

Plague, Print and Providence
in Early Seventeenth Century London

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Plague and Providence in Popular Print in Early Seventeenth Century London

AIM: To consider how contemporary understanding of divine providence is reflected in and expressed through selected popular printed material concerning outbreaks of plague in early seventeenth century London, with particular reference to the pamphlets of Thomas Dekker.

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Abstract Summary

The aim of this study is to consider whether and how the plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker demonstrate understanding of divine providence, and, by comparison with other contemporary plague writing, what can be learned of religious attitudes in early seventeenth century London. Historians have come to characterise religion in England of this period as ‘post-Reformation’ rather than necessarily Protestant, although it remains a challenge to discover the beliefs of those who did not write for themselves. Cheap print publications provide one such source as they appear to have reached a wide readership, at least within relatively literate London. Dekker’s plague pamphlets represent a body of work produced in response to the plague outbreaks in 1603, 1625 and 1630. They rarely use the word ‘providence’ in the context of plague, but came from what has been called ‘a broadly providentialist mind-set.’ Dekker is insistent that plague is the judgement of God on sin, and that the only answer is repentance. Judgment is always collective, on city or nation, not personalised to the individual. He does however give particular attention to those who flee the city to escape the plague or neglect the poor. At a time when the authorities were attempting to impose a policy of isolation on plague victims, it is striking that Dekker makes no effort to endorse the Plague Orders, and, unlike many with more theological education, has no time for secondary causes or ‘means’ by which the plague is carried. Indeed, he is so fixed on repentance as the answer that his theology becomes Pelagian, as he insists repentance has mechanical efficacy. This study supports the view of those historians who see providence as part of a continuum of ideas from before the Reformation. However it is also clear that not all providentialism was the same: others looked to God’s ‘special providence’, an idea not to be found in Thomas Dekker’s plague pamphlets.

Note on Location of Sources

The majority of the primary sources used for this study have been sourced from the website Early English Books Online – <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> – accessed on numerous occasions between October 2011 and August 2013. When referenced below they are shown with the relevant bibliographic number from the Short Title Catalogue. The full web address has not been given, as these are long and excessively cumbersome. The search facility within *EEBO* makes the documents readily accessible. In each reference the Image Number is given for the relevant page of the document on *EEBO*. Where physical copies of early books have been consulted, the location is provided. Original spellings have been retained throughout.

Abbreviations

In footnotes, the five Dekker plague pamphlets are referred to using the following abbreviations:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| <i>WY</i> | <i>The Wonderfull Yeare</i> (1603) |
| <i>NG</i> | <i>Newes from Graues-end sent to Nobody</i> (1604) |
| <i>RR</i> | <i>A Rod for Run-awayes</i> (1625) |
| <i>LLB</i> | <i>London looke backe at that yeare of yeares 1625</i> (1630) |
| <i>BRWR</i> | <i>The Blacke Rod and the White Rod</i> (1630) |

1. Introduction

‘To looke backe, strengthens wisdom; to looke forward, armes Prouidence.’¹ With these words Thomas Dekker called on his readers to learn from past experience of the plague and halt its imminent return by appealing to God’s mercy and repenting of their sins. His was just one voice amongst many who turned to print in the early seventeenth century seeking to give explanation to the seeming inexplicable and meaning to the apparently meaningless devastation wrought by plague epidemics.

The purpose of this study is to consider the extent to which and manner in which Dekker’s five plague pamphlets appeal to divine providence for such explanation. By the doctrine of providence is meant the belief that God orders events in this world according to his purposes, in ways that may appear positive, negative or simply bewildering to those caught up in them. The doctrine was not new to the seventeenth century, and indeed can be considered universal of Christian tradition (at least in the pre-modern world), and yet it is particularly associated with the Reformation and especially Calvinistic Protestantism. Nor of course was plague new in 1600: for two and a half centuries after the Black Death had first swept away perhaps a third of the population, people had grappled to understand it as a phenomenon and struggled to find any effective response. Relatively new in the seventeenth century England were Plague Orders, first issued in 1579, attempting to contain the disease through isolation, burning infected clothes and bedding, imposing quarantine, and attempting to raise taxes for the needs of the poor afflicted. For the first time (relatively) accurate records were kept, publishing bills of mortality and marking plague victims in burial registers with the letters ‘pl’. Some sense of order was being sought out of the chaos, but this did not prevent huge surges of plague deaths in 1603 and 1625, carrying away up to twenty per cent of London’s population, or indeed the disease continuing to fester in the suburbs, accounting for over ten per cent of burials between 1606 and 1610.²

Relatively new also in 1600 was the development of the print industry in London with large numbers of short texts now produced for a popular market. The publication of pamphlets was one part of a proliferation of cheap print in the period. As a genre, the pamphlet is defined more by its topicality of subject matter than by

¹ Thomas Dekker, *London Looke Backe* (London, 1630) STC (2nd ed.) / 16755, Image 2

² Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, Boston, Melbourne & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) pp. 5, 144-147, 207-209; 281-282

its length, its content characterised by moralising comment on contemporary events, its regular fate to be soon ditched as worthless ephemera rather than being preserved and treasured on the bookshelf.³ Thomas Dekker's plague writings are such as these, those written at the start of the Jacobean period adopting parodies of higher literary forms, the later ones shorter, more direct, and to commentators less interesting. In these we will seek to find how Dekker understood the role of providence in the onset of plague, and from these we may be able to draw inferences about wider contemporary attitudes.

As a preliminary this study will begin by looking at how historians have understood the character of the English church around 1600, whether it should be considered truly Protestant, and especially whether Protestantism belonged merely to the social elite or if it had been infused amongst the lower orders. We will then explore the arguments surrounding the use of cheap print as a source of evidence for social and religious attitudes and beliefs, including issues of literacy and availability of texts. Then we will examine the doctrine of providence as understood in the Reformation period, asking about the shape and form of the doctrine as elucidated by John Calvin and how this was articulated in preaching and practice. We then come to the central part of this study, the plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker. We will consider how they have been identified as his (for only one bears his name), their presumed audience and value to the historian. The content of each will be outlined, and additional analysis given to the first and most complex of them, *The Wonderful Yeare*. Then the questions relating to providence will be asked directly.

It had originally been planned to attempt a wider study of plague texts, but these proved too numerous to make a full comparison possible. However, a sample of broadly contemporary publications will provide a context for Dekker's pamphlets. The focus has remained on London, as London dominated the print industry and so to London most of the evidence pertains.

In the conclusion the threads will be drawn together, considering whether the message Dekker put across was doing anything to infuse or sustain Protestant providentialist readings of affairs, and whether we can infer anything from these pamphlets about the attitudes and beliefs of those who may have read them but not necessarily have written anything for themselves.

³ T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 260-264

2. Plague Pamphlets and Historiography

‘A generation ago, to study the English Reformation was to participate in a cheerful form of trench warfare,’ wrote Alec Ryrie recently; whereas now, he continued, ‘it is a little disconcerting to realise that peace has broken out.’ Whether conflict or consensus is in the air, it is useful to chart aspects of the journey to this point, with the aim of setting the study of the plague pamphlets in context. Ryrie’s consensus narrative concludes with the development of a new broadly Protestant religious culture under Elizabeth and James I: ‘During the long “Jacobean” Reformation England was infused with Protestant culture, whose reach was far more pervasive than the self-conscious minority of Puritans were willing to admit.’⁴ It is to our understanding of this process of infusion of Protestant culture that the plague pamphlets have the potential to contribute.

To seek to understand the value of the plague pamphlets, we will need first to consider how historians have described, characterised and analysed the early Stuart church. We need to acknowledge the difficulty in reaching behind the theology of clerical elites to those whose thoughts were not recorded, and look at how some historians have used popular print publications to give insights to the values and understandings of the time. The debate about literacy at the time will be reviewed, for the pamphlets will show little if few could read them. We will then take a closer look at the doctrine of providence, both as articulated by Reformation theologians (notably by Calvin) and as promulgated in seventeenth century England. This should provide the necessary background from which to approach the plague pamphlets themselves.

2.1 Characterising the Church of England, c.1600

Historians’ descriptions of the character of the English church in the early Stuart period have changed over the years. The magnetic pull of the task of interpreting the British Civil Wars is now acknowledged as having caused some to lose their bearings. The straightforward clash between ‘Anglicans’ and ‘Puritans’ as a precursor to war has long been rejected, the word ‘Anglican’ recognised as misleadingly anachronistic. Puritan influences and tendencies can be identified running deep within the established church, but they did not necessarily constitute a

⁴ A. Ryrie, ‘Signposts: The English Reformation,’ in *History Today*, Vol 63, Issue 6: June 2013. p54-55

drive for separatist or Presbyterian reform.⁵ Nicholas Tyacke demonstrated to the satisfaction of most that the majority of Jacobean clergy and educated laity were Calvinist, in that they accepted double and absolute predestination. Less universally accepted is Tyacke's view that the divisive novelty was the rise of Arminianism which gained ascendancy by the end of the 1620s.⁶ However, the Calvinist/Arminian divide has been seen as simplistic as the previous Anglican/Puritan one. Kenneth Fincham proposes 'four non-watertight categories' of English Protestant: radical puritans; moderate puritans; conformist Calvinists; and anti-Calvinist.⁷ Ian Green identifies three 'Protestantisms' in the literature of the time: the orthodox of the clergy, who emphasised faith as the key to salvation; the educated laity who laid the stress on authority, morality and reason; and a populism that blended aspects of old and new religion and maintained faith in good works.⁸ Emphasis now is much more on spectra of positions rather than polar opposites. The label 'conformist' tends to be used as once 'Anglican' might (except with the recognition that many of those once called 'puritan' fully conformed to the establishment). Much depends on the focus of study. Ryrie points out that, when seen through the lens of devotion and lived experience (rather than doctrine), there was a broad-based Protestant culture which shows no great divide between puritan and conformist.⁹

With 'conformist' the dominant adjective, attention has increasingly turned to the centre ground. Whereas, in the past, to use Patrick Collinson's phrase, 'practitioners of the commonplace prayer book religion, unlike the more strident religious minorities, [have] not pluck[ed] at the historian's sleeve,' it is increasingly this non-controversial religion that has attracted attention.¹⁰ Keith Thomas' seminal study of popular belief and practice claimed that Protestantism had little substantial hold over large parts of the population. Thomas believed a religion based on preaching could not reasonably be expected to hold interest amongst the uneducated classes, and noted religious indifference especially characterised city life. Thomas says he would not go as far as Lawrence Stone who calls the Elizabethan period 'the age of greatest

⁵ Kenneth Fincham, *The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993), pp3-4

⁶ Peter Lake, 'Puritanism, Arminianism and Nicholas Tyacke' in Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, *Religious Politics in Post-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boodell, 2006), pp.1-2

⁷ Fincham, *Early Stuart Church*, p.6; others have referred to 'a polyphony ... a veritable cacophony' of voices from different factions: Lake, 'Puritanism', p.12

⁸ I. M. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. xii, 556

⁹ R. Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) p.6

¹⁰ P. Collinson, *The Religion of the Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) p.192

religious indifference before the twentieth century’, but claims that much of the population greeted ‘organised religion with an attitude which varied from cold indifference to frank hostility.’¹¹ Christopher Haigh states boldly that by 1600 the Protestant reforms had not made church or people emphatically Protestant, as such a word-based religion was simply too demanding for large parts of the population who may have become ‘de-catholicised’ but remained ‘un-protestantised’. Haigh therefore suggests they are best called ‘parish anglicans’ because they believed in communal values and expected to follow the rituals of the Prayer Book which contained memories of former Catholic devotions.¹²

As numerous historians have pointed out, analyses like those of Thomas and Haigh tend to accept at face value the rhetoric of sermons and complaint literature. Such rhetoric tends by its nature to create binary opposites and make ever greater demands of its listeners or readership. Alexandra Walsham has demonstrated the contemporary label, ‘church papist’, which was used to accuse people of non-recusant Catholicism, was essentially a rhetorical creation and part of the ‘licensed ecclesiastical libel’ used to build up Protestant identity under Elizabeth.¹³ A more helpful descriptor is Judith Maltby’s ‘Prayer Book Protestants.’ Maltby shows there was great demand for worship according to the Book of Common Prayer among articulate educated lay people, who turned to the church courts to ensure such services were provided.¹⁴ Most historians now agree we should reject the contemporary analyses of the English Church that self-validate the godly and allow Geneva to set narrow boundaries for Protestantism. At the same time we should recognise that many medieval survivals were also characteristic of the English church. The expression, ‘not thoroughly Protestant, but distinctly post-Reformation,’ has been accepted by many.¹⁵

¹¹ K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971, 1973, 1991) pp. 189-195, 204

¹² C. Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) pp. 12, 287-289, 291

¹³ A. Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993) pp. 1-3, 111-112

¹⁴ J. Maltby, ‘“By this Book”: Parishioners, the Prayer Book and the Established Church’ in Fincham (ed) *Early Stuart Church*, 115-136, pp. 118-127

¹⁵ J. Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998); Green, *Print and Protestantism*, p. vii

The difficulties in discovering and understanding the beliefs of people who do not write their beliefs down are of course considerable. Haigh considers ‘recent attempts to get at the grass roots of Reformation history [to be] frustrating and perhaps futile.’¹⁶ Walsham commented in 1993 that ‘distanced by four centuries, we cannot prize open the mentalities of most men and women, and inspect their souls.’¹⁷ However, in her subsequent work she has proved reluctant to give up that quest, which she has pursued through the vehicle of cheap print publications, and discovered within them repeatedly expressions in popular form of the doctrine of providence.¹⁸ We will consider first the medium and then the message.

2.2 Cheap Print and Popular Belief

The development of the print industry has been used to evidence theological preferences in the early seventeenth century. Kari Konkola used the bibliographical evidence of the Short Title Catalogue to suggest up to fourteen per cent of households owned substantial theological books, such as Lewis Bayly’s *Practice of Piety* (1612) which reached its twelfth edition by 1640. From these householders emerged a core group of text-based Protestants who would become natural leaders.¹⁹ Ian Green has undertaken a statistical approach to book sales, viewing reading habits with the ‘wide-angle lens’ of books that appear in at least five editions within thirty years, and like Konkola concludes that edifying, consensual print had the lion’s share of the market.²⁰ But there are difficulties with the evidence: sales figures cannot show whether these represented a few people owning a lot of books, or whether the books were distributed more widely. Inventories are very inconsistent how they record books, making this an unreliable source as well.²¹

Clearly large books were a substantial financial outlay and beyond the means of most households. Attention has turned to cheap print, especially the short pamphlets selling for a few pence that became a significant part of the publishing world in the first half of the seventeenth century. Sandra Clark writes with enthusiasm that this

¹⁶ Haigh, *English Reformations*, p.18

¹⁷ Walsham, *Church Papists*, p. 107

¹⁸ A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 1999; paperback 2001) *passim*

¹⁹ Kari Konkola and Diarmaid MacCulloch, ‘People of the Book: Success in the English Reformation,’ in *History Today*, Vol. 53 (10) October 2003, 23-29, pp. 24-27; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) p.588

²⁰ Green, *Print and Protestantism*, p. xiii

²¹ David Cressy, *Literacy and Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980) pp.46-48

new form of writing ‘provides clues ... to the habits of the Elizabethan mind’ (and since her book covers the period up to 1640, presumably the Jacobean and early Caroline mind as well).²² She goes on to suggest that such works are more helpful in establishing thought patterns than more self-consciously literary works because they betray deeply engrained values and those parts of the mental world that are never explicitly formulated.²³ Tessa Watt’s substantial study of *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* researches a vast array of publications to show the attitudes and values represented in print. She demonstrates there was no binary opposition between elite and popular culture, or indeed between oral and visual culture. Sermons like ballads were both performed and printed. The preached ‘Protestant’ message should not be seen as ‘confrontational’ to traditional culture as has sometimes been suggested.²⁴ Both she and Walsham emphasise the links between sermons and pamphlets, through which media together ideas, including those of the Reformation, were conveyed, adapted, reinforced and intensified.²⁵

Keith Thomas has warned against putting too much weight on publications whose main function is to entertain rather than to edify, and in which even the moralizing aims to titillate. However, there is no reason why entertainment would not contain popular social attitudes. Equally, there is also no reason why their writers should not combine commercial opportunism with a spiritual message. Indeed, the development of the ‘penny godly’ developed as a genre from the 1620s suggests there was a significant market for accessible and entertaining moral messages.²⁶

Particular care does need to be taken with plague pamphlets. Plague produced a vast outpouring of contemporary literature, but both short pamphlets and longer publications raise particular issues for interpretation. For all that cheap print claimed to answer the demand for novelty, ‘strange news’ and ‘wonders’, writers drew on shared language and narrative forms, and most of the writing appears conventional and derivative.²⁷ According to James Longrigg, the derivation goes back to Thucydides’ treatment of the Athenian plague of 430-427BC, subsequently adopted

²² Sandra Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers: Popular Moralistic Pamphlets, 1580 – 1640* (London: Athlone Press, 1983) p.18

²³ Clark, *Elizabethan Pamphleteers*, p.36

²⁴ Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 2, 322-325

²⁵ Walsham, *Providence*, p.6

²⁶ Green, *Print and Protestantism*, pp.447, xi; Walsham, *Providence*, p.64;

²⁷ K. Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor’s Summer. A Scrivener, his City and the Plague* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011) pp. 6-8

and adapted by Lucretius, Virgil, Diodorus Siculus and Procopius, and brought through them into medieval and early modern accounts. Particular themes recur, such as plague's arrival by ship, accusations of poisoning of wells, religious extravagance, the craven behaviour of the priesthood and of the doctors, the failure of both religion and medicine, people becoming indifferent to the rule of religion and law, and the steady descent of society into disintegration.²⁸ While such a conventional script makes it difficult to identify the actual experience of ordinary people at a specific time, where writers depart from convention will be particularly worthy of note.

2.3 Accessibility of Plague Pamphlets

There would be little point in labelling printed sources 'popular' if only a small elite were able to read them. We will consider first issues of literacy, and then the availability of pamphlets to their potential readership.

The extent of literacy in early Stuart England has been the source of historical debate. David Cressy, whose research has dominated discussion, calls England 'massively illiterate' with more than two thirds of men and nine tenths of women 'so illiterate ... they could not even sign their own names.'²⁹ This discouraging conclusion is drawn from the evidence of those who made their mark (as opposed to signing their names) on key documents like the 1641 Protestation Oath and presentments at ecclesiastical courts through the century. He acknowledges this has many limitations, but asserts that it is the only measurable evidence available. However, the picture for London, the focus of this study, is very different. The fact that in 1641 only twenty two per cent of the Londoners listed made their mark suggests the capital was 'a uniquely literate environment' (although we have to note that the records of just four London parishes were available).³⁰ A similar picture is given from the ecclesiastical courts. Tradesmen and craftsmen (sixty per cent of male deponents in London) were overwhelmingly literate (seventy two per cent, compared with under fifty per cent nationally). It also shows servants and apprentices in London were 'extraordinarily literate', although the sample here is

²⁸ J. Longrigg, 'Epidemic, Ideas and Classical Athenian Society' in T. Ranger and P. Slack (eds.) *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992)pp. 21-22, 32, 37-38

²⁹ Cressy, *Literacy*, p.2

³⁰ Cressy, *Literacy*, p.72-3

very small.³¹ We may imagine that tradesmen and craftsmen, perhaps with some servants and apprentices, may have provided the bulk of the market for popular pamphlets.

Cressy points out that the size of the reading public can be guessed at but not measured.³² However, as he acknowledges but rather plays down in his desire to emphasise illiteracy, all the teaching handbooks of the day advocate that reading should be taught before writing. As Margaret Spufford has shown, there is contemporary evidence for boys and girls learning to read for six to twelve months at an age before they were able to contribute to the household economy, after which they were withdrawn from school, so missing out on instruction in writing.³³ This opens the possibility that many girls and women could read, even if it was very rare for them to learn to write, and so the pamphlets could have had a female readership. (In London, Cressy shows female literacy overall as substantially higher, but the change measured by the ability to sign came later in the century.)³⁴

Spufford concludes that it was ‘rare to be completely outside the orbit of the printed word’. It may be hard to see the evidence of this across the country, but in London it cannot be far from the case.³⁵ Moreover, as Christopher Marsh intimates, people in oral and aural cultures treat texts as matter to be read aloud and shared. He concludes, ‘it is extremely likely ... that literature reached the illiterate with a fluidity that seems alien today.’³⁶

The issue of availability also needs briefly to be addressed. Pamphlets characteristically name a single place where they were to be sold. However, Tessa Watt’s examination of the early modern print trade shows how the London stationers made use of the networks first developed for the ballad trade in order to peddle chapbooks across the country, developing strategies for selling to the rudimentary reader with limited capital. Clearly the issue of affordability is crucial: short pamphlets kept a steady price over the period 1560 to 1635 whilst overall

³¹ Cressy, *Literacy*, pp. 121, 129-130

³² D. Cressy, ‘Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730’ in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, March 1977, 1-23; pp.1-2

³³ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) pp. 23-27; Cressy, *Literacy*, p.20

³⁴ Cressy, *Literacy*, pp.128-129

³⁵ Spufford, *Small Books*, p.32

³⁶ C. Marsh, *Popular religion in Sixteenth Century England* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998) p.139

commodity prices doubled, making them relatively cheaper. At 2d or 3d a time they would be too much for a wage labourer, but Watt suggests a husbandman with thirty acres could expect to make fourteen to eighteen pence per week surplus income, so could afford the occasional pamphlet if he chose to make it a priority. Successful craftsmen and tradesmen might well expect to have similar or greater income available.³⁷

We can conclude that the sorts of pamphlets under consideration here were widely available, certainly within London and possibly beyond, affordable to those with above minimal incomes, a substantial proportion of whom would have had sufficient literacy skills to understand them. Taken amongst other evidence, they can be indicative of the sorts of message that were being given out in post-Reformation England, and suggestive of popular attitudes amongst their potential readerships.

2.4 Currents of Providentialism

Alec Ryrie calls belief in providence ‘the water in which the English church swam’.³⁸ Calvin explained the doctrine’s meaning as ‘not an idle observation by God in heaven of what goes on in earth, but His rule of the world which He made; for He is not the creator of a moment, but the perpetual governor.’³⁹ In this he would have common ground with Augustine, from whom he drew extensively, and with Aquinas, who entitled a chapter of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ‘God governs things by his Providence’.⁴⁰ Belief in providence is considered just about universal in seventeenth century England. Keith Thomas claims that ‘Puritans [were] undoubtedly ... the readiest to spot God at work in daily occurrence,’ but also acknowledges that Archbishop Laud was convinced even trivial occurrences could be providential signs from God, and would amend his actions accordingly.⁴¹ As at the level of scholar and churchman, so also in popular thought, providence was everywhere. Peter Lake, in his study of the specific genre of the murder pamphlet, and Alexandra Walsham reading a vast range of sermons, tracts, pamphlets and other

³⁷ Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp.261, 322-325

³⁸ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, p.7

³⁹ John Calvin, *A Defence of the Secret Providence of God*, printed as an addition to his *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, first published in Geneva in 1552; translation by JKS Reid (London: James Carke & Co Ltd, 1961) p.162, paragraph X.1

⁴⁰ Horton Davies: *The Vigilant God: Providence in the Thought of Augustine, Aquinas and Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) pp. 72, 163-167

⁴¹ Thomas, *Religion*, pp.105, 109, 112

writings, recognise providence as a ‘shared frontier’ (Lake) or ‘social cement’ (Walsham) linking the pre- and post-Reformation worlds.⁴²

To return to Ryrie’s metaphor, if providence was the water in which the church swam, then we should be aware, if are to understand and correctly place Thomas Dekker’s pamphlets, of some of the currents within this sea. Calvin’s teaching may well be said to appear as clear blue water, but it becomes turbulent and muddied when channelled into the forms of popular piety. It is useful to see how the currents divide around three particular rocks: first, how the mainstream sense of the complete sovereignty of God can be dissipated in a variety of eddies and whirlpools as it is applied and made pastorally useful. Secondly, while Calvin left the course providence a mystery, for others the purpose of preaching the doctrine was to explain why it should cascade in particular places. Thirdly, some writers gave their attention to the river of providence taking hold of church and nation collectively, whilst others looked to the rivulets of God’s purposes affecting individual lives.

The sixteenth chapter of the first book of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* conveys the immensity of Calvin’s sense of God’s sovereignty through his providential working in the world. God is ‘Governor and Preserver ... by special providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending all things he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow.’ God’s omnipotence is ‘vigilant, efficacious, energetic and ever active.’ God does not sit idly in heaven looking at the world, but ‘holds the helm, and overrules all events.’⁴³ There is nothing uniquely Protestant in this, although it may have become a more prominent strand of Protestant preaching. Thomas sees this emphasis as deriving from a desire to deny the medieval Catholic claim to manipulate God’s grace for earthly purposes through religious works, but neither the *Institutes* nor *On the Secret Providence of God* are so directed.⁴⁴ Calvin’s targets are those who, like ‘the Epicurians, plague the world with the idea of an inert or idle God’ and believe the world to be governed by luck or chance, fate or

⁴² Walsham, *Providence*, pp.2, 5, 70, 115; Peter Lake, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post Reformation England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002) p.318

⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845) Book I, Chapters xvi, paragraphs 1, 3, 4

⁴⁴ Thomas, *Religion*, p.90

fortune.⁴⁵ Human passivity due to fatalism is forbidden, as God uses human beings as his agents.⁴⁶

At a popular level, Protestant preachers undoubtedly followed this argument, denouncing all reasoning based on fate, Mother Nature, or stars and planets. They recast old stories long favoured by preaching friars, so as to shift the focus of supernatural activity from the saints to providence. They denied the effectiveness of thaumatological cults, many (like John Jewel) arguing that miracles belonged solely to the apostolic age.⁴⁷ With regard to plague, Pre-Reformation and Counter-Reformation responses involved holding special masses, street processions, and building votive churches such as Venice's *Redentore*. Evidence for such devotions in Marian England survives in the images of St Sebastian at Wellingham and of St Roche at Gressenhall (both in East Anglia), both invoked against the plague. Almost all printed breviaries of Mary's reign contain a Mass of St Roche.⁴⁸ The Reformation drove religious processions from the streets, but created new gatherings: from 1563, public fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays was decreed, and this involved listening to seven consecutive sermons from the authorised book of homilies.⁴⁹ Both Catholic and Protestant were providentialist responses to the crises, but had their own particular flavours. Both sought relief through turning to God, repentance and doing the works they believed the Lord required of them. Whether one was more guilty than the other of manipulating the grace of God is open to interpretation.

The second distinction may be summarised as between providence as mystery and providence as revelation.⁵⁰ Calvin emphasised God's purposes in providence are hidden and secret, in which the believer should stand in awe.⁵¹ It is 'the secret counsel of God' that governs both the universe and human affairs.⁵² God's ways are

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xvi, 2, 4, 8; T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to his Thought* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) p.43, 45

⁴⁶ Davies, *Vigilant God*, p.101

⁴⁷ Walsham, *Providence*, pp. 124, 226-7, 329

⁴⁸ E. Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege and Seditious Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) pp. 76, 81

⁴⁹ Slack, *Plague*, pp.29, 36-37

⁵⁰ Taken from the title of Ronald J. VanderMolen's article, 'Providence as Mystery, Providence as Revelation: Anglican and Puritan Modifications of John Calvin's Doctrine of Providence', *Church History*, Vol 47, No. 1 (March 1978) pp.27-47

⁵¹ Parker, *Calvin*, p.47; Davies, *Vigilant God*, p.99

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes* I, xvi, 3

marvellous and ineffable, and ‘it is not becoming in us to be too inquisitive.’⁵³ Great care should be taken in interpreting providence as reward for virtue or punishment for evil, as it is presumptuous to claim to know the thoughts of God; indeed it is a ‘monstrous infatuation’.⁵⁴

Thomas Beard 1597 best-seller, *Theatre of God’s Judgements*, excised mystery and secrecy from the doctrine. Studying history, Beard maintained, ‘layeth virtue and vice so naked before our eyes, with the punishments and rewards inflicted or bestowed upon the followers of each of them.’⁵⁵ Referring to Augustine, he says many sins are punished in this world so ‘that the providence of God might be more apparent, and many, yea most reserved for the world to come that we might know there is yet judgment behind.’⁵⁶ To take just one of hundreds of examples of providence in action, Beard describes the death of Marlow, scholar, poet and playwright, who was ‘so full of his own wit’ he denied God: ‘But see what a hooke the Lord put in the nostrils of this barking dogge,’ resulting in his being stabbed by his own dagger as he blasphemed to his last gasp.⁵⁷ Readers are invited to reflect on this revelation of how providence works, and to amend their own lives accordingly.

This didactic use of providence has been traditionally been regarded as typical of puritans, and RJ VanderMolen argues Beard’s approach represents the characteristic puritan modification of Calvinism.⁵⁸ However, more recently the identity of Beard himself as a Puritan has been contested, John Morrill calling him a conforming pluralist.⁵⁹ Walsham highlights a whole genre of writing she calls ‘the English Judgement Book’ of which Beard’s is the best known but includes works by Edmund Bicknell (1579) Stephen Bateman (1581) John Reynolds (1621), Samuel Ward (1622) and William Prynne (1633), not all of whom could be called puritan although all aimed, in Beard’s words, to rouse ‘drousie consciences’. The desire to do what Calvin considered presumptuous and draw theological conclusions and make moral judgements on past and contemporary events proved irresistible for many. Indeed,

⁵³ Calvin, *Secret Providence*, pp.177, 184; paragraphs x.11; x.15

⁵⁴ VanderMolen, ‘Providence as Mystery’, p.32; Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xvii, 1

⁵⁵ VanderMolen, ‘Providence as Mystery’, p.39

⁵⁶ Thomas Beard, *Theatre of God’s Judgements* (4th edition, printed in London by SI and MH, 1648) p.411

⁵⁷ Beard, *Theatre*, p.92

⁵⁸ VanderMolen, ‘Providence as Mystery’, p.28

⁵⁹ Quoted by Walsham, *Providence*, p.70

Calvin himself was not so consistent in his caution, being prepared to haul in providence to interpret the deaths of French Kings Henry II and Francis II.⁶⁰

Another current in the flow of providentialism is what VanderMolen calls ‘Anglican providence’, by which English history was considered an agent of providence with the Church of England established by divine sanction. George Hakewill, a primary spokesman for this doctrine, argued God was working through English history to produce an ideal church. Like Calvin’s doctrine and the Heidelberg Confession his was an optimistic view of providence. However, Hakewill went further in claiming providence was only responsible for the good in the world, not for evil and decay. He emphasised God’s judgment would be at the end of time as a fiery cataclysm, and emphatically not be seen during or through history as it is known. Hakewill echoed Calvin in seeing providence at an individual level as mysterious and beyond human knowing, yet was happy to claim interpretative rights on God’s purposes on the larger canvas of history.⁶¹

That providence was used to bolster the nation’s and church’s story is agreed amongst historians. According to Thomas, the idea of England as God’s elect nation was popularised by John Foxe, elucidated by many including Calvinist bishop George Carleton (1624) and encouraged in the Book of Homilies.⁶² Walsham identifies ‘hundreds of ebullient, patriotic sermons’ often by godly preachers pointing to peace and prosperity enjoyed by the kingdom since the reintroduction of the Gospel in 1559. Preachers gave providentialist interpretations of deliverance from the Armada and the Gun Powder Plot, their sermons setting the scene for the days of patriotic celebration that took the place of saints’ days. A vast array of publications, such as Michael Spark’s *Crummes of Comfort* (1627), publicised eleventh hour deliverances at the hands of the Lord. Walsham describes the growth of a sense of ‘national covenant’ as preachers correlated the relationship of God and England with a legal contract or marriage bond.⁶³ Such constant retelling of ‘the national story’ undoubtedly was a significant part of talk about providence, and was far too widespread to be identifiable with a particular group or faction that might be labelled ‘Anglican’.

⁶⁰ Walsham, *Providence*, pp.69, 107

⁶¹ VanderMolen, ‘Providence as Mystery’, pp.33-38

⁶² Thomas, *Religion*, pp.106-107

⁶³ Walsham, *Providence*, pp.243-251, 305

Calvin made a clear distinction between the primary cause of events – the will of God – and secondary, human causes; between the ‘remote cause’ and the ‘proximate cause’; between the ‘equitable providence of God’ and ‘the stormy assaults of men.’⁶⁴ One should not overlook, he argued, ‘inferior causes’ which may be the legitimate instruments of divine providence, but the real value is found in fixing the mind on God’s purposes.⁶⁵ Such fine distinctions became adapted in different ways as they were brought into popular thinking and piety.

One approach, associated with best-selling author of puritan divinity, William Perkins (although he himself refuted the ‘puritan’ label), has become known as ‘experimental providentialism’.⁶⁶ In Perkins’ 1597 tract, *A Grain of Mustard Seed*, writing about the inner life of the believer, he asserts, ‘the ... beginnings of grace are counterfeit unless they increase.’ He challenged his readers with a nineteen point plan to ensure God’s grace could be seen to grow in them like a mustard seed. At point eleven he says, ‘Give all thy diligence to make thy election sure and to gather manifold tokens thereof... Observe the works of God’s providence, love and mercy both in thee and upon thee.’⁶⁷ This intensely personal piety, scrutinising of one’s own life for the signs of providence at work, effectively minimising secondary causation, is most associated with puritan devotion.⁶⁸

Although Calvin had treated providence as part of the doctrine of creation, it became surely linked with that of election. John Preston had ten volumes of sermons printed from 1629 to 1633, all strongly predestinarian in Perkins’ mould and preoccupied with issues of assurance and distinguishing the regenerate from the unregenerate.⁶⁹ At a popular level, certain of Peter Lake’s murder pamphlets have a particular way of dealing with the issue which he considers to be deliberate propagation of predestinarian providentialism. Thomas Cowper’s 1620 *The Cry and Revenge of Blood*, contains the not unusual motif of two convicted felons, one penitent, the other recalcitrant. According to Cowper, God’s providence was responsible for bringing

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination*, p.181: x.15

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xii, 9

⁶⁶ JI Packer, *An Anglican to Remember: William Perkins, Puritan Popularizer*, (London: Needhams, 1996), pp.1,3

⁶⁷ Quoted by Packer, *Perkins*, pp.12, 15

⁶⁸ MacCulloch, *Reformation*, pp. 390-1; Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) p.95

⁶⁹ White, *Predestination*, pp.289-290

both to justice, and it was God's sovereign grace that caused the one to repent and the other not, demonstrating the election of the one and reprobation of the other. Lake points out that death bed repentance could equally be given an 'Arminian reading', as done by Peter Studley in *The Looking Glass Schism* (1634).⁷⁰ Although popular pamphlets are often described as displaying 'popular Pelagian' attitudes, Lake sees something more like 'a popular Manichaeism' in which Satan and sin are active characters battling over the soul of the sinner who is ignorant of God and his word, or who fails in his duty of prayer and fasting. The world in these pamphlets, Lake argues, is not necessarily puritan, Calvinist or Protestant, but lent itself to manipulation by zealous preachers and pamphleteers for their own purposes. The sense of the world as the theatre of God's judgements, the power of God's justice, and the intensity of the struggle with sin and Satan all lend themselves to predestinarian, Protestant readings.⁷¹

As we turn to look at Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets it is useful to keep the charting of these providentialist channels in mind (even if they flow through shifting sand). We are not looking for a sustained theological discourse, but rather to identify providentialist attitudes that may be either explicit or implicit in his responses to the outbreaks of plague in London in the early 1600s.

⁷⁰ Lake, *Lewd Hat*, pp.151-153

⁷¹ Lake, *Lewd hat*, pp.147-149; 153-154

3. The Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker

F.P. Wilson in 1925 used the label ‘plague pamphlets’ to define an identifiable body of work by the playwright Thomas Dekker (c.1572 to 1632).⁷² Only one of these, *A Rod for run-awayes* (1625)⁷³ actually bears Dekker’s name. The others are anonymous. However, Dekker claimed authorship of the best known of these pamphlets, *The Wonderfull Yeare* (1603)⁷⁴ in another pamphlet three years later – *The seuen deadly sinnes of London*. Here the writer refers to the ‘Wonderfull yeere’ and adds in the margin ‘A booke so called, written by the Author, describing the horror of the Plague...’⁷⁵ With *The Wonderfull Yeare* established as Dekker’s, the other pamphlets are attributed to him by similarity of style and subject matter. *Newes from Graues-end sent to nobody* (1604) was identified as Dekker’s by J.P. Collier in 1865. Wilson quotes and accepts Colliers justification: ‘We know no writer of that day who could make so near an approach to the style of Nash, without its bitterness.’⁷⁶ Wilson also regards *The Meeting of Gallants* (1604) as Dekker’s, seeing the subject and treatment as very similar to the first two pamphlets. However *The Meeting of Gallants* is now accepted as the work of Dekker’s frequent collaborator, Thomas Middleton, although a short section may be Dekker’s.⁷⁷

After 1604, there is then a break in production of plague pamphlets, partly because of the absence of major plague outbreaks in London, and partly because Dekker was initially engaged in writing plays and latterly in prison for debt.⁷⁸ However, the new plague epidemic in 1625 saw the production of the pamphlet *A Rod for Run-awayes*, which once was seen as plagiarised from Henry Petowe’s *The Wipping of runawaies*, but Wilson says it owes nothing to this ‘sober, homespun and undistinguished effort.’⁷⁹ Two further pamphlets were prompted by what turned out to be a smaller plague outbreak in 1630. *London Looke Backe* and *The Blacke Rod and the White Rod* were attributed to Dekker by Wilson on the basis of distinctive style,

⁷² F.P. Wilson, *The Plague Pamphlets of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925)

⁷³ Dekker, *A Rod for run-awayes*, (RR) STC (2nd ed.) / 6520

⁷⁴ Dekker, *The Wonderfull Yeare* (WY) STC(2nd ed.) / 6535

⁷⁵ Dekker, *The seuen deadly sinnes of London*, STC (2nd ed.) / 6522 Image 5

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, p. xi

⁷⁷ G. Taylor, ‘Middleton, Thomas (bap. 1580, d. 1627) playwright,’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, OUP, 2004) online edition, Jan 2008 [accessed 14/01/2013]

⁷⁸ J. Twynning, ‘Dekker, Thomas (c. 1572-1632) playwright and pamphleteer,’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online, [accessed 28/07/2012]

⁷⁹ Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, xxi

phraseology and theme, and this attribution does not appear to have been challenged.⁸⁰

Plague pamphlets are just five of the twenty seven pamphlets listed against Dekker's name in the Short Title Catalogue. He clearly delighted to show off his skill at different forms and genres, writing verse, romance, anecdotes, entertainments, sensationalist tracts, visions and morality texts. We know little of his life, except that he was continually short of money. It seems he turned his hand to whatever he and his publisher thought would sell.⁸¹

3.1 Audience and Value of the Pamphlets

'O London! (thou Mother of my life, Nurse of my being)': with such words Dekker claimed to be a true Londoner.⁸² His target audience were Londoners and he claimed to speak for Londoners. There is immediacy in his descriptions of street scenes and his retelling of current stories that makes this feel like the testimony of one of those in a city besieged by plague. His habit of addressing his remarks to the afflicted, or to those absconding from the city, or to those judged to be failing in their civic duties, helps to convey the impression of being on the spot and speaking for the people. His, Dekker would have us believe, is the voice of London.

Those who have sought to evaluate Dekker's literary output have been critical of him for his self-styled calling. LC Knights in 1937 dismissed Dekker as wanting in 'artistic consciousness: ... his thoughts are of the average Londoner.'⁸³ Knights was following a line of criticism of Dekker that goes back to Jonson's dismissal of him as a 'hack', but we should be wary as Dekker and Jonson were engaged in a lengthy acrimonious dispute. Dekker's own description of his pamphlets as mere 'scribbled papers' should also be handled with care. The phrase is part of a largely ironic dedicatory epistle to *The Wonderfull Yeare*.⁸⁴

Whilst 'the thoughts of the average Londoner' may not inspire a literary critic, the prospect of a source containing them is likely to make a historian's face light up.

⁸⁰ Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, xxii, xxv; S. Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers – Popular Moralistic Pamphlets 1580-1640* (London: Athlone Press, 1983) pp. 110-111

⁸¹ Clark, *Elizabethan Pamphleteers*, p. 29

⁸² Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, p. v; Twynning, 'Dekker', p. 1; RR, Image 7

⁸³ Quoted by Frederick O Waage, 'Thomas Dekker's Pamphlets, 1603-1609, and Jacobean Popular Literature Vol. 1,' in Erwin A Sturzl (ed.) *Salzburg Studies in English Literature*, No 53 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1977) p.17

⁸⁴ WY, Image 2

‘Slight productions’ (Wilson’s description of the 1630 pamphlets) can be very suggestive of popular attitudes, values and beliefs.⁸⁵ Whilst we must be very careful not to confuse the feel of authenticity with proof of historical accuracy, such sources may bring us as close as we can to those who did not write for themselves. It was essential for the impecunious ‘hack’ to keep his ear open to the voices of those he hoped would buy his pamphlets. To make a living he would need to make connection with the experiences and attitudes of his readership, and to give articulate expression to what he heard, doing so in a coherent, amusing or indeed shocking manner so as to attract people to his words.

The nature of religious thought expressed explicitly and implicitly through the pamphlets will be discussed in detail later. However, in the religiously contested era of the early seventeenth century, brief attention needs first to be paid to the possibility Dekker came with a religiously charged agenda. In 1626 and again 1628 he was arrested and charged with recusancy.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it has never been seriously suggested that he was a Catholic. The charge came from his failure to attend church, which may be attributed to an attempt to escape arrest for debt. He attacked Catholicism as happily as any contemporary, as he did in the *Seuen Deadly Sinnes of London*, published in the wake of the arrest and trial of Guy Fawkes.⁸⁷ On the other hand some critics have described Dekker as a ‘militant Protestant’ or Puritan, perhaps because of his Biblical references and moralising tone.⁸⁸ However, Dekker was happy to lampoon Puritans, ranking ‘Precisians’ (following the prejudices of his time) with Turks and Jews. He was generally silent on the big issues of the day, such as justification and ceremonies in the Church of England. George R Price describes him as ‘a very orthodox Anglican’.⁸⁹ We do not need to attach a label to him. It is enough merely to note at this stage that there is nothing to suggest he had a religiously partisan agenda behind his plague pamphlets.

Dekker’s early plague pamphlets (1603 and 1604) were consciously literary creations, indeed parodying current literary styles and affectations. Here Dekker uses frequent Latin tags, classical allusions and poetic passages (much of which is surely intended ironically or satirizing other writers) suggesting his target audience had a

⁸⁵ Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, p. vi

⁸⁶ Twyning, ‘Dekker’, p. 6

⁸⁷ Waage, ‘Dekker’s Plague Pamphlets’, p. 23, 28

⁸⁸ M. Healy, ‘Discourses of the Plague in Early Modern London’ in J.A.I. Champion (ed.) *Epidemic Disease in London* (1993) 19-34

⁸⁹ George R Price, *Thomas Dekker* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc, 1969), p. 133-4

grammar school education. He might claim his reader had no more learning than ‘the most errand Stinkard’, but his actual reader must have had a more education to find this amusing (although people can like to look as if they enjoy a joke that they do not in fact understand).⁹⁰ A cost of 3d or 4d (the usual price for a forty eight page booklet) would also put these pamphlets above the reach of some. However, the richness of their language and highly rhetorical style made these pamphlets ideal to be read in public, and so they could still have reached a wide audience.

Dekker’s later pamphlets are considerably shorter. *A Rod for Runn-awaies* has thirty two pages, *London Looke Back* eighteen, and *The Blacke Rod* twenty. This seems to fit the pattern of the popular market. According to Ian Green, whilst forty eight pages was the standard length when pamphlets appeared in the 1580s, a typical length was half that by the 1620s and 30s.⁹¹ Tessa Watt describes ‘penny merriments’ as forms of truly populist publication, containing a proliferation of pictures throughout the text.⁹² In most cases Dekker’s pamphlets contain a cover picture, but thereafter are solid text. They belong within the range of popular literature aiming for widespread appeal but not the lowest point in the market. The later pamphlets also lack literary pretension.

Dekker’s pamphlets were published in London for a London audience. Whilst the networks existed to sell them further afield, if his own messages are to be believed about panic in the provinces at the arrival of anyone from London, it is likely their sales were predominantly within the bounds of the city. It is hard to know how many copies were sold. Most were not recorded in the Stationers’ Register. With such ephemera, survival rates are very low. Three early copies of *The Wonderfull Yeare* are known, and two of *a Rod for runaways*, the others existing in single editions only. Since there are minor discrepancies in the text between the copies Wilson assumes that they are different editions, although it was not unknown for corrections to be made in the course of a print-run.⁹³ The standard print-run of the time was of 1500 copies. The number of copies was not enormous in a city whose population is estimated at between 140,000 and 180,000 in 1600, but if there were three editions of *The Wonderfull Yeare* this would suggest unusual popularity for such ephemera, an idea supported by the rapid follow-up pamphlet, *Newes from Gravesend. A Rod*

⁹⁰ WY, Image 3

⁹¹ I. M. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 447

⁹² Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 297-299

⁹³ WY: two copies in the Bodleian Library and one in the Shakespeare Folger Library; RR: Henry E Huntingdon Library and Bodleian; Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, pp. xxix-xxxix

for Run-awayes is produced with a confidence that suggests he expects the plague theme will be a big seller.

No text, of course, can ever be said fully to represent the ‘average Londoner’ of the early seventeenth century. As we come to look in detail at the five plague pamphlets, we have to acknowledge that they were shaped by Dekker as an individual and by the traditions and expectations of plague writing. Having acknowledged those issues, we can go on to enquire about the messages they may convey and if anything may be inferred about popular opinions in the context in which he wrote.

3.2 *The Wonderfull Yeare*

The Wonderfull Yeare is the most substantial of Dekker’s plague pamphlets, has received most attention from scholars, and is most subtle in expressing belief in God’s providence. Its title continues ‘...Wherein is shewed the picture of London lying sicke of the Plague.’⁹⁴ The initial dedication to a non-existent ‘Water-Bailiffe of London’ indicates it is not meant entirely seriously, and the reader is invited to ‘happilie laugh ... because mirth is both Phisicall, and wholesome against the Plague.’⁹⁵ Setting aside this dedicatory section, the pamphlet can be divided into three parts, first about the death of Queen Elizabeth and the proclamation of James as King, the second describing the state of London under the plague, and the third telling a series of stories about plague-related incidents. All, in their own way, represent ‘wonders’ to Dekker, together making 1603 a more wonderful year even than 1588.

The first section begins with a description of spring, 1603, when all seemed in good order: ‘heaven looked like a Pallace, and the great hall of the earth, like a Paradise.’ The summoning of the Queen by sickness ‘to appeare in the Star-chamber of heauen’ led to a ‘generall terror’ and national mourning.⁹⁶ Dekker briefly wonders at some coincidences about Elizabeth’s death, and follows this with three epigrams about her funeral, concluding that she was ‘appointed to be the mirror of her time’, and it is that reflection that prompts the statement ‘1603 [was] a more wonderfull yeere than 88.’ He moves quickly to the proclamation of the new king and ‘that wonder begat

⁹⁴ WY, Images 2 & 3

⁹⁵ WY, Image 1; M. Healy, ‘Discourses of the Plague in Early Modern London’ in J.A.I. Champion (ed) *Epidemic Disease in London* (Centre for Metropolitan History Working Paper Series, No. 1, 1993) viewed online at <http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/epiheal.html> [accessed 30/10/12]

⁹⁶ WY Images 5

more, for in an houre, two mightie Nations were made one.’ Dekker is quick to point out ironies: ‘Upon Thurseday it was treason to cry God saue king Iames of England, and upon Friday hye treason not to cry so.’ The king brings ‘the blessed fruits of peace’ which gives the confidence for trade to revive and the city to flourish, and (a typical Dekker comment) ‘the thriftie citizen ... resolues to worship no Saint but money’. But just as the ‘miracle-worker [had] in one minute turnd our general mourning into general mirth, ... now againe in a moment alter that gladnes to shrikes & lamentation.’⁹⁷

Dekker gives dramatic intensity to his description of the coming of the plague: ‘A stiffe and freezing horror sucks vp the riuers of my bloud...’ But he has a clear purpose, ‘to paint and delineate to the life the whole story of this mortall and pestiferous battaile’ remembering the ghosts of more than 40000 who died in it.⁹⁸ He conveys the horrific conditions and claustrophobic atmosphere of a plague-ridden city, describing the ‘unmatchable torment [of being] barb[ed] up euery night in a vast silent Charnell-house’ that is the city of London. He describes streets scattered with rosemary and other herbs, the bells continually tolling, heaps of dead men’s bones stacked up, and the crying of wives for husbands, parents for children and children for mothers.⁹⁹ He shows how plague inverts proper behaviour, addressing a father who has lost his only son: ‘Now, doest thou rent thine haire, blaspheme thy Creator, cursest thy creation, and basely descendest into brutish & vnmanly passions, threatning in despite of death and his Plague, to maintain the memory of thy childe, in the euerlasting brest of Marble.’¹⁰⁰ If death is the ruler, Plague is like the ‘Mustermaister and Marshall of the field’ of death’s armies. Dekker seems to delight in exploring this metaphor – ‘Burning feuers, Boyles, Blaines, and Carbuncles, the Leaders, Lieutenants, Serieants, and Corporalls: the main army consisting (like at Dunkirke) of a mingle-mangle, viz. dumpish Mourners, merry Sextons, hungry Coffin sellers, scrubbing bearers, and nastie Graue-makers...’ Those who run away to the countryside find themselves in the ‘vnmerciful hands of the Country-hard-hearted Hobbinolls’ so they return to the besieged city (and hence once more to the military metaphors).

⁹⁷ WY Images 9, 10 & 11

⁹⁸ WY Image 11

⁹⁹ WY Image 12

¹⁰⁰ WY Image 12

In the gloom, Dekker continually finds dark humour. He sees those who do venture out ‘miching and muffled up & downe with Rue and Wormwood stuff in their eares and nostrhils, looking like so many Bores heads stuck with branches of Rosemary, to be serued in for Brawne and Christmas.’¹⁰¹ His most bitter criticism is for those who try to exploit the misery of others for personal gain. He identifies ‘three bald Sextons’ who demanded heavy fees and ‘herbwives’ who enjoy selling rosemary and other herbs, flowers and garlands for massively inflated prices. And ‘what became of our Phisitions in this Massacre’ is not worth asking because they did no good anyway and ‘hid their Synodical heads aswell as the prowdest’ whilst ‘iolly Mountibanks clapt vp their bills vpon euery post.’¹⁰²

The final section Dekker describes as ‘play[ing] the Souldiers’ – that is, telling stories of battle after the fight is over. Throughout his theme is the inescapability of the plague. The first three are little more than this: a pilgrim who couldn’t be provided with a coffin because the friend who helped him died first; a Dutchman who tried to escape back to Holland, but died before he could do so; and a Londoner heading for Bristol who could find no help at inn, farm or church. The fourth is of a pair of young lovers who tried to get married before plague struck them, but the bride faltered on ‘in sickness or in health’ and the marriage was over before it was consummated.¹⁰³ In the fifth, the wife of an honest cobbler, apparently on her death bed, confesses her multiple affairs only to recover; her husband forgives her, but the other wives come with nails like sharpened claws and worry her to death with scolding. There is a darkly comic story of the sexton of Stepney who drunkenly fell in a grave; waking up he found the bones playing with his nose and, thinking he heard a voice, ran, believing a goblin was chasing after him.¹⁰⁴ Finally, in the longest tale, when a traveller from London dies at a country inn, no one is willing to bury his body until a tinker comes along who happily takes forty shillings for the work, and then finds seven pounds on his body. He comes back to ask if there are more Londoners to bury.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ WY Images 13 & 14

¹⁰² WY Image 15

¹⁰³ WY Images 16, 17 & 18

¹⁰⁴ WY Images 19, 20 & 21

¹⁰⁵ WY Images 21, 22 & 21

3.3 Analysis of *The Wonderful Yeare*

At first reading, *The Wonderful Yeare* is disappointing from the point of view of this study. It contains no direct reference linking the advent of plague to divine providence. The word 'providence' appears just once in the pamphlet. It comes in the course of Dekker's description of how James, King of Scotland, acceded to the throne of England, by which St George and St Andrew became brothers, and (typically mixing the metaphor) James' coronation representing the wedding day for the two nations 'as thō prouidence had enacted, that one day those two Nations should marry one another.'¹⁰⁶ This work of providence filled everyone with new found hope and confidence in a new age of peace and plenty. This form of providentialism corresponds RJ VanderMolen's 'Anglican' providence, like George Hakewill's insistence that God was working through English history to provide an ideal church. Dekker makes no reference here to the established Church of England, but sees God's hand in the story of the kingdom.¹⁰⁷

In fact, *The Wonderful Yeare* is not on the surface a religious tract. God is rarely invoked as the events of 1603 unfold. There is some criticism of the church in its response to the plague, mostly directed at the unwillingness of clerics to provide a Christian burial, and especially of sextons to provide a grave. Any moralising comment is quite limited, and the conclusion drawn at the end of the plague stories is brief and reads as a few common place observations. None of this may be surprising if the pamphlet aims to entertain rather than to inform or moralise. However, that the writer began with satirical twists on literary conventions and that the content is not limited to darkly amusing anecdotes, give reason to look for something more subtle and sophisticated in this work. Frederick O. Waage has argued that this indeed is the case.¹⁰⁸

Waage sees Dekker as subverting classic literary forms to get across unexpected messages. His description of spring is of classical harmony and good order but is also laden with such literary pretension that it must be a parody of spring as represented in court masques or May-time folk festivals.¹⁰⁹ The eulogy for Elizabeth

¹⁰⁶ WY, Image 10

¹⁰⁷ VanderMolen, 'Providence as Mystery', pp.27-47. 32, 35, 38. VanderMolen refers to Hakewill's *An Answer to a Treatise Written by Dr Carier* (London 1616) and *An Apologie of the Power and Providence of God In the Government of the World* (Oxford, 1627)

¹⁰⁸ Waage, *Dekker's Pamphlets*, *passim*

¹⁰⁹ Waage, *Dekker's Pamphlets*, p.62-3, 150-1

should then be read as a parody of familiar Arcadian language of lament. This genre sets up the expectation of a restoration of plenty and peace at the end, but Dekker provides no message other than the inevitability of death. It is the obverse of the pastoral ideal: it is the coming of the wilderness, the devastation of Arcadia and the destruction of societal harmony.¹¹⁰ The literary convention that presents man as capable of transcending his condition is ridiculed in the final tale of ‘jest book’ section as a tinker becomes an unlikely hero, comically compared to Aeneas. Before the plague, all lose their moral compunctions in the desperate desire to survive, but nothing does any good. The point of the ‘wonder’ in the pamphlet’s title, according to Waage, is not simply to wonder at things that are beyond human control, but to wonder at human failure to consider what has caused such a wonder. People know the truth, that this is God’s judgement, but have the remarkable ability to ignore all the signs, even to ignore God himself, and so to allow death’s power to remain absolute.¹¹¹

Waage’s case is generally well made, although he pushes too hard to unearth Dekker’s ‘unique temperament’, placing undue weight on Dekker’s two paragraph description of spring, and treating everything as parody.¹¹² The eulogy to Queen Elizabeth is taken by other commentators for what it purports to be, Twynning regarding it as the main purpose of the pamphlet.¹¹³ Dekker’s selection of stories surely derives more from the desire to entertain, especially through identifying the ironies in human behaviour, than from a literary master-plan. The fact that he corrects a detail in one suggests he did care about the stories’ accuracy. Their construction is not as subtle as Waage suggests, some stories losing their effect through sheer verbosity.¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, the Waage’s conclusions are sound and useful for this study. Dekker’s message is that plague should act as a *momento mori* through which human beings are brought to reflect on their mortality. Dekker’s descriptions convey the claustrophobia and dystopia of the plague-ridden city.¹¹⁵ His repeated personifications of the plague enhance the sense that this is not just a random force but sent with purpose. The directing hand he often leaves as implicit, but there are

¹¹⁰ Waage, *Dekker’s Pamphlets* pp. 71-3, 147, 178, 165 & 84

¹¹¹ Waage, *Dekker’s Pamphlets*, pp. 87-91, 154-5, 179

¹¹² Waage, *Dekker’s Pamphlets*, pp. 80

¹¹³ Twynning, ‘Thomas Dekker’, p. 4

¹¹⁴ Price, Dekker, pp114-116; the correction, between two editions of *The Wonderfull Yeare*, is in the story of the sexton. Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, p. xxxii

¹¹⁵ Lake, *Lewd Hat*, p. 373

enough references to divinity to ensure there is no confusion. For example, addressing the ‘worldly mizer’, he warns, ‘tomorrow thou must be fumbled into a Mucke-pit, now you blaspheme thy Creator.’ Country people who fear plague so much as to be terrified even by the arrival of a parcel of cloth from London are ‘those misbeleewing Pagans, the ploughdruers, those worse than Infidels...’ The symptoms of plague are ‘black and blue stripes’ which are ‘tokens from heaven’ – this of a pilgrim for whom they signify he will soon ‘go and dwell in the vpper world’. One rare traveller who showed ‘piettie and pittie’ by bringing a plague victims belongings back to his family, ‘departed out of this world, to receiue his reward in the Spirituall court of heauen.’¹¹⁶

The religious content is underplayed, but is present in *The Wonderfull Yeare*. Though depicted as a battle, this is not a form of popular Manichaeism with good and evil battling against each other (as Lake suggests with regard to murder pamphlets). Death and plague are personified, but the sovereign hand of God is behind it all: in this sense, God is both enemy and source of salvation. The plague reduces human beings to fools as they cease to act with normal regard for one another, ignoring expectations of charity, hospitality and Christian behaviour. Dekker had set out a description of a well ordered world, one that was disrupted first by the death of the Queen. The triumphalism accompanying the arrival of the new king was swept away by a much greater force, epidemic plague. At the end of 1603 the outcome was still unknown. However the devastation wrought by plague was not ambiguous, both in terms of the number of deaths, and in the destruction of the harmony and good working of society. The plague reveals people’s underlying unbelief: ‘their Turkish and barbarous actions [show them] to belieue that there is no felicitie after this life, and that (like beasts) their souls shall perish with their bodies.’¹¹⁷ Beneath *The Wonderfull Yeare*, then, is a sense that a divine hand is behind all that goes on, and divine intent is looking for human response, but that response is pitifully lacking. It is, in its way, a providentialist tract.

¹¹⁶ WY Images 15, 16 & 18

¹¹⁷ WY, Image 24

3.4 *Newes from Graues-end sent to nobody*

Published the following year, *Newes from Graues-end* has many similarities with *The Wonderfull Yeare*. Wilson writes, ‘Both pamphlets anathematize the hard hearts of usurers, commiserate the poverty of poets, deplore the neglect of scholars, and show noble compassion to the weak and defenceless.’¹¹⁸ Waage also notes the similarity of theme, but considers the ideas more pious and conventional, although understandable within the same analytical framework.¹¹⁹ Twynning sees it purely as the plague proving a surprisingly popular topic, prompting Dekker to churn out a second pamphlet.¹²⁰ To Healy it embodies a political message, that ‘the management of the plague in 1603 was socially divisive, blatantly unfair to the poor and devastating to trade as well as to the people left to fend for themselves in the capital.’¹²¹

Physically, this pamphlet is the same as its predecessor, forty eight pages of quaranto. The literary structure is simpler, consisting of two main sections, a lengthy (fourteen page) prose dedicatory epistle, followed by thirty two pages of rhyming couplets. The dedication is addressed in flamboyantly excessive language to ‘Nobody’ and concerns itself with the lack of available literary patrons, together with the rapacity of lawyers (for ‘ten plagues cannot melt so many crosses of silver out of Lawyers purses’) and how ‘Nobody’ provided encouragement, provisions, medical care, or sacred ground for burials when plague struck and city worthies deserted the sinking ship.¹²² Whilst the tone is playful, satirical and teasing, there is also an underlying bitterness conveyed by a writer who lacked the means to escape and associated himself with those who remained behind.

Dekker promised to serve up rhymes ‘in the taile of the Plague like Caveare, or a dish of Anchoues after supper.’¹²³ When the rhymes arrive, they are in simple couplets. The contrast with the overblown prose is striking, suggesting perhaps that these are commonplace opinions, or perhaps that they will cut through literary fancy with common sense. Dekker moves swiftly into mocking the failed efforts of physicians (‘Mens Demi-gods’ who ‘suck from poisonous stinking weeds /

¹¹⁸ Wilson, *Plague Pamphlets*, p. xii

¹¹⁹ Waage, *Dekker’s Pamphlets*, p. 182

¹²⁰ Twynning, ‘Dekker’, p. 4

¹²¹ Healy, ‘Discourses’, p. 8

¹²² Dekker, *Newes from Graues-end (NG) STC (2nd ed.)* 12199 Image 7

¹²³ NG, Image 3

Preseruatuēs’), this apparently despite the king’s command to emphasise medical cures.¹²⁴

He describes the natural causes people identify, such as ‘thick poisonous fumes’ that come from the sun shining on ‘Rottenness and Filth, ... heapes of bodies, Carrion, ... standing Pooles, or wombs of Vaults’, and asks why animals and birds do not get plague since they inhabit the same air. He then challenges the idea that it can be merely passed from person to person, asking how this explains the first person who had plague.¹²⁵ Asking again, ‘from whence / Comes this? youle say from Prouidence,’ he rejects this answer as well, saying it is the ‘common Spell / That leades our Ignorance (blinde as hell)’. In other words, turning to providence as an explanation is just an excuse to avoid thinking about it more deeply. It should not be accepted fatalistically.¹²⁶

Dekker’s explanation is that human sin is the cause: ‘For in euery man within him feeds / A worme which this contagion breedes; / Our heauenly parts are plaguy sick, / And there such leaproous spots do stick, / That God in anger fills his hand / With Vengeance, throwing it on the land.’¹²⁷ Healy argues that Dekker’s idea of sin in society is primarily about avarice over-riding charity: ‘Employing mercantile and market-place language and allusions throughout his satire, and redeploing the homiletic commonplace associating greed and usury with God’s wrath and plague, Dekker sets up a moral dichotomy.’¹²⁸ Whilst these elements are undoubtedly present, Dekker’s identification of particular sins is wider: ‘Princes Errors, / Or faults of Peeres, ... /The Courtiers pride, lust and excesse, / The Church mans painted holinesse, / The lawyers grinding of the poore, / The souldiers staruing at the doore...’¹²⁹ Within the list of ‘conventional’ sins, those of social responsibility receive particular mention.

A little later a further suggestion attempts explanation of plague at this particular time of change in the English monarchy: ‘For since his Maiden Seruant’s gone, / And his new Vizeroy fills the Throne,/ Heauen means to give him (as his bride) / A Nation new, and purified.’¹³⁰ This would be represented by an opening of the audit-

¹²⁴ Healy, ‘Discourses’, p. 8

¹²⁵ NG, Images 11 & 12

¹²⁶ NG Image 12

¹²⁷ NG Image 13

¹²⁸ Healy, ‘Discourses’, p. 8

¹²⁹ NG Image 13

¹³⁰ NG Image 14

books for Elizabeth's forty five year reign, and Dekker has little doubt that those found wanting will be usurers, lawyers, misers, and drunkards. The pamphlet ends with a simple clear message: 'Only this Antidote apply, / Cease vexing heauen, and cease to die.'¹³¹

Newes from graues-end may indeed be more conventional and pious, but also contains biting satire directed against the rich and powerful abandoning the city. All causes of plague other than God's wrath at sin are rejected. Included amongst the rejection is 'providence'. This will be discussed below. It is clear his understanding remains 'providentialist' in the sense of seeing plague as God's judgement which can only be averted by repentance. In the detail there is no consistency of thought, suggesting Dekker is picking up opinions he hears and marshalling them quite uncritically. There is no doubt his sympathies lie with those who have no choice but to endure. In the overall scheme, as in *The Wonderfull Yeare*, he describes vividly how the plague overturns the natural order, but is more explicit in calling upon a change of behaviour from Londoners in order to appease the Almighty.

3.5 *A Rod for Run-awayes*

It was more than twenty years later when Dekker returned to the theme of plague in his pamphlets, perhaps on account of the plague forcing closure of London theatres once more. *A Rod for Run-awayes* (1625) is shorter than the 1603-4 pamphlets, having thirty two pages, and is written entirely in prose.

The title page conveys a sense of confidence in the writer and the theme. A large wood-cut illustration dominates, showing a giant skeleton representing death dancing on coffins, flourishing arrows in each hand, driving people out of the desolate city only to be turned back by country people wielding pikes and halberds. From a cloud above comes a three pronged 'hand of God'. The picture introduces the themes of the pamphlet, suggesting either that it may have been specially commissioned, or that Dekker drew inspiration from seeing it.¹³²

The dominant words on the page are those of the subtitle, 'Gods Tokens', making clear this pamphlet will be unapologetic in seeing God's hand at work. Unlike the other anonymous pamphlets, the authorship is given three times: 'By THO. D.' on

¹³¹ NG Image 23

¹³² Dekker, *A Rod for Run-awayes (RR)* STC (2nd ed.) 6520 Image 1. A quick search in EEBO did not reveal the image to be used in any earlier publication.

the cover; 'THO. Dekker' on the personal dedication; and 'T.D.' after the general dedication. The personal dedication is also worthy of note, being made to 'M^r Thomas Gilham, CHIRVGIAN' and including the comment, apparently without irony, 'I honour your Name, your Art, your Practice, your profound Experience'. Absent from this pamphlet is negative comment on the medical profession, although there is equally no recommendation to seek doctors' help.

The reader dedication indicates the pamphlet is intended for those who have left London to escape from the plague, in order to inform them of the 'miserable estate' of the city. Since, however, it was printed for John Trundle to be sold at his shop in Smithfield, the actual readers would be those staying in London. Dekker could hope it would sell well as an expression of the feelings of those who had to stay, encouraging them by articulating some of their views, and reinforcing their sense of identity and communal solidarity.¹³³

Feeling was apparently strong against such 'run-aways'. Dekker acknowledges, 'We are warrented by holy Scriptures to flie ... from the Plague,' but this should not be to the detriment of those who stay behind.¹³⁴ However, 'you robbe vs of our victuals'.¹³⁵ 'How shall the lame, and blinde, and half starued be fed?' Prisoners perish because there is no one to feed them. 'It is not good, it is not charitable, it is not Christian like.' It is this breakdown of Christian charity and of social obligations in the community that seems to offend Dekker most. The poor are not even given a decent burial: 'the poore man is hurried to his Graue by nasty slouenly Bearers, in the night, without followers, without friends, without rites of burial due to our Church, due to our Religion...'¹³⁶ He can find but one example of charity being given by a gentleman on his way out of the city.¹³⁷ There is no more charity to be found in the countryside: a general fear of Londoners leaves people to sleep without shelter, and many die accordingly. Such stories Dekker calls 'A digression a little merrily, taxing the inciulity of the common people,' illustrating how flight demonstrates 'foolery, infidelity, inhumanity, nay villainy, irreligion, and distrust in God (with defiance of his power)'.¹³⁸

¹³³ RR Image 2

¹³⁴ RR Image 8

¹³⁵ RR Image 4

¹³⁶ RR Image 6

¹³⁷ RR Image 9

¹³⁸ RR Image 10

This pamphlet, unlike the earlier ones, puts a religious message at the head. Dekker has used military metaphors before to describe the plague's action, but now, explicitly, this is God's army and God's battle. 'The King of Heauen and earth is the Generall of the Army; reuenging Angels, his Officers; ... our innumerable sinnes, his enemies'.¹³⁹ Sin he identifies as the cause and grounds for the war. Dekker does not, however, identify individuals' sins as explaining why they received the plague: it is the nation that has sinned. He makes clear he is not hinting at royal misdemeanours: 'To Queen Elizabeth and King James wee were an vnthankfull and murmuring nation, and therefore God tooke them from vs; they were too good for vs.'¹⁴⁰ Whilst individuals might bribe the searchers to escape from being shut up according to the plague orders, they cannot escape search by God's avenging angels.¹⁴¹ 'God will not haue his Strokes hidden: his markes must bee seene.' Since these wounds were inflicted by the 'great Omnipotent Generall of Heauen' they should be borne with patience, constancy and even gladness. No one should presume to escape the 'Rod of pestilence' but equally all should rejoice when he shows mercy and the plague figures begin to go down.¹⁴²

The final section, entitled 'Gods Tokens', consists of the stories the title page promised, making the reader 'tremble at the repetition of these horrors', mainly about the suddenness of death caused by plague, both in the city and in the countryside.¹⁴³ These stories have few of the twists and ironies of those in *The Wonderfull Yeare*, but share the same themes of the unavoidability of the plague, of uncivil behaviour, and of the undermining of the conscience. The irony ultimately remains the same, that the sins of selfishness and mistreatment of others underlay the judgment that instigated the plague, yet human response to the plague makes this behaviour even worse. A simple question sums up the problem: 'How can wee expect mercy from him, when wee expresse such cruelty toward one another?'¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ RR Image 4

¹⁴⁰ RR Image 6

¹⁴¹ RR Image 10

¹⁴² RR Images 9 & 10

¹⁴³ RR Images 12 to 16

¹⁴⁴ RR Image 11

3.6 The Pamphlets of 1630

The two pamphlets attributed to Dekker in 1630 are significantly shorter than his earlier plague writings, eighteen pages and twenty pages respectively. Neither has a dedicatory epistle (ironic or otherwise). *London Looke Back* has for a cover a crudely drawn skull wreathed with a garland, whilst *The Blacke Rod* has no illustration.

There are none of the stories of city life under plague conditions that characterise the earlier publications. George Price says of these later pamphlets, ‘the homiletic note is more insistent, for the religious feeling of an old, world-weary man overrides his interest in the ironic, macabre and tragic events already too familiar to him.’¹⁴⁵

Undoubtedly these pamphlets are more directly religious, but this is less about being ‘world-weary’ than conveying a sense of urgency to impart a message, and reflects the demands of the genre of moralising tract. As with all these publications, we should see no contradiction between authenticity of message and the desire to make money.¹⁴⁶

London Looke Backe has the appearance of a religious tract or adaptation of a sermon. There is a liberal spattering of Biblical quotation, with chapter and verse given in the margin. Themes of sin, repentance, mercy and thankfulness run throughout the pamphlet. A new intensity is given to these themes when the message becomes personal. The writer claims that he was close to death, ‘Yet loe! I was called out of this graue.’¹⁴⁷ ‘Seeing ... death was about to thrust me downe with one hand, yet life gently pluckt me vp by the other.’ He then gives humble and hearty thanks to heaven, and sets his mind to ‘put all others ... in minde of their deliverance!’¹⁴⁸ Although it is possible Dekker is using the experience of someone else, or speaking allegorically about the city itself, it makes most sense to read it for what it purports to be, his appreciation of having been close to death driving the urgent message of repentance.

This pamphlet is filled with the sense of God’s grace and forbearance, that although plague had stricken London again, after about 5000 deaths, divine mercy had intervened and the plague was halted. This is what Dekker means by looking back and learning from the past. Repentance is the key, and indeed he writes a eulogy to

¹⁴⁵ Price, *Dekker*, p. 129

¹⁴⁶ Green, *Print and Protestantism*, p. xi

¹⁴⁷ Dekker, *London Looke Backe (LLB) SCT* (2nd ed.) / 16755 Image 5

¹⁴⁸ *LLB* Image 6

repentance which he likens to a silver-winged dove, or a silver bell, or a chain of Oriental pearls as the thing that wins over the King of Heaven. He claims this as a sounder prescription to any laid down by medical authorities like Galen, Hippocrates or Paracelsus. The best answer is to ‘Cry out with *David*, O Lord! Chastize me not in thy wrath.’¹⁴⁹

The word ‘providence’ is used once in this pamphlet, near the start in the third paragraph, in an epigram that appears to sum up the purpose of the publication: ‘To looke backe, strengthens wisdom; to looke forward, armes Prouidence: and lendes eyes to Prevention.’¹⁵⁰ This neat summation, although it leaves undefined what exactly it means to ‘arm providence’. However there is no problem in grasping the overall sense, which is that readers should be ready for what providence may bring, through the fruit of repentance.

The Blacke Rod and the White Rod also has the appearance of a religious tract. A quotation from Psalm 91 (promising God’s deliverance from ‘the noisome pestilence’) acts as a sermon text, and takes the place of a cover picture.¹⁵¹ This pamphlet is more structured than *London Looke Backe*. It begins with a lengthy double metaphor of the world as a stock exchange and as a theatre, all of which introduces a reflection on the transitory nature of life.¹⁵² A lengthy history of the plague in England follows, tracing it back (as Dekker believes) to the reign of William the Conqueror.¹⁵³ Dekker’s point is that God at times inflicts the country with plague (his black rod of judgment) and sometimes shows the white rod of mercy. This interpretation derives from the very name ‘plague’: ‘*Plaga* signifies a stripe, and this Sicknesse, comes with a blow, or stripe, giuen by the hand of Gods Angell, when (as he did to *David*) he sends him to strike a people for their sins.’¹⁵⁴ There follows a more detailed review of the plagues of 1603 and 1625, making use of the statistics provided by the bills of mortality to show how many died on a week by week basis.¹⁵⁵ Sadly, with the coronation of King James, ‘we were ... not a new Nation, but the selfe-same stiffe-necked people we were before.’¹⁵⁶ In Charles’ reign,

¹⁴⁹ *LLB* Images 6 & 8

¹⁵⁰ *LLB* Image 2

¹⁵¹ Dekker, *The Blacke Rod and the White Rod (BRWR)* STC (2nd ed.) / 6492.5 Image 1

¹⁵² *BRWR* Image 3

¹⁵³ *BRWR* Images 4 & 5

¹⁵⁴ *BRWR* Image 5

¹⁵⁵ *BRWR* Images 5 to 8

¹⁵⁶ *BRWR* Image 5

in eleven weeks in 1625, the rod of pestilence smote 30, 876, which is 14, 938 more than the twelve weeks of plague in 1603.¹⁵⁷

However, he argues, God's mercy was also shown, because there was a beginning, when only one person died, and there was an end, another week where only one person died. This year there are but sixty seven dead of plague. 'Incomprehensible loue of a Father to vs his Children; The mildnesse and Mercy, of our Judge! ... O just and euen Balance, of Heauenly Compassion!'¹⁵⁸ It is hard to read this today without assuming this is intended ironically. Such a death toll does not sound compassionate. However, even with Dekker's liking for irony, it seems unlikely here, as it would not be directed towards human foibles or contradictory behaviour, but towards the action of God. It must, therefore, be taken as a statement of faith in God's mercy in the midst of the appalling destruction of human life.

The right response to all this is fasting and prayer, followed by – typically Dekker – a reversal of the uncharitable behaviour characteristic of the citizenry. Although there are great numbers of 'Religious, Godly, and Faithfull Relieuers of the Poore', taking the city 'in a lumpe together' there is little 'true Charity, true Christianity, true Friendship'. Instead, if we get another to our advantage, 'we grind his Bones, and gnaw his heart in peeces.'¹⁵⁹

Another theme, mostly new to this publication, comes to the fore towards the end, that of looking to heavenly benefits. First, the victims of the 1603 epidemic are described as the train of the Queen's procession, accompanying her all the way to heaven. (This image was used in *A Rod for Run-awayes*.)¹⁶⁰ Then comfort is drawn on behalf of the many babies, that they go straight to heaven: 'Note the great Mercy of God extended to Infants in calling such numbers of them to Heauen, because he would haue that place glorified with some white pure, and unspotted Soules, snatched from the society of the wicked.' For the country, be thankful 'wee are a populous Nation still', and 'sing Hymns vnto almighty Jehovah.'¹⁶¹ Finally, for those who get the plague, finding themselves 'all-spotted over', they should treat those tokens as 'GODS rich Ermines, ... Hug them as thy Louer, Kiss and bid them welcome' for they will enable your soul to go cheerfully on its journey. They are reminded they go to meet their friends who have gone before, not least Biblical

¹⁵⁷ BRWR Images 7& 8

¹⁵⁸ BRWR Image 8

¹⁵⁹ BRWR Image 9

¹⁶⁰ RR Image 6

¹⁶¹ BRWR Image 10

characters like Noah, Abraham and Moses, and more than that, ‘there thou shalt see thy Redeemer sitting at the right hand side of this Father’ and live in his perfect court for ever.¹⁶²

3.7 Conclusions: Providence in Dekker’s Plague Pamphlets

If, as Alex Walsham says, belief in providence acted as ‘a set of ideological spectacles through which individuals of all social levels and from all positions on the confessional spectrum were apt to view their universe,’ and if as Peter Lake says, it was made up of ‘a bundle of attitudes, assumptions and expectations, of themes, images and fragments of narrative’, it is worth trying to be as precise as possible about what understanding of divine providence is presented in Thomas Dekker’s plague pamphlets.¹⁶³ Coming to the pamphlets with this question, inspired by these historians, the most immediately striking point is that the word ‘providence’ is a rare occurrence, appearing a bare handful of times across all five pamphlets. The word obviously does not have to be used in order to express the idea of the world operating under the sovereign hand of God. It may be that like George Hakewill, Dekker was reluctant to use the word ‘providence’ for attributing what is negative in human experience.¹⁶⁴ In reviewing providence in the plague pamphlets, we will use three instances in the pamphlets as starting points for discussion. The third will lead on to discussion of alternatives that Dekker did not follow.

The first instance appears to have had little to do with the plague: ‘England and Scotland (... as tho providence had enacted, that one day those two Nations should marry one another) are now made sure together, and King Iames his Coronation, is the solemne wedding day.’¹⁶⁵ With these words, Dekker ascribed the union of the crowns to the hand of God. Such comment falls within the compass of what VanderMolen’s ‘Anglican Providence’. Since plague hit London in the year of the accession of King James I (and would do so again on the accession of his son, Charles I) it may have been necessary, or at least politic, to be absolutely clear that providence was not casting judgement on the past reign or presaging what was to come.¹⁶⁶ Although never a major theme, occasional comments in different pamphlets seek to make (sometimes unlikely) positive theological connections between the

¹⁶² *BRWR* Image 11 & 12

¹⁶³ Walsham, *Providence*, p. 2; Lake, *Hat*, p. 318

¹⁶⁴ VanderMolen, ‘Providence’, p. 37. Unlike Hakewill, Dekker had no compunction over identifying God’s judgements in contemporary events.

¹⁶⁵ *WY*, Image 10

¹⁶⁶ Slack, *Plague*, p. 19

plague and the sovereign. In *A Rod for Run-awayes* (and also in *The Black Rod*) Dekker suggests that the souls of the plague dead are like the Queen's train accompanying her to heaven, and an unknown number would likewise accompany 'our peace-maker king' in 1625. His general verdict: 'they were too good for us ... [an] unthankful nation.'¹⁶⁷ He suggests in *Newes from Graues-end* that through the plague heaven offers God's 'new Vizeroy ... a Nation new, and purified.'¹⁶⁸ Despite all the plague deaths so deliberately counted in *the Black Rod*, England remains a 'populous Nation still', and that he sees as heaven's blessing.¹⁶⁹ These positive statements stand in stark contrast with the dystopian picture of the plague city that dominates most of Dekker's plague writing. They may indeed feel like unconvincing afterthoughts given the rhetorical force with which he describes calamity. Nevertheless, they do contribute to the sense that the nation, though under the heavy hand of judgement, was still directed by divine beneficence. The best hope is that it will indeed produce that 'Nation new, and purified.'

In *Newes from Graue-end* Dekker appears to deny the role of providence in sending plague:

Yet the (i'th midst) stands fast: from whence
 Comes this? youle say from Prouidence.
 Tis so, and that's the common Spell,
 That leades our Ignorance, (blinde as hell)
 And serues but as excuse, to keepe
 The soule from search of things more deep.'¹⁷⁰

These lines form the culmination of a list of what he considers false causes attributed to the plague, a list that includes both poison in the air and contagion. A few lines later he goes on to explain the true cause as a kind of spiritual disease ('our heauenly parts of plaguy sick') and plague spots he describes as thrown by God in vengeance at people who have committed a capital offence or even high treason against 'th'Eternal King'. It is abundantly clear that Dekker, as Lake puts it, 'portrayed the plague as a providential punishment visited on the crying sins of the city.'¹⁷¹ But here he is saying the way people ascribe it to providence is like a spell, ignorant,

¹⁶⁷ *RR*, Image 6; *BRWR*, Image 13

¹⁶⁸ *NG*, Image 10

¹⁶⁹ *BRWR*, Image 10

¹⁷⁰ *NG*, Image 9

¹⁷¹ Lake, *Hat*, p. 370

blind, and just an excuse. They have a fatalistic understanding of providence. They imagine nothing can be done to assuage the assault or mitigate the effects.

We have seen that Calvin particularly targeted his teaching about providence against belief in fortune, whether capricious or benign. Walsham and Thomas have both shown that Protestant preachers attacked the idea of chance and fate having any control over human affairs, or of using the word ‘providence’ to cover the same thing.¹⁷² Therefore, although Dekker appears to reject providence as the cause of plague in this one place, what is actually rejected is fatalistic acceptance. Plague caused by the hand of God as a result of human sin is very much his diagnosis, even if he does not call it providence.

‘To looke backe, strengthens wisdom; to looke forward, armes Prouidence: and lendes eye to Preuention.’¹⁷³ This line from *London Looke Backe* acts as a text for the pamphlet, and indeed could be seen as summing up the message of all Dekker’s plague pamphlets. It also expresses something of the ambiguity of the doctrine when set in the context of a moralising discourse. If all is in the ineffable sovereign will of God, change in human moral action should not logically change God’s decision. But Dekker’s desire is to look at the plague and change behaviour. The idea of ‘arming providence’ is a neat expression, but the exact meaning is unclear. It could be arming against the potential action of providence (through repentance) or that failure to learn from warnings is like putting weapons into the hand of the providential Judge. Alternatively, it could be the providence is the source of salvation that becomes available through the wise retrospection the pamphlet recommends.

The fundamental premise is very clear, however, that the incidence of plague is God’s earthly judgment for sinfulness. Occasionally, judgement is favourable: from the Holy Land pilgrim in *The Wonderfull Yeare* to the instruction to the dying in *The Blacke Rod* to ‘bid thy soule goe cheerfully on her Journey’, there are suggestions plague can be the means to the reward of heavenly bliss.¹⁷⁴ However the dominant message is that plague is an earthly judgment for sin. Using the very word ‘plague’ seems automatically to invoke the idea that this is God’s action. As explained in *The Blacke Rod*, the Latin ‘*plaga*’ from which it derives means ‘stripe’, so God’s active

¹⁷² Walsham, *Providence*, pp. 20-1, 124; Thomas, *Religion*, p. 121

¹⁷³ *LLB*, Image 2

¹⁷⁴ *WY*, Image 16; *BR*, Image 11

intention to punish can be presumed.¹⁷⁵ The term ‘God’s Tokens’ is repeatedly used to mean the symptoms of plague, such as spots, boils and buboes, which are very public ‘for God will not have his Strokes hidden.’¹⁷⁶ ‘God’s Tokens’ is also the term used by Dekker for his stories about plague victims and human behaviour under threat of plague, for these stories exemplify God’s judgment at work.¹⁷⁷

Dekker loves to use military metaphors on many occasions, representing London as a city under siege. In *The Wonderfull Yeare*, we are told ‘Death pitcht his tents ... the Plague is the Muster-maister and marshall of the field’ (with the various symptoms as lieutenants, sergeants and corporals). Such language raises the possibilities of a kind of popular Manichaeism (as Lake observed in the murder pamphlets he studied) where good and evil, life and death engage in a cosmic struggle. However, for Dekker it is always the case that God is in overall control, and acts at times both as enemy and as source of salvation. In *A Rod for Run-awayes*, the commander is ‘The great Omnipotent Gernaerall of Heauen’ and the troops, the ‘smiting Angell [going] from doore to doore.’ If he was more explicit about this in 1625 than in 1603, he still says enough in the earlier pamphlet not to leave too much to interpretation.¹⁷⁸

Having established God’s judgement on sin as the cause of the plague, Dekker would be expected to elucidate on which sins he thought God was judging. This message, however, is less clear. His most dramatic statement, in *Newes from Grauesend*, is to call it ‘high treason [against] th’Eternal King’.¹⁷⁹ In *Rod for run-awayes* he says such running away from the plague represents disbelief in God, but rarely does he make neglect of religion a major target. More typical of him is the question, ‘How can we expect mercy from [God], when wee expresse such cruelty towards another?’¹⁸⁰ His lists of London’s sins are wide-ranging, including pride (repeatedly) lust, excess, luxury, grinding the poor, envy, cursing and usury.¹⁸¹ Such lists are quite conventional, but if Dekker has a particular target it is around neglect of the poor (as is certainly the case in *Rod for Run-awayes*). Bearing in mind another convention of plague writing was to make scapegoats of the poor, vagrants and the disorderly

¹⁷⁵ *BR*, Image 5. The same point is made by Henoeh Clapham in his pamphlet of 1603; he makes the point that the word ‘pestilence’ does not carry the same connotations: *An epistle discoursing on the present pestilence*, STC (2nd ed.) / 5339

¹⁷⁶ *RR*, Image 9

¹⁷⁷ *RR*, Images 1 and 12

¹⁷⁸ *WY*, Image 13; *RR*, Image 11

¹⁷⁹ *NG*, Image 9

¹⁸⁰ *RR*, Images 11-12

¹⁸¹ *NG*, Images 9-10

slums, Dekker's comment is more distinctive than it first appears.¹⁸² It is therefore possible to agree with Margaret Healy's analysis that by highlighting the sins of greed and selfishness, Dekker challenges the strategies of the cities ruling elites for managing the plague in ways that divided society, leaving the poor to fend for themselves while trade and business were devastated.¹⁸³

In some ways Dekker could be seen to be writing in the tradition and style of 'the English Judgment Book' (albeit in very much shorter publications).¹⁸⁴ It could be said of Dekker, as VanderMolen does of Thomas Beard, 'His moralism is straightforward, his lessons obvious, and his applications dramatic.'¹⁸⁵ However (unlike Beard) Dekker never targeted the instrument of God's judgement onto individuals. It was the city or nation collectively that bore judgement. He recognised at one stage that there were many good charitable individuals, but the city taken together 'as a lump' was guilty. Individuals who sought to avoid judgement would be found out; escaping God's judgement is impossible. But he never suggests they are more under judgement than others, or that any who avoid contracting plague are somehow innocent. It is the shared or collective judgement on the city and nation that concerns him. In this way, Dekker's approach (perhaps reflective of the subject matter) is different from the writers of Peter Lake's murder pamphlets, where providence is described as an active force seeking out individuals, laying bare crime, and leading people to repentance. He shares the interest in the implacability of divine justice and the aim of repentance, but not the individualisation of judgment and mercy.¹⁸⁶

Dekker's answer to the challenge of divine justice is time and again to call for repentance. *London Looke Back* is most explicit, to the extent of eulogising repentance, which is described as like a silver bell or diamond shining in the dark.¹⁸⁷ He gives few ideas about what repentance entails. There are some brief references to fasting, praying and hymn-singing, but such calls are not really developed and the meaning of such religious responses is taken as read.¹⁸⁸ His focus is on changing

¹⁸² Slack, 'Introduction', p. 17

¹⁸³ Healy, 'Discourses', p. 8

¹⁸⁴ Walsham, *Providence*, p. 65

¹⁸⁵ VanderMolen, 'Providence', p. 41

¹⁸⁶ Lake, *Lewd Hat*, p. 180

¹⁸⁷ *LLB*, Image 10

¹⁸⁸ *BR*, Image 9; *RR*, Image 9; *LLB*, Image 4

behaviour: ‘Cease to sin; cease to die.’ The outcomes of penitence would be thanksgiving, charity, patience and goodness.¹⁸⁹

The ‘cease to sin, cease to die’ message takes repentance beyond an appeal to God’s mercy to one where the penitent has a claim on God and a right to forgiveness. The ‘eulogy’ in *London Looke Backe* even speaks of repentance ‘tying up God’s hands that he shall not strike us’ and providing a ‘golden ladder’ to heaven.¹⁹⁰ This approach fits with Walsham’s analysis that in cheap print there is an unspoken assumption that penitence and prayer could have a ‘mechanical efficacy’ and that moral regeneration would act as the infallible means of diverting plagues.¹⁹¹ Any sense of divine inscrutability has been left behind. Through the determination to demonstrate the efficacy of repentance, a theology of works has re-emerged. The moralising instinct of the pamphleteer ultimately has overtaken Calvinistic understanding of the sovereignty of God. A form of popular Pelagianism has been spawned out of providentialist rhetoric.

Dekker’s rich and varied styles of prose and poetry were harnessed to convey a world governed and directed by the providence of God. It was a world where the inscrutable purposes of God could be marvelled. Occasional joy and delight (perhaps occasioned by a new king) could only be wondered at. The calamity, dislocation and destruction of the plague-ridden city, and people’s faithless reactions, were all the more to be wondered at. When plague struck, London was like a city under siege, surrounded on all sides, bombarded by many enemies, from which there was no escaping (and those who tried were guilty of lacking both belief and charity) for this was God’s hand of judgement. The right response was not, however, fatalistic acceptance, but repentance of sin, which would have the sure and certain result that God would take his judgement away. Thomas Dekker, who wondered at the extraordinary happenings of ‘the wonderfull yeare of 1603’, through his wonderings at the strangely ironic behaviour of human beings and his appeals to change human behaviour, ultimately pressed a solution that involved ‘tying up [the] hands’ of almighty God.

¹⁸⁹ *LLB*, Image 9; *NG*, Image 23

¹⁹⁰ *LLB*, Image 10

¹⁹¹ Walsham, *Providence*, p. 150

4. Contemporary Plague Writing

It is not the purpose of this study to conduct a comprehensive survey of early seventeenth century plague writing. However it is instructive to consider a sample of broadly contemporary texts in order to set Dekker's in context. Plague was widely discussed and debated in this period, even if, as Paul Slack notes, this debate was striking for its 'lack of intellectual rigour' and most of the writing was 'conventional and derivative'. The context was of the authorities' growing insistence on the isolation of plague sufferers, employing searchers to identify them, shutting them in their houses for six weeks, burning bedding and (at least in theory) raising taxes for their relief.¹⁹² Evidence of the official attitudes behind these requirements can be found in the Plague Orders (1603) themselves, and in the *Exhortation* contained within *Certaine Prayers collected out of a forme of godly Meditations*, issued on the King's authority and to be used on Wednesday fast days 'during the visitation' (1603).¹⁹³ The official message can itself be contextualised by reference to some earlier homiletics, exemplified by a 1553 sermon by John Hooper (Bishop of Worcester and Gloucester), together with the Elizabethan homily on repentance.¹⁹⁴ The range of broadly contemporary voices is instanced by court preacher and poet John Donne; James Balmford of Southwark and William Crashaw of Whitechapel (clerics who might be called moderate puritans); and Henoah Clapham, described by Slack as 'cantankerous, opinionated and undoubtedly a maverick' and who oscillated between the desire to be a prophet and for acceptance at court.¹⁹⁵ A northern voice, directed towards London, is provided by Robert Jenison, Newcastle's puritan lecturer. Amongst other pamphlets, the authorship of which is only indicated by initials, one, *The run-awyaes answer*, directly responds to Dekker's 1625

¹⁹² Slack, *Plague*, pp. 24, 209-211, & 228

¹⁹³ *ORDERS thought meete by his Majestie and his Privie Counsell to execute through his realm* (1603) STC (2nd ed.) / 9209; *Certaine prayers...* STC (2nd ed.) / 16532

¹⁹⁴ J. Hooper, *An Homilie to be read in tyme of pestilence*, (1553) STC (2nd ed.) / 13759; *Certain Sermons or Homilies appointed to be read in churches during the reign of Queen Elizabeth of famous memory* (published in 1562; reprinted in Oxford, 1683)

¹⁹⁵ Donne's preaching is quoted in Rivers Scott, *No Man is an Island: A Selection of the Prose of John Donne*, (London: Folio, 1997); J. Balmford, *A short dialogue concerning the plagues infection* (1603) STC (2nd ed.) / 1338; W. Crashaw, *Londons Lamentation for her Sinnes* (1625) STC (2nd ed.) / 6017.5; H. Clapham, *An Epistle Discoursing on the Present Pestilence ... Reprinted with some additions* (1603) STC (2nd ed.) / 5339; Slack, *Plague*, pp. 233-234; J. Doelman, *King James I and the Religious Culture of England* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2000) p. 49

pamphlet.¹⁹⁶ Using such sources we will try to place some of the issues raised by Dekker into the context of contemporary debate.

Sandra Clark writes, ‘the question for the responsibility for the plague brought all writers together: they agreed that men had brought the plague on themselves through their sinfulness.’ It is difficult to disagree, God’s judgement providing the link between sin and plague.¹⁹⁷ Jenison called it ‘a fearfull sign of God’s displeasure and wrath.’¹⁹⁸ Donne lamented ‘the hand of God fell upon thousands in this deadly infection.’¹⁹⁹ Crashaw pronounced, ‘Nothing but our sins have pulled down this Plague.’²⁰⁰ B.V. uses Dekker-like language to narrate how ‘the Armada of God’s anger was preparing against us, ... the Pestilence beat at our Citty Gates, and the Arrowes of Infection flew into our houses.’²⁰¹ It was not just Dekker but common usage to speak of plague symptoms as ‘God’s tokens’ or ‘God’s marks’. Balmford refers to ‘botches, blains and spots (called Gods tokens)’²⁰² and similarly the 1603 Plague Orders, in a section suggesting a variety of physical cures, mention ‘botches, carbuncles and markes, called Gods markes’.²⁰³ Henoah Clapham goes into more detail than Dekker in explaining the derivation of the word: *plaga* in Latin or *plege* in Greek means ‘blow’ or ‘stripe’, and so the word ‘plague’ implies God’s specific blow inflicted on mankind as a result of sin.²⁰⁴ Simply using the word reinforces the message that it is from God.

Providentialist explanations of plague outbreaks, then, were universal. However Dekker is typical in avoiding the word ‘providence’ in explaining them. If the word is used at all, it is with regard to deliverance from plague, either in individuals avoiding it or recovering from it, or of outbreaks coming to an end. This comes across particularly in James Balmford’s *Dialogue*, where the term is used repeatedly in these ways. He claims, ‘The greater the danger is, the greater is God’s providence in delivering his people.’²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁶ R. Jenison, *Newcastle’s Call*, 1637, is quoted in Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor’s Summer*; B.V., *The run-awaies answer to a book called, a rode for run-awaies* (1625) STC (2nd ed.) / 24562

¹⁹⁷ Clark, *Pamphlets*, p. 118

¹⁹⁸ Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor’s Summer*, p. 75

¹⁹⁹ Sermon, January 1626, quoted in Scott, *No Man* p. 160

²⁰⁰ Crashaw, *Londons Lamentation*, Image 13

²⁰¹ B.V. *Run-awaies answer*, Image 4

²⁰² Balmford, *Dialogue*, Image 27

²⁰³ *ORDERS thought meete...* (1603) Image 11

²⁰⁴ Clapham, *Epistle*, Image 3

²⁰⁵ Balmford, *Dialogue* Image 30

All speak of sin as the cause, and many, like Dekker, produce lists of sins for repentance, but there is no sense of a single abiding sin. Thomas White in 1577 did have a single idea: ‘The cause of the plague is sin ... and the cause of sinne are plays: therefore the cause of plagues are playes.’ (It is hardly surprising that playwright Dekker did not share this assessment).²⁰⁶ John Donne was fairly typical in highlighting as causes ‘drunkenness and voluptuousness in riotous houses, and ... lusts and wantennous in licentious houses’. He, like Dekker, delighted in drawing attention to the ironies of self-inflicted destruction, such as those who broke into houses and ‘seeking the wardrobes of others, found their own winding sheet in the infection of that house where they stole their own death.’²⁰⁷ Crashaw provides an all-embracing list, covering sins of commission and omission, including (like Donne) personal sins and (like Dekker) social sins such as neglect of the poor, but (unsurprisingly for the pastor of Whitechapel) most emphasised religious failings (such as profaning the Sabbath, contempt for the word, formality of religion, and superstition).²⁰⁸ The 1603 *Exhortation* provides what might be regarded as the official sin list. It begins with gluttony and drunkenness, and then moves to those who speak ill of those in authority and who demand further reformation of the church. After these, the range includes taking God’s glory for oneself, swearing, deceit, theft and using false weights, and finally neglect of word and sacrament.²⁰⁹ It is difficult to conclude very much from these, except that commonplace lists can be nuanced according to the concerns of those drawing them up.

All call for repentance, but again like Dekker, few give indication of what action they expect. One of the most striking images comes from William Crashaw’s idea of ‘Sovereign Medicine’ against the plague: ‘Take thy Heart ... and every morning wash it, in the teares of true repentance and hearty sorrow for thy sinnes.’²¹⁰ Alec Ryrie says such emotional engagement seems to be expected in the true repentance of a seventeenth century Protestant (and not just of Puritans). Since the plague texts leave it to be assumed what ‘repentance’ meant, it is worth following Ryrie’s research to understand how the word would have been heard. He speaks of a penitential tide sweeping across the religious culture of the time. Repentance was so dominant, the word ‘mourning’ came to apply primarily to lamenting one’s sins, and

²⁰⁶ Quoted in M. Morrissey, *Politics and Paul’s Cross Sermons, 1558-1642* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) pp. 82-3

²⁰⁷ Sermon in January, 1626, quoted in Scott, *Donne*, p.160

²⁰⁸ Crashaw, *London’s Lamentation*, Images 10-11

²⁰⁹ *Certaine Prayers...* Images 11-12

²¹⁰ Crashaw, *London’s Lamentation*, Image 24

only secondarily to lamenting the dead. Repentance filled many books of prayers, forty five out of seventy one in Nicholas Themythorpe's book of prayer and thanksgiving. Self-examination and self-condemnation were seen in judicial terms, as you came into the divine judgement hall not to excuse yourself but as your own accuser, so as to plead for mercy from the Judge. Above all it mattered to repent with feeling rather than formality, not relying on the General Confession but systematically making an inventory of sins. According to Thomas Cartwright, practices like fasting, austere living, or clothing yourself in dust and ashes could have value both in humbling yourself and in averting worse judgement, but none of this could atone for sin. All agreed repentance meant actions, not words, but because of human propensity for repeating past mistakes, true repentance was marked by a sincere and earnest intent to moral reform, whether or not that intention was fulfilled. In that sense, true repentance is what you feel.²¹¹

The official Elizabethan homily on repentance and reconciliation states: 'They are greatly deceived that preach repentance without Christ, and teach the simple and ignorant that it comfortheth only in the works of men. [However]... without Christ they be all vain and unprofitable.'²¹² None of the writings studied here make reference to turning to Christ as part of repentance. The writers no doubt would all claim this was implied without being spelled out, but as Ian Green has pointed out, chapbooks aimed at the popular market characteristically say much about God but little about Christ, and tend to present God as an Old Testament patriarch, providentially punishing wrong-doers and rewarding the righteous. Green claims that, by contrast, the clergy produced orthodox, Christo-centric theology. This may be true of the longer works he focuses on, but does not appear to be represented amongst these plague pamphlets and tracts, not even in the official *Exhortation* to be read on fast days across the land.²¹³

The issues so far discussed have produced near unanimity amongst the chosen sample of plague writers. Dekker was saying the same as everyone else. More controversial was the issue of secondary causes (or 'means') by which the plague was spread. The authorities did not intend there to be a free debate on the issue, threatening disbarment from preaching and imprisonment for any who declare 'it is a vain thing to forbear to resort to the Infected, or that it is not charitable to forbid the

²¹¹ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 49-59

²¹² *Certain Sermons* (1562) p. 337

²¹³ Green, *Print and Protestantism*, pp. 557-9, 565

same, pretending that no person shall die but at their time prefixed.²¹⁴ The following year the threatened sanctions were raised to whipping or hanging, although there is no evidence these were ever implemented.²¹⁵

The 1603 *Exhortation* spells out the authorities' thinking about and commitment to the policy of isolating the sick.²¹⁶ It is striking that the first half follows the familiar line on sin, judgement and repentance: this is the safe ground, that can be counted upon to be shared with those listening. Then comes the change of gear with the demand that 'naturall and ordinary meanes [are] not to be neglected.' Such means are provided by God and include physicians and medicine. Contagion is a more significant cause than 'any general infection of the aire'. Any who deny that plague is contagious are guilty of 'grosse conceit'. Raising the emotional intensity, the *Exhortation* continues: 'If wee run desperately and disorderly into all places, and amongst all persons and pretend our faith and trust is in Gods providence, saying: If he will saue me, he wil saue me: and if I die, I die. This is not faith in God, but a grosse, ignorant and foole-hardy pretence and presumption.'²¹⁷

Whether by conviction or compulsion, preachers and pamphleteers were quick to reaffirm the official line. Whereas fifty years early John Hooper had merely said natural remedies were not sufficient, in 1603 strong language was used against those who 'neglect lawful means God provides' but rather 'doe wilfully, rashly and foolishly runne themselves into all kinde of dangers, saying, God is able to preserve them if it please him.'²¹⁸ The ostensible purpose of James Balmford's *Dialogue* was to refute the 'bloudie error, which denieth the Pestilence to be contagious.'²¹⁹ To act without concern for your own safety, he says repeatedly, is the sin of presumption (although you should not have such inordinate fear of the plague as to stay away from church).²²⁰ John Donne, reflecting on his illness in 1623 notes how the sick are 'made instruments and pestiducts to the infection of others'.²²¹ William Crashaw's 1625 *London's Lamentation* is a form of prayer to be used at home in place of fast-days gatherings. He reiterates the earlier points, that it is to tempt God to place oneself in needless danger or to reject 'good helps of nature and Art, which

²¹⁴ *ORDERS thought meete* Image 7

²¹⁵ Slack, *Plague*, p. 211

²¹⁶ Slack, *Plague*, p. 230

²¹⁷ *Certaine prayers....* Images 12, 13 & 14

²¹⁸ Hooper, *An Homilie* Image 10; I.W., *A Brief Treatise of the Plague* (1603) STC (2nd ed.) / 24905.7

²¹⁹ Balmford, *Dialogue*, Image 3

²²⁰ Balmford, *Dialogue*, Images 26, 29, 35, 41 & 45

²²¹ Scott, *Donne*, p. 64

God's good Providence affords', and that the opinions are 'wicked' that suggest plague is not infectious and that there is no point in avoiding infected persons or places because none can die that love and fear the Lord. All this is to tempt God.²²²

Paul Slack notes one or two dissenting voices from the official line. *A Potion for the Heart-Plague* (1603) contained a diatribe against 'atheistical politicians'. 'Maverick' Henoeh Clapham's dismissal of all natural explanations, which he said came from 'atheists, mere naturians and other ignorant persons,' earned him eighteen months in gaol, before he printed a retraction.²²³ The available text of Clapham's *Epistle* (from the Bodleian Library) does not appear as strident as Slack suggests, and contains acknowledgement of both natural and supernatural causes. Whilst Clapham's stress is undoubtedly on 'sinne as the provoking cause' he accepts we should use natural means (justifying it by the example of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38) and not tempt God. This text is acknowledged as 'reprinted with some additions', so it may represent an amended form after Clapham's imprisonment, although it retains 1603 as the date.²²⁴ As it stands, it seems remarkably similar in attitude and opinion to Dekker's *Newes from Graues-end*, in which he rejected all other explanations of plague than God's judgement and all other remedies than repentance. There is no evidence of Dekker being castigated for expressing these views.

Once 'means' are accepted as legitimate for avoiding the plague without denying God's sovereignty, fleeing the city is also legitimated. Dekker's indictment of 'run-aways' proves he disagrees. Hooper acknowledged that Galen recommended flight as the most effective remedy, but set against it (in a manner Dekker would pick up) the certainty that God's judgment will always catch up with you.²²⁵ Clapham was characteristically vehement about the pointlessness of running away: 'It is not a change of place but a change of life that must help us.'²²⁶ *The run-aways answer* asserts 'It is fit to Fly, and withstand the Pestiferous Enemy by all faire and lawfull meanes' but seems more concerned with parodying Dekker's style than giving credible reasoning, feebly suggesting first that since the leaders departed, others are bound to follow, and then that tarrying at home would simply leave more mouths to feed.²²⁷ Defence of flight is found in longer works by those with theological

²²² Crashaw, *London's Lamentation*, Images 28-30

²²³ Slack, *Plague*, pp. 233-234

²²⁴ Clapham, *Epistle*, Images 1, 3 & 5

²²⁵ Hooper, *Homilye*, Image 9

²²⁶ Clapham, *Epistle*, Image 10

²²⁷ B.V. *Run-awaies answer*, Images 4, 5 & 12

education. Perhaps they demonstrated more nuanced theological understanding or more likely felt themselves under criticism as they headed out of the city, along with others of their class. They may have been reminded of Hooper's blunt words: 'if [clergy] forsake theyr people ... they be hirelings and no Pastours'.²²⁸ Robert Jenison said it was 'lawfull, yea necessary' to flee the plague where a man's calling allowed it, and then distinguished between the calling of a lecturer (like himself) and those with pastoral charge, and said for himself he listened to the advice of others (presumably to leave).²²⁹ James Balmford's *Dialogue* was apparently written in response to criticism of his own failure to visit the sick. He argued that it was right for magistrates and ministers to remain resident (although physicians, as not holding a public stipend, were not so required and the rich were free to go) but that a minister's first obligation was to preach the gospel rather than to visit the sick, so 'the lesser has to give way to the greater.' The obligation might be met more beneficially by providing for their needs.²³⁰

The issue of flight provided a context for some writers to begin to wrestle with the tension within the doctrine of primary and secondary causation. No one questioned that, if you thought flight enabled you to escape God's judgement, you were grossly in error, but they questioned whether by remaining behind you could be guilty of presumption. If you had responsibilities, did faithfully remaining at your post exempt you from catching the plague? Psalm 91 was frequently quoted with its promises of protection from 'the noisome pestilence' for those who 'abide under the shadow of the Almighty'. Crashaw argued that some of those who died of the plague, whilst remaining at their station and doing their duty in good conscience taking heed not to tempt God, 'wanted not Grace, nor Faith for Salvation' but perhaps lost faith that God would preserve them. On the other hand, many 'whose Callings and Duties inevitably bound them within reach of such dangers', staying strong in faith, discovered God would not fail in his promise.²³¹

Balmford is alone amongst these writers to employ the phrase 'special providence' to refer to an individual escaping the plague. He argues that it is important not to diminish the danger of the pestilence itself, so that God should be glorified for granting such special providence. But, for all this, 'Be the plague neuer so

²²⁸ Hooper, *Homily*, Image 10

²²⁹ Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor's Summer*, p. 59. Wrightson calls this a 'masterpiece of self-serving cant.'

²³⁰ Balmford, *Dialogue*, Images 16, 20, 43 & 44; Patrick Wallis, 'Plagues, Morality and the Place of Medicine in Early Modern England,' *English Historical Review*, Vol CXXI, No. 490 (2006), pp. 5-6, 9

²³¹ Crashaw, *London's Lamentation*, Images 30-31

contagious in its owne nature, none can be smitten with it, but those, whom God hath specially appointed.’ It raises the question of why ‘the godly’ contract the plague and die. He says a godly man may fail to receive the promise of preservation through a failure of faith when all around are weeping and wailing, but this does not deny his faith for salvation. Alternatively, his death may bring glory to God: otherwise the godly might say they were delivered through their own righteousness.²³²

Dekker’s comments on the effects on the poor of the policies of confinement and of the rich fleeing the capital seem to be unusual. Certainly the authorities seem to have been sensitive to this criticism, the Plague Orders ending with the instruction that, ‘according to Christian charity, no persons of the meanest degree shall be left without succour and reliefe,’ and the *Exhortation* concludes with a (brief) appeal to the rich to ‘show fellow feeling to their brethrens necessitie’.²³³ The bills of mortality were, by the early seventeenth century, making it plain that the poorest parishes were suffering the worst of the plague.²³⁴ Nevertheless, James Balmford had little sympathy with the objection that preventing the poorer sort from seeking relief was ‘extreme cruelty’, merely saying there are plenty who are not so badly off who complain in the same way.²³⁵ Equally, the writers under consideration do not seem to have treated the poor as scape-goats or to be at fault themselves, a standard response to plague elsewhere, according to Brian Pullen.²³⁶ One who did was Benjamin Spencer, who also blamed the rich for abandoning them, but said of the poor themselves, ‘I know that they are ... ill-livers, intemperate of tongue, and appetite... [and] all this conspires for their ruine ... preparing their bodies for other diseases as well as the Plague.’²³⁷

Plague pamphlets, tracts and sermons followed a narrow range of themes and reflected consistency of attitude, which was providentialist, even if the word ‘providence’ was rarely used in this context. The writers continually battered away with the interpretation of plague as God’s judgement for sin, and the resultant remedy being repentance. The full force of the judgement of God was only mitigated by repentance of sin, and repentance was a serious, personal and emotive matter.

²³² Balmford, *Dialogue*, Images 30-37

²³³ *ORDERS thought meete...* Image 7; *Certaine prayers...* Image 15

²³⁴ Slack, *Plague*, p. 240

²³⁵ Balmford, *Dialogue*, Images 11-12

²³⁶ Brian Pullen, ‘Plague and Perception of the Poor in Early Modern Italy’ in T. Ranger and P. Slack, *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) pp. 107-9

²³⁷ Clark, *Elizabethan Pamphlets*, p. 117

Alongside this overwhelming and apparently well-accepted message was another, involving the encouragement of 'natural means' against the plague, government policy of isolation, and individual flight from the city. Most were happy to set the two alongside each other; only a few began to explore the tensions between them (and then sometimes only prompted by the need to defend their own non-heroic actions). Thomas Dekker's views sit within this climate of opinion. He repeated, sometimes in highly expressive ways, old and traditional messages. He gave no credence to the use of 'means'. His playful verse style may have kept him out of the trouble in which the more confrontational Henoeh Clapham found himself. His attacks on flight to escape the plague were not unique to himself, but clearly touched a sensitive area for some, as did his comments on abandonment of the poor. Whether any of this can be considered as indicative of the Protestantism of the early seventeenth century England will be addressed in the final section.

5. Conclusion

Like many big ideas, the doctrine of providence tends to fragment at the edges when placed under pressure. Today such fragmentation occurs out of the difficulty of explaining how such suffering can be ascribed to the intentions of a loving and all-powerful God. In the seventeenth century the fragmentation points were different, but nevertheless became visible when under the extreme pressure represented by plague epidemics.

The two historians whose work inspired this study, Alexandra Walsham and Peter Lake, are in agreement that providence was an essential ingredient of cheap print, arguing the doctrine acted as a kind of leavening agent in the post-Reformation dough. However, their emphases are different. Walsham stresses consensus, that providentialism was a ‘source of social solidarity’ providing continuity from the pre-Reformation world, and being shared across social, economic and religious groups. Lake talks of ‘a shared frontier’ where disparate views were promoted amongst the ‘bricolage ... of contested and partial transactions and exchanges’.²³⁸ As we finally consider the value of Thomas Dekker’s plague pamphlets for the inferences that may be drawn about for contemporary views of providence, we do so bearing in mind the two alternative views offered by Walsham and Lake.

In analysing Thomas Dekker’s pamphlets, we have seen that the very qualities for which he has been written off as a ‘hack’ are the ones that make his work most valuable. A hack needed an ear for opinions on the street and an instinct for what was likely to sell. As Dekker explored a range of genres, he found ways of communicating ideas and experiences his readership would recognise. It is reasonable to think his descriptions of the plague-ridden city and his comments about people’s behaviour in it would have elicited a nod of recognition, a knowing half smile, or a grunt of shared outrage (or their seventeenth century equivalents). He adopted and adapted themes familiar to his readership, and engaged with contemporary debate over fleeing from the city. Much of his writing is derivative and formulaic, but even where this is the case it would reflect existing attitudes and reinforce them through the forcefulness of his words. Research into literacy at the time suggests that large parts of London’s population would have been able to read such literature, and the price was not exorbitant. The pamphlets were probably not

²³⁸ Walsham, *Providence*, p. 166; Lake, *Lewd Hat*, p. 318. The difference between the two of them is emphasised more by Lake than by Walsham

targeted at the lowest orders of society (the ‘errand stinkards’ he mockingly refers to in *The Wonderfull Yeare*), but perhaps towards the craftsmen and tradesmen who made up so much of London’s population and who had at least some limited education. There is enough here to suggest the pamphlets may be indicative of attitudes that were widespread at the time, and can contribute something to the debate between agreed and contested views of providence in the early seventeenth century.

It is abundantly clear that the plague writings of Thomas Dekker and everyone else studied here came from a providentialist mind-set. That God was sovereign and active in the world, and that plague was part of his activity, appears unquestioned. However the actual word ‘providence’ was not used to explain the occurrence of plague, which does raise the question of whether historians should do so today. ‘Providence’ is used in a more benign way, at times explaining how plague was escaped or avoided. This also gives the best interpretation of Dekker’s slightly ambiguous reference in *London Looke Backe* to ‘arming providence’.²³⁹ The wisdom that comes from looking back and repenting gives a weapon to enable providence to keep you safe.

There is equally abundant evidence that ascribing plague to God’s judgement was deeply engrained in the culture. Such phrases as ‘God’s tokens’, meaning plague symptoms, betray deep seated assumptions about where plague came from. These assumptions were not new to the Reformation period or any different from their contemporaries in Catholic countries. Nevertheless, as Walsham has argued, the fact that these views were continually re-enforced within a Protestant context and using Protestant language potentially had the effect of further anchoring and entrenching Reformation belief.²⁴⁰

Dekker’s particular contributions to this ‘anchoring and entrenching’ are his memorable descriptions of the plague besieged city and his stories illustrating the inescapability of plague-delivered judgement. His themes were not remotely original and are mirrored in plague accounts from Catholic Europe which equally spoke of the breakdown of social obligations (such as Miquel Paret’s on the Barcelona epidemic of 1651 and in Giovanni Dragoni’s of Monte Lupe, Tuscany, in 1630-1).²⁴¹ Nevertheless, the power of Dekker’s imagery, combined with his dark humour and

²³⁹ *LLB*, Image 2

²⁴⁰ Walsham, *Providence*, p.166

²⁴¹ Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor’s Summer*, p. 8

bitter irony, written about and for post-Reformation London, sought to capture the imagination. Once captive, the imagination is then enlisted to accept an interpretation of plague expressed Protestant providentialist terms. It becomes part of the Protestant story and the nation's identity.

Equally uncontroversial (in the terms of the seventeenth century) was Dekker's appeal to repentance as the only answer. No one disagreed that repentance was the right response, but writers with more theological training held back from implying repentance ended plague with mechanical efficacy. Dekker was typical of a moralising pamphleteer in compromising true Calvinist providentialism with this form of Pelagianism. The need to be blunt enough to 'rouse the sluggish conscience' began this process of doctrinal fragmentation. Nevertheless, repentance itself was a message hammered home in sermons, tracts and prayer books. Again, it was a message upon which pre-Reformation or Counter-Reformation Catholics would have agreed. However, the practice implied by the word 'repentance' would be quite different, with public forms (outside of fast-days) removed, and the priority now placed on self-examination, remorse, and changed behaviour. That Dekker and other popular writers saw no need to spell out what they had in mind is suggestive that these ideas had already taken hold strongly. How Protestants were supposed to repent was well-known.

A number of other intertwined ideas periodically raise their heads but are never coherently explained. Judgement was presented as on city and nation rather than the individual. A readership schooled in the idea of the world as 'the theatre of God's judgements' would be inclined to interpret such visitations didactically. The question was what should be learnt. The coincidence of plague with the accessions of both James I and Charles I meant writers like Dekker had to be especially careful never imply the Sovereign was to blame, hence his emphasis that 'they were too good for us.'²⁴² He also had to be careful not to fall foul of the Plague Orders: he never directly speaks of the policies of isolation and confinement, but criticises individuals for shirking their responsibilities to the needy. It is possible his condemnation of 'run-aways' is a cypher for attacking the authorities' policies, as both were 'means' of avoiding infection. Dekker's critique of the social fragmentation and collapse of neighbourly obligations reflects the theme of a nation under judgement. At the same time the sense of England as God's special nation (so-called 'Anglican providence')

²⁴² RR Image 6

is not completely buried. The nation is chastised but not abandoned by God. There is hope it will emerge 'new and purified.'²⁴³ The very way these arguments are not spelled out suggests they are part of the common currency of ideas.

'Special providence' did not belong to consensus. None of the writers reviewed here show any idea of the plague being targeted by God onto individuals, but some writers (such as Balmford and Crashaw) did look to special providence by which individuals would be protected. For Balmford, these were the godly, so here we begin to see what Lake calls 'the world-view of the perfect Protestants' and their distinct form of providentialism following the lines of William Perkins. Crashaw applies the doctrine to those with civic and pastoral responsibilities, suggesting that God's providence would protect those who expose themselves to infection in order to fulfil their duties. In both Balmford's *Dialogue* and Crashaw's *Lamentation*, these ideas are left until near the end and do not read as if they are trying to convince a sceptical audience about an unlikely doctrine.²⁴⁴ Although Dekker gave no apparent support for 'special providence', his criticism of 'run-aways' as lacking both charity and faith may imply that special divine protection would have been available had they faithfully remained.

Fatalism was an attitude targeted from all sides. Calvin abhorred people's reliance on fortune. Dekker derided those who spoke of providence but meant luck. The *Exhortation* launched a tirade against those who acted as if catching the plague was a matter of random chance. The printed word appears univocal on the matter (except perhaps Henoeh Clapham). Unless this is mere tilting at windmills, we may presume many people held to this alternative form of providentialism. This could be the evidence Keith Thomas alludes to in arguing that society was deeply divided between a Calvinist elite and a superstitious populous who had little interest in official religion. The problem is that there is no evidence that identifies the targets of this anti-fatalist attack, or indicates how numerous they were, or whether they represented a single tier of society or a cross-section of all social groups. If there were a divergence of views over providence, this is probably the greatest. That it may have had a social basis can neither be proved nor disproved.

The doctrine of providence showed certain fragmentation when it came to be applied in the context of plague. If all was a result of God's sovereign hand, fatalism was not

²⁴³ NG Image 14

²⁴⁴ Balmford, *Dialogue*, Images 36-7; Crashaw, *Lamentation*, Image 31. Of course it could be that they leave controversial matters until having reassured people by rehearsing the common ground

an illogical response. The figures, locations and dates for plague deaths published in bills of mortality may have fascinated many, but failed to demonstrate that any practical course of action other than flight could keep you safe from the plague. However the authorities wanted action, trying to impose a policy of isolation and to make people believe they could avoid spreading infection. The moralising pamphleteers wanted action in the form of repentance, whether they preached this message out of theological conviction or simply to follow convention. The ‘means’ argument of the government more accurately represented the teaching of Calvin who clearly distinguished between primary and secondary causation, than did the moralists’ insistence that repentance could automatically end the plague. It is, however, highly likely the latter was closer to popular opinion. Despite this fragmentation at the edges, the broader picture is one of a consensus that unifies the early seventeenth century with the pre-Reformation world. The plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker reflect a deeply engrained view of the world that recognises God’s sovereignty as overwhelming and God’s judgement as visible in the world. The only hope was that through repentance judgement would be lifted by the arming of God’s providence.

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