

The Significance of the Bills of Mortality in Understanding Response to the Plagues in Early Seventeenth-Century London

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Beginning in 1603, Bills of Mortality were first documented as a way to record deaths and burials regarding the plagues terrorizing London.¹ The Seventeenth-century was a historically momentous period in early modern London, England, as plagues brought great death and despair for the English people. In this period, the Bills of Mortality became pivotal documents as they held great significance in understanding life and plague narratives at the time, as “[t]he basic function of the bills was to localize mortality by parish.”² The information provided through said documents allows researchers to analyze and acquire knowledge on social and political contexts, and the significance of religion and documentation for events at the time. The aim of this essay is to thoroughly examine the profound role the bills played in understanding key aspects of English life, and the immediate and gradual impacts of the plague in early modern England. A vital facet of the bill(s) was the information it provided on the societal and political life of different classes at the time of an outbreak.

Throughout its history, London had several plague outbreaks, the most notably violent were the outbreaks in 1603, 1625, 1630, 1636, and 1665.³ The bills documented in these periods highlighted the ways in which individuals coped, as well as the steps taken politically to contain the plague outbreaks. The documents were rich in information, especially regarding the responses from the wealthy to the poor, and how the different classes fared. It was a common practice for wealthy mothers to send their babies to be wet nursed in an attempt to save them, as well as the wealthy to flee London or congested

¹ Spencer J. Weinreich, “Sums Theological: Doing Theology with the London Bills of Mortality, 1603-1666,” in *Church History* 90, no.4 (2022): 800.

² Weinreich, “Sums Theological,” 807.

³ Viviana Comensoli, ““This Straunge Newes”: Plague Writing, Print Culture, and the Invention of News in Thomas Dekker’s *The Wonderfull Yeare* (1603),” in *News in Early Modern Europe* (2014): 200.

spots that were prone to disease transmission.⁴ Records also reveal that central parishes where individuals would quarantine, fared better after 1603 than extra-mural ones, indicating that the rich typically fared better than the poor.⁵ Subsequently, it becomes clear that when the wealthy had fled London for regions that were less densely populated, the middling sort and the poor were left with less work.⁶ This posed an issue for them as the lower classes relied on work to support themselves and their families, and showed that “[s]ickness and death aside, [the] plague’s most tangible burden was economic... [and that] those who paid most dearly during times of plague were the lower middling sort.”⁷ The Bills of Mortality also touched on the implementation of quarantine on individuals residing in London and its surrounding areas, and how it was something the general public struggled with.

The mortality rates that the bills showed throughout parishes allowed political forces to use them as evidence and reinforcement when implementing measures aimed to help the containment of the disease. There was huge potential for “the ammunition the bills might supply against political and confessional opponents.”⁸ Quarantine in early modern England was something that had been a relatively new strategy, even in 1636, and it had been something that created discourse on its effectiveness and if the measures were warranted or not.⁹ There had been arguments, by using the numbers shown in the mortality bills, that the close confinement of individuals in quarantine “increased the death toll during outbreaks,” when the goal of them was to reduce risk of infecting those who were not ill.¹⁰ It became clear to many living at the time that “the social and psychological chaos that plague inaugurates is as

⁴ Charles M. Evans, and Angela E. Evans, “Plague – a disease of children and servants? A study of the parish records of St Peter upon Cornhill, London from 1580 to 1605,” in *Continuity and Change* 34 no. 2 (2019): 192.

⁵ Neil Cummins, and others, “Living standards and plague in London, 1560-1665,” in *The Economic History Review* 69, no. 1 (2015): 4.

⁶ Christopher J. Duncan, and Susan Scott, “Plagues in London in the 17th century,” *Biology of Plagues Evidence from Historical Populations* (2009): 215.

⁷ Kira L. S. Newman, “Shutt Up: Bubonic Plague and Quarantine in Early Modern England,” in *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2012): 816.

⁸ Weinreich, “Sums Theological,” 811.

⁹ Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 809.

¹⁰ Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 812.

much a direct product of the disease as is the somatic chaos of buboes, fevers, lesions, and death.”¹¹ The quarantine of that period went further than simply instructing individuals to stay in their homes if they or their loved ones were infected. There were documents that had demanded there be two buildings, that were architecturally sound in their construction, to be used for the sick, and for those who had been exposed to the virus but were generally healthy.¹² Although good in thought, quarantine had proved to be a difficult time for several individuals. As previously stated, the lower classes relied on their professions to obtain a living wage, but “[q]uarantine took twice the usual toll on vendors of perishable goods,” and so many felt it was an act against the lower classes.¹³ Throughout this time of isolation, many also saw it as a punishment as the “plague disproportionately affected people of the middling or lower socioeconomic status, who lacked the financial resources to flee.”¹⁴ Many individuals also argued that if the plague had been a punishment by God, then there should be no government intervention as it was seen as a way of the government taking control, instead of letting God have control.¹⁵ This ideology reflects the religious significance the mortality bills played as a response to the plague.

Plague outbreaks in the early seventeenth-century had been perceived by some as a divine intervention by God. Many saw it as a time for religious renewal with some even theorizing that a lack of preaching and thanking God was a potential cause for the outbreaks; that a lack of preaching equated to illness, whereas periods of preaching resulted in fewer infections.¹⁶ The mortality numbers within the bills acted as a support for the religious narratives of the time. The “sermons, homilies, tracts, poems, and pamphlets published during or just after the major epidemics of the seventeenth century,”

¹¹ Ian Munro, “The City and Its Double: Plague Time in Early Modern London,” in *English Literary Renaissance* 30, no. 2 (2000): 246.

¹² Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 813.

¹³ Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 824.

¹⁴ Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 826.

¹⁵ Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 825.

¹⁶ Weinreich, “Sums Theological,” 814.

incorporated the statistical numbers of the bills as a way to “rebuke sin, encourage reformation, and score polemical points.”¹⁷ Individuals living in and around London, and in quarantine conditions, sought solace in the religious narratives being provided to them as a result of being scared by the statistics in the bills. Many were pushed into moral reflections that urged repentance and shared a common base of exploiting the Bills of Mortality for their own religious purposes.¹⁸

The records of the Bills of Mortality also played a role in religious narrative and teachings. They situated themselves in the crevices of religion and in what people wanted others to hear, even going as far to say that “[p]lague victims were similarly described as being struck by God’s whip.”¹⁹ The messages given to individuals were about a dire need for spiritual reformation and was a punishment caused by “mass immorality and corruption among London’s inhabitants.”²⁰ Individuals relied on religion as an answer for the horrid events occurring, and in a way relied on religious reform to counteract the plague. Using the Bills of Mortality in religious narratives offered a deeper insight into the roles they played in shaping said narratives and how residents of London coped with the events of the time.

With the introduction of the Bills of Mortality in 1603, there was also a significant impact on record keeping. The consistency throughout the record keeping allowed for future analysis of the numerical data, which in turn allowed for understanding outbreaks, tracing patterns, and the nature of the plague itself. The bills and research alike allowed for conclusions like “[t]he epidemic [being] more deadly in suburbs than the city itself,” as well as the identification of trends such as “nurses and infants

¹⁷ Weinreich, “Sums Theological,” 802.

¹⁸ Weinreich, “Sums Theological,” 822.

¹⁹ Claire Turner, “Intersensory Experiences of the Plague in Seventeenth-Century London,” in *Social History of Medicine* 36, no. 2 (2023): 45.

²⁰ Turner, “Intersensory Experiences,” 45.

[being] believed to face a higher risk of infection.”²¹ Furthermore, the documentation of the mortality and burial rates in parishes throughout London since 1603 allowed for studies in future plague outbreaks (like that in 1636), and “examining the government system of plague control and regulation in early modern England.”²² The use of textual records and evidence on the plague outbreaks allowed for understanding the implications of the disease in early modern England and allowed for the analysis of the disease’s characteristics in both an urban and city setting.

The Bills of Mortality played a significant role in understanding plague narratives and life in early Seventeenth-century London. These records are deeply embedded in the religious societal aspects of the society at the time, and they allow for a deeper understanding of the plague’s impact. Not only do the bills pertain to the religious ideologies and narratives, they allowed for the analysis of the plague’s impact on important political decisions and in understanding the response of society and London’s inhabitants. The numerical data in the bills transcends simple statistics and numbers, it plunges into the motivations behind historical decisions and the ideologies of the time. Documents like the Bills of Mortality are integral in modern day understanding of past and present events, and they serve as a witness to events in London’s history.

²¹ Duncan, “Plagues in London,” 194; Turner, “Intersensory Experiences,” 56.

²² Newman, “Plague and Quarantine,” 810.

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