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## The Honest Whore, the Lanthorne and the Belman: Thomas Dekker's disease discrimination

Dekker's Pox Pamphlets and joint authorship of the two Honest Whore plays with Thomas Middleton can give us insight into one potential catalyst of the joining of discriminatory attitudes towards foreign bodies and disease. The chosen extracts from the pamphlets *The belman of London*, *Lanthorne and candle-light* and *The Honest Whore* plays are the focus of this first chapter as they are situated in the aftermath of the bubonic plague in 1603, stemming from an environment keenly aware of disease and fearfulness of the infectiousness of one's neighbour and therefore offering an early modern response to venereal disease from a moralistic perspective. In the case of Dekker and his puritanical values, the anger that comes with living in the plague's aftermath manifests itself in a hatred of prostitution, those who engaged in it and those who he deemed responsible for the spread of plague's sister disease, the French pox – grande verole, or syphilis.

In the case of *The belman of London*, published between 1608-9, pox is used to highlight hypocrisy in the upper echelons of society, "bringing to light the most notorious Villanies that are now practised in the Kingdome" in an attempt to "awaken" the "eies" of his readers to the "common abuses" presented to them daily. Dekker's narrative voice for revealing this hypocrisy is that of the belman himself who, Dekker proposes, represents the "Owle (who is the Embleme of wisdome)," and serves the moralistic purpose of shedding light on the "broode of mischiefe, which is ingendered in the wombe of darknesse" that is London. An understanding of Dekker's intentions in the publication of the pamphlet, can be established through his clarification that, "at no mans bosome doe I particularly strike, but onely at the body of Vice in Generall." This suggests that where vice was concerned (here, vice equals disease) moral discrimination for once had no class-based differentiation, although of course, the spread of disease in the slums of the working class would have been comparatively higher. Equally, the tone of his writing pushes forward a belief in the need for the city's collective resilience against the instigators of this vice: "Be you therefore as second aduenturers, and furnish men armed with Iustice" for the benefit of "the Republik wherein you liue." (4) While not exactly pandering towards xenophobia, Dekker's invoking of the people of London against disease forms an 'us' and 'them' divide – one which, as we shall see, will equally be revealed as a national one.

The medical writing presented by Robert Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy' speaks of the physical effects on the body and the relationship between excessive emotion and aggressive, physical, outward responses such as disease. (T. Roberts?) These excessive emotions, or perturbations, discussed in the same breath as Vice, have been shown to lead directly to

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physical manifestations of the perturbations through (among other physical responses, but in this case most importantly), disease. As we consider to study Dekker, this model of ‘excessive emotion = Vice = outwardly manifested disease’, will be employed, so that Dekker’s discussion of Vice is thought of alongside issues of health, disease and plague.

As we have seen so far, Dekker’s pamphlets urged readers to not only be wary of, but to actively arm themselves against Vice, a creator of disease. Returning now to Dekker’s second instalment of the belman’s travels, we are provided with further evidence pertaining to Vice and infection. “Lanthorne and candle-light”, which continues to follow the belman as he denounces the evil of Vice and offers insight into the “strange Villanies” (2) Dekker professes to have witnessed in the year of 1609. The ninth chapter, which bears the title “The infection of the Suburbes”, specifically considers plague through the whore-houses of the suburbs which are, importantly, noted as separate to the city itself: “the Citty being not able to hold him within the freedome, because he was a Foreiner, the gates were sette wide open for him to passe through, & into the Suburbes hee went.” (32) Dekker’s choice to make the belman a foreigner was likely a deliberate reference to the French pox. The doors to the suburbs, known universally as a hotbed of disease, were opened wide for the foreigner, knowing that his position as an (geographically speaking, probably French) outsider brought with it preconceptions of an already pox-ridden body. While Dekker’s pamphlet discusses the bubonic plague of 1603 and France was conversely famous for its Pox, the two differing diseases may seem thematically incompatible. However, we can see from another of Dekker’s pamphlets that he links the two. In “Graues-ende” Dekker sardonically notes that the “painted harlots [...] smile at [the French] plague” because they know that their:

[...] deaths come o’re from France:

Tis not their season now to die,

Two gnawing poisons cannot lie,

In one corrupted flesh together. ( )

The invocation of French versus English diseases alongside the “gnawing poison” of disease affects the physical body of the individual shows us a link between a literary representation of disease and an engagement with ideas of national identity. The pox of France and the plague of England are simultaneously identical in their commonality of complete debilitation of the infected and markedly different through their incompatibility. The French pox may have travelled across the channel, but the poisons from the two nations cannot lie in “one corrupted flesh together”. Dekker offers a national ownership of the disease ravaging London that demands engagement with disease as a national unit rather than on an individual level. The prostitutes gain knowledge

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of their own mortality because they understand and differentiate between what infection means to them and their sense of geographical togetherness, in opposition to what it means to those infected by the French pox. This insistence, while likely written for comical purposes of comparison by Dekker, perhaps also begins to offer us some insight into the responses he was attempting to invoke in his audiences. Returning to “The infection of the Suburbes”, we can explore further Dekker’s wish for, or existing understanding of a nationally collective response to disease further. Following a lengthy description of “What armor a harlot weares comming out of the Suburbes to besiege the Citty within the wals” (33), Dekker (the belman) berates those in positions of political and social power for not curbing the spreading infectiousness of prostitution by lamenting “... how art thou made a blinde Asse? because thou hast but one eye to see withall: Be not so guld, bee not so dull in vnderstanding” and concludes that the guardians of the city do not sufficiently care for its inhabitants:

You Guardians ouer so great a Princesse as the eld|est daughter of King Brutus: you twice twelue fathers and gouernours ouer the Noblest Cittie, why are you so careful to plant Trees to beautifie your outward walks, yet suffer the goodliest garden (within) to be ouer-run with stincking wéedes? You are the proining kniues that should loppe off such idle, such vnprofitable and such de|stroying branches from the Uine: The beames of your Authoritie should purge the ayre of such infection: your breath of Iustice should scatter those foggy vapors, and driue them out of your gates as cha.e tossed abroad by the windes. (34)

Dekker offers a tangible response to begin to rectify the spread of disease in London, placing the need for institutional response to the matter of prostitution, a known key factor in the spread of disease, in the hands of the “guardians” and “gouernours” of the city. To Dekker, a city overgrown by “stincking weedes” becomes a metaphor for the rapid spread of infection, to be pruned back by the powers of the institution. He presents a fight between “authority” and “infection”, compelling the able to chase away the miasma that hangs over the city with its “breath of Iustice” and scatter the disease to the winds. As in “Graues-ende”, the power of the collective body is called upon to fight against the infection, with the hyperbole of “the beames of Authoritie” and Dekker’s imperative language demanding togetherness in the face of the venereal disease. What’s more, the collective body is specifically made one of British unity, through Dekker’s invocation of King Brutus, the legendary descendant of Trojan hero Aeneas from medieval British history, hailed as the founder and first king of Britain.

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