

“Quack conjurers” and Snake Oil: Drawing Parallels Between Defoe’s *Plague Year* and Public Exploitation During The Age of COVID-19.

In a modern context, the circumstances of the Black Plague and the widespread suffering the disease wrought on Europe may seem easily dismissed as the tragic result of a time suffering from the limitations of rudimentary understandings of science and medicine. However, in an age deeply destabilized by the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the horrors of misinformation and widespread public hysteria make the memoir perhaps more uncomfortably familiar than ever for readers and historians alike. For this reason, one can see how a text that is nearly three hundred years old, having first been published in 1722, still offers valuable insight into our current circumstances, as we navigate a disease still in the early stages of being fully understood.

Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* was written as a personal account of one individual’s experiences living in London in 1665, during one of the most intense and devastating breakouts of the Black Plague. As a historical resource, the book provides incredible insights into the tumultuous upheaval the disease inflicted upon the city, an epidemic which in that year alone is estimated to have resulted in nearly 70,000 documented deaths in London, with estimations for more precise fatalities thought to have exceeded 100,000 (The National Archives). As the disease decimated the urban population, Londoners were quickly overwhelmed by fear and confusion, leading them to desperately seek even the most obscure and bizarre treatments as a means of disease prevention and personal preservation. This led, in many ways, to a perfect storm, allowing for the rise of exploitation of the poor and ignorant at the hands of unsavory conmen and women who viewed the epidemic as an opportunity to prey on this terror and profit immensely. Defoe recalls this phenomena with a sense of both disgust at the blatant greed of these charlatans, and pity for those who suffered as a result of the situation, stating,

These terrors and apprehensions of the people led them into a thousand weak, foolish, and wicked things, which they wanted not a sort of people really wicked to encourage them to: and this was running about to fortune- tellers, cunning-men, and astrologers, to know their fortune... and this folly presently made the town

swarm with a wicked generation of pretenders to magic, to the black art as they called it (Defoe).

The author's skepticism regarding the occult and mystical is perhaps expected of readers today, when such interests typically remain reserved for entertainment purposes, rather than being considered as genuine alternatives of medicine. However, at a time when science, medicine, and technology still had a long way to go, and a lack of real understanding of how the malignant illness was transmitted provided little recourse for safety, the tendency for people to gravitate towards the untraditional (and at times seemingly unbelievable) becomes much more understandable. This demonstrates how the public's need for answers and consolation played into the hands of those who were ultimately out for their own gain. In this sense, the plague presented a new market for scamming, theft, and deceit. Unsurprisingly, this desperation only created more problems for the unprepared public. The author recalls the tendency for this distress to lead people to "storing themselves with such multitudes of pills, potions, and preservatives, as they were called, that they not only spent their money but even poisoned themselves beforehand for fear of the poisoned and of the infection, and prepared their bodies for the plague, instead of preserving them against it" (Defoe).

From a contemporary perspective, it may be easy to dismiss the willingness of the public to embrace these self-professed panaceas as a symptom of antiquated naivety. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding was not unique to the 1600's, as our current pandemic has also experienced waves of false information, fraudulent pharmaceuticals advertised as cures, and debunked conspiracy theories decrying expert opinion. In a few short months, we have found ourselves struggling to navigate constantly changing discussions concerning how we can protect ourselves as well as how we can recover from COVID-19 if it is contracted. While much of this shifting dialogue can be attributed to the fact that medical experts are still in the process of learning how we can best respond to the illness, efforts have also been complicated by the rise of deceptive advertising that has lauded false and ineffective treatment, ranging from miracle vitamin supplements, to herbal oils and teas promising immunity to those who purchase them. In response to this issue, the FDA has mobilized efforts to hold companies who unlawfully market their products against the illness accountable, while also making the true nature of these treatments available to the public so that they may be avoided (Machado).

Despite this, flawed understandings persist. The World Health Organization currently lists over twenty-eight debunked misconceptions on their website about coronavirus, including the belief that the illness is caused by exposure to 5G mobile networks, that it can be effectively treated through the injection of disinfectant chemicals, as well as the notion that immediate relief can be gained through the consumption of garlic (World Health Organization). As a resource, the organization aims to demystify these rumors by putting them to rest, but this is no easy task as many cling to these hoaxes as legitimate sources of understanding. In April of 2020, it was clear that this wave of misinformation had permeated even the highest position in our government, as President Trump suggested in a formal press conference that ultraviolet light and the injection of disinfectant, both of which have since been proven ineffective and dangerous, would be “a great thing to look at” in combatting COVID-19 (BBC).

One thing that we can learn from *A Journal of the Plague Year* is the importance of learning from the mistakes of the past. Widespread public misunderstanding of the Black Plague had disastrous consequences, leading to the deaths of many ill-formed, innocent people. Lamenting on the carnage brought by a reliance on ineffectual methods of treatment, Defoe states, “How the poor people found the insufficiency of those things, and how many of them afterwards were carried away in the dead-carts and thrown into the common graves of every parish” (Defoe). Today, we are much more fortunate than those living during the Great Plague of London. More comprehensive understandings of medicine have revolutionized how we approach illness compared to the days of the 17th century. In addition to this, the internet has made information more accessible than ever. As we continue the fight against COVID-19, we must remember to put our faith in reliable sources, as doing so will protect us from the predation of deception and ignorance.

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