹¹.

However, significantly, Boccaccio's treatment of the plague does not involve the protracted descriptions of its miseries that detached observers might deem most appropriate. Instead, Boccaccio says "strange customs sprang up" (13) when people died of the plague. There were few "pious lamentations and bitter tears. . . in lieu of these things there prevailed, for the most part, laughter and jests and feasting and merry making" (13). In plague/times, people did not want to be morose all the time. Whether the desire to laugh comes from what modern psychoanalysts call 'escapism,' 'denial,' or other 'coping strategies' is hard to say, but this seemingly paradoxical and perverse desire seems to have existed. Pampinea wants "no news other than joyous" (25), insisting "it behooves us to live merrily. . . to live joyously" (23). The group is glad Dyoneo is with them: "the merriest fellow in the world and full of quips and cranks," who threatens to go unless "you will address yourselves to make merry and laugh" (23). Hence, "they fell to singing amorous and merry ditties" (26) and story-telling.

Boccaccio thus gives a clue to appreciating Dekker: in plague times, there was a need for levity. In both *The Decameron* and *The Wonderfull Yeare*, laughter is a balm to the plague. Clearly, Dekker's jokes go much further than Boccaccio's, but both writers often address plague issues in the same way¹². For example, both object to the macabre pleasure gravediggers derive from their lucrative jobs during the plague. Boccaccio berates gravediggers for "flouting us with our distresses in ribald songs" (18), while Dekker's grave-digging tinker sings: "Have ye any more Londoners to bury, hey downe a downe dery, have ye any more Londoners to bury" (59).

Whereas Boccaccio is content to report that ribald songs were sung, Dekker cannot resist supplying the lyrics. Perhaps Dekker's explicitness is what upsets some critics. Bowers observes that Dekker "focuses on the savage ironies of his various story lines" (233); a "grim, realist mimetic has been the narrative strategy of the pamphlet throughout" (239); "the amoral relish of the ironist is unmistakable" (235). Dekker's stories show the plague itself is amoral in the way it can strike anybody so indiscriminately¹³. Thus, Dekker's apparently amoral response seems strangely appropriate. However, Waage sees some embodiments of morality play absolutes in *The Wonderfull Yeare*: "the cobbler's wife is Lechery, the drunkard is drunkenness, and the tinker is Cupidity (if not pride)" (97). Yet such allegorical identifications

do not seem valid as "blanket moral judgement does not apply" (Bowers 238): after all, the plague spares those three sinners. Instead, humour seems to replace judgement. Dekker's only systematic concern seems to be making each plague story funnier and more outrageous than its predecessor, not to assert some moribund moralising.

Dekker seems almost wilfully and scurrilously amoral in his stories. Indeed, Dekker's apparently amoral approach was maybe preferable to asserting that folk should suffer the plague in stoical silence and put their faith in the church and its grisly Sextons. The church did not offer much consolation in explaining the plague, portraying it as afflicting those who had offended God through such sins as "neglect of God. . . hypocritical worship. . . light account of the sacrament, and the unworthy receiving thereof. . . Wine is the Vine of *Sodome*, and Grapes of *Gomorah*"¹⁴.

Medical explanations foundered in a similar manner. Understandably, the "notion of a micro-organism transmitted through fleas from rats acting as host for the bacillus was unheard of" (Bowers 231). Instead, the most prevalent theory was that the plague was spread through polluted air. Physician Thomas Thayre describes three causes of the plague: "sinne. . . corruption of the aire. . . the evill disposition of the body, bred by evill diet, and the abuse of. . . things not natural"¹⁵. Thayre prescribes "the avoidance of baths, and vehement exercise; keeping northeast windows open on clear days", and many other weird remedies, "ranging from the purgative to the costive". Such methods were ineluctably doomed to failure. As Dekker sneers, "their Phlebotomies, Losinges, and Electuaries, with their Diacatholicons, Diacodions, Amulets, Antidotes, had not so much strength to hold life and soule together, as a pot of *Pinders Ale* and a Nutmeg. . . *Galen* could do no more good than Sir Giles Goosecap" (36). Besides, Dekker claims that even finding a physician to prescribe such ineffectual treatment was almost impossible as "they hid their Synodical heads" (36).

Moreover, in plague times, as Dekker's tales show, "civic authority and legal redress is as. . . laughably impotent as medical advice and spiritual guidance" (Bowers 236). Bowers sees "scapegoating" as the "fundamental strategy of medical and moral plague pamphlets" (233). Plague-sufferers looked to medics and clergy for comfort, only to find themselves blamed for their illness; "Dekker alone approached the plague of 1603 through the paradoxical linguistic strategy of stories" (Bowers 233).

All other remedies fail so miserably, so should people laugh or cry? Almost necessarily, a plague outbreak would cause a surfeit of sadness, which is why Dekker seeks to counter it with laughter. This philosophy is supported by "the wisdom of Soloman, that 'a merry heart doeth like a good medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones'" (quoted Wilson 143). Laughter may well be the best medicine, even if the reader is doomed to be the next victim. *The Wonderfull Yeare* might thus be viewed as gallows' humour or as being somewhat analogous to the *sardonios*: a "Sardinian plant which when eaten was supposed to produce convulsive laughter ending in death"¹⁶. Dekker's humour is often bleak and brutal, but perhaps

this is because "it aims at dissolving the morbid tensions of a diseased society" (Bowers 237). Dekker's response to the plague might be construed as rather analogous to people that unaccountably start laughing at a funeral: both behaviours seem horribly inappropriate, but not genuinely malicious.

Undeniably though, at times, Dekker's *schadenfreude* in his "*schwankbuecher*" (Wilson 122: jestbook) is clear, such as in his treatment of the Dutchman. However, again the reader should consider whether Dekker is trying to tell a true story, a realistic depiction, or if he is just fabricating matter for literary purposes. Although the line between fact and fiction often seems blurred, the latter seems more plausible: Dekker makes the plague "literary, fictional, ironic, metaphorical. *The Wonderfull Yeare*... 'spreads' the plague as metaphorical serum against itself through a variety of story lines" (Bowers 239). Dekker thus uses the plague more rhetorically than realistically, just as Boccaccio does in *The Decameron*. However, at the same time, both Boccaccio and Dekker make some serious, pertinent points about the plague.

Similarly, Boccaccio conveys a definite sense of the need for laughter and levity as an antidote to the plague's depressing ravages. Dekker takes this notion a stage further with his jesting anecdotes about the plague, which provide full range for him to exploit his literary skills and virtuosity, presenting paradoxes and farcical fabrications. Dekker must have tailored *The Wonderfull Yeare* to contemporary literary taste and sensibilities, as it appears he was only writing it for money: his income from plays having been stopped by the closure of theatres due to the plague.

The loss of income from the theatres must have been substantial for Dekker. Although Dekker was a "prolific dramatist" (Berlin 263), with a hand in "forty-two" plays (Berlin 265), his finances were never too healthy. Thus, money was almost certainly Dekker's object in penning *The Wonderfull Yeare*. Indeed, Dekker states his commercial motives with candour, indicating that he does not want "to dam it perpetually to lye on a Stationers stall" (5). Dekker wanted *The Wonderfull Yeare* to be a best-seller, not something that would be so reviled that the public would not buy it and would instead be buying for his blood because he had joked about the plague.

Nobody in 1603 seems to have objected particularly to *The Wonderfull Yeare*: it was not censored, and no records exist of Dekker being lynched or even publicly criticised. Thus, Dekker deserves credit for knowing what the public would like. Dekker's "love for the citizens" (Berlin 265), manifest in his plays, must have been reciprocated to some degree. Further indication of Dekker's popularity (and common touch), in addition to his forty-two plays, is the fact Dekker co-wrote James' coronation pageant that same year. Even criticisms of Dekker, a "Henslowe hack" (Berlin 277) or a "*Poetaster*" (as Ben Jonson famously called him), nonetheless seem to recognise, inherently, that he was adept at gauging the tastes of his public and of tailoring his writing accordingly. In 1603, Dekker believed *The Wonderfull Yeare*, a tissue of tall tales and gags about the plague, would be well-received by the public¹⁷.

Dekker had his finger on the pulse, even though pulses were expiring all around him. Dekker was an eminently better judge of public sentiment and sensibilities than the chattering classes of modern critics whose opprobrium has fallen upon *The Wonderful Yeare*.

These posturing, self-righteous critics thus appear rather anachronistic in looking back to a time of nation-wide trauma and objecting to the "shocking incongruity" (Bowers 235) of Dekker in joking about the plague. Such critics seem to feel that an account of the plague warrants a certain gravity, so they would probably be more gratified by Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, as it represents such a serious treatment. On one hand, Defoe confirms certain aspects of the plague fitting Dekker's depictions¹⁸, but Defoe cannot discern any hilarity in the plague: "Tears and lamentations were seen in almost every house" (25); "Death was before their eyes, and everybody began to think of their graves, not of mirth and diversions" (37).

However, other writers beg to differ. Poe, *à propos de* Defoe, in "The Masque of the Red Death", opts instead for his characters to emulate those of *The Decameron* when faced with a dread pestilence: rather than mope, Prospero and his possé head for an isolated abbey where the "prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure": "The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve" (604). Both Boccaccio and Dekker similarly reject misery in favour of mirth, taking the jocose over the morose. Although Dekker sets sail with his logbook of the plague-year keeping a tight ship of woeful and sombre tales of desperate decay and gaping graves (28), he soon complains that "My spirit growes faint with rowing this Stygian Ferry" (31), and so he changes tack and sails his ship of fools instead "on the merry wings of a lustier winde" (31), signalling the start of the jesting.

Defoe seems to have copied Dekker quite shamelessly in many respects, taking his ideas, but omitting the humour¹⁹. This omission of humour is significant as Defoe was not writing his plague account with anything approaching the same immediacy as Dekker or Boccaccio. Defoe was writing in 1721 about the 1665 plague (when he had been only four years-old), apparently with the main goal of convincing an indifferent public (with little knowledge or recollection of 1665) that the plague then sweeping across Europe was a real danger. Thus, Defoe adopted a similar stance to that of the aforementioned modern critics of Dekker: looking back at the plague in the distant past and declaring dogmatically that it is no laughing matter. However, Dekker and Boccaccio, with much more real and immediate experience of the plague, arrived at the opposite conclusion: merriment was exactly what was required.

Perhaps it is just a case of sour grapes for such modern critics, nonplussed by *The Wonderful Yeare*. Dekker's pamphlet defies attempts to unify it: Waage cavils that "*The Wonderful Yeare* ends with a long plague-jestbook, which has nothing to do formally with what has gone before" (8), namely the first third of the pamphlet re James succeeding Elizabeth. Indeed, Dekker gives the impression his anecdotes could go on and on, with little consideration of how or where to stop, and with no thought of reconnecting the stories to the monarchical matter of the pamphlet's beginning.

The result is sprawling heterogeneity, the odd mix of genres: encomium and jestbook. Unravelling the Gordian knot of Dekker's exact intention in twining these genres together appears to represent an almost impossible task. Bowers' belief is that *The Wonderful Yeaere* appropriately reflects the "mad, maniacal, macabre, ultimately ludicrous situation of plague" (236), and this approach certainly seems more positive and productive than that of the cantankerous critics who simply want to decry Dekker's scabrous *mauvais gout* in jesting about the plague. Dekker states explicitly that "mirth is both *Physicall* and wholesome against the *Plague*" (3), hence the tales: anecdotes as antidotes. Boccaccio expresses the same view in *The Decameron*. These authors, writing in terrible times of plague, should surely be better judges of the public's sensibilities than some squeamish, cloistered critic of the twentieth-century.

ENDNOTES

1. Trevelyan estimates the number of dead from the plague at "30,000 persons" (265).
2. Moreover, these criticisms of Dekker's prose compound those of his more-vaunted drama as they are so similar: M.C. Bradbrook calls him a "moral sloven", and Algernon Swinburne chastises "his want of seriousness" (quoted Berlin 264, 272n).
3. Banks, the "famous horse-dancer, arithmetician, and climber of St. Paul's" (220n).
4. As well as the plague theme link, Wilson notes early English comic *novelle* generically "descend from... comic material in the *Decameron*" (140).
5. "In 1558-9 the Lord Mayor was Sir Thomas Leigh... in 1602-3 Robert Lee" (220n).
6. *A Hundred Mery Tales* was a famous jestbook. Dekker knew the genre well: he and George Wilkins penned *Iests to make you Merie* (1607).
7. Rather like *The Decameron*, Foxe uses the plague to explain a providential meeting: "it came to pass that Cranmer by reason the plague was in Cambridge resorted to Waltham", where he met the men who introduced him to Henry VIII (*The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*. George Townsend. New York: AMS, 1965. 331).
8. *Comme Artaud dit*, too: "all social forms disintegrate. Order collapses" (15); "every infringement of morality" (15) follows; "the surge of erotic fever... trying to wrench a criminal pleasure from the dying or even the dead" (24); "The dead already clog the streets in ragged pyramids gnawed at by animals around the edges" (23).
9. Dekker also reviles usurers: "Usurers and Brokers (that are the Divels Ingles, and dwell in the long-lane of hell)" (12); "ruffians... that faine would dig up gowty usurers graves" (15); a dying man ignored by "the rich Usurer dwelling next doore" (28).
10. Exploitation of the grotesque is quite common among Dekker's contemporaries. Finding examples is not hard (especially in Nashe), and even in Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (London: Penguin, 1987): when King Basilius and his men repel the "clowns and other rebels" (379), mutilated body parts are gorily flying all over the place. Such brutal humour suggests the public quite enjoyed it.
11. The Black Death killed one in four Europeans ("fifty million", Artaud 22), and "between 30 and 50 percent of the population of England died... mortality may have been as high as 3,000,000" (Trevelyan 29). These millions compare to 40,000 London plague victims in 1603. Trevelyan: "in spite of recurrent visits of the plague... Tudor London was relatively healthy and deaths were fewer than births" (20).

12. Boccaccio and Dekker use the same images to show the overcoming of the plague. Boccaccio: "the sun is high. . . nor is aught heard save the locusts in the olives" (26). Dekker sees James, coming to dispel the plague, as the "Sun" (20) and an "Olive" (26).
13. The plague was wholly arbitrary, often striking the good and sparing the bad. Waage: "Dekker's tales show service recompensed by death" (181). Artaud: "No one can say why the plague strikes the coward who flees it and spares the degenerate who gratifies himself on the corpses; why distance, chastity, solitude are helpless against attacks. . . why a group of debauchees isolating themselves in the country, like Boccaccio. . . can calmly wait for the warm days when the plague withdraws. . . Other victims, without bubos, delirium, pain, or rash, examine themselves proudly in the mirror, in splendid health, as they think, and then fall dead" (22, 23).
14. Roger Fenton offers this spiritual explanation in his *Perfume against the noysome Pestilence* (London, 1603), quoted by Bowers (232).
15. Thayer's theories are in his 1603 *Treatise of the Pestilence* (quoted Bowers 231). Thayer's strangest 'cure' is: "Pull away the feathers from about the fundament of the cocke, and place the fundament upon sore, and hold his bill sometime to keepe in his breath, he shall the better draw the venome: and he die, then take another, and do so againe." Modern sceptics might call such a cure, 'chicken-sh*t,' quite literally. Artaud calls such quacks: "strange personages. . . noses long as sausages. . . chanting absurd litanies. . . These ignorant doctors betray only their fear and their childishness" (23/4).
16. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Unabridged Edition).
17. Yet Dekker never made a killing: the work was recalled for not being licensed. This was a pity for, as Robert Burton says (*Anatomy of Melancholy*. Philadelphia: J.W. Moore, 1852): "nothing. . . sells better than a scurrile pamphlet" (4). Instead, Dekker spent 1612-19 in gaol, lucky Burton's views were not law: "a bankrupt shall be. . . publicly shamed. . . for a twelvemonth imprisoned", and if still in debt, "he shall be hanged" (61). Dekker would not have shared that Burtonian view, but his literary treatment of the plague seems analogous to Burton's treatment of melancholy: to "make an antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease" (5).
18. "I could fill this account with the strange relations such people gave every day of what they had seen" (30); "You may be sure, also, that the report of these things lost nothing in the carriage. The plague was itself very terrible, and the distress of the people very great. . . But the rumour was infinitely greater" (210).
19. Defoe's narrator, the saturnine Saddler of Whitechapel, is not at all of the same rollicking stock comic type as the Sexton of Stepney, *The Cobbler of Canterbury* or *The Tincker of Turvey*.

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