International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Studies
Volume 10 Issue 02 ǁ February 2025
ISSN: 2582-1601
www.ijahss.com

History and Fiction:Plague and Bills of Mortality in *A Journal of the Plague Year*

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Abstract : *The visitation of the plague in 1665 caused great terrors in England, and the delineation of London as a dead city under the attack of pestilence is a familiar topic to contemporary Britons. Daniel Defoe, in addition to the delineation of historical facts, provides the reader with an interpretation of social and humane significance in A Journal of the Plague Year. However, the way how Defoe manipulates historical documents in his narrative should not be underestimated. Defoe deliberately interweaves truth and fiction in his work as he attempts to convey his concerns for society, rather than the entertainment that the genre would bring to its reader. This study aims to interpret A Journal of the Plague Year from a historical perspective. Based on the records during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, this paper aims to investigate the historical narratives of plague in Defoe. The study covers such important issues as plague, bills of mortality as well as the interrelationship between history and fiction in Defoe's depiction of the epidemic disease.*

Keywords: *plague, bills of mortality, history, fiction, historical fiction*

I. INTRODUCTION

Opening with the statement of the imminent crisis, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) attempts to explore the historical facts of the plague that occurred during 1664 and 1665. Through the observation of H.F., the saddler who insists on staying in London during the visitation, Defoe depicts, analyzes, and criticizes miscellaneous phenomena in London. H.F.'s ambition to record history is rather explicit, and Defoe endeavors to present "the persistence and survival of the state of nature in even the most structured civil societies" (Degabriele 1). The credibility and truthfulness of *Journal* has achieved consensus among critics, and the book is unanimously regarded as historical fiction, in which historical events and fictitious episodes are intertwined.

Defoe's meticulous use of historical materials is manifest. F. Bastian enumerates the sources that Defoe adopted for historical information in the *Journal*. He pleads for Defoe: "It is clear that . . . many of its facts . . . prove to be neither recklessly invented, nor simply borrowed from previously published work" (156). Maximillian Novak suggests that Defoe professes a "commitment to truth and morality" ("Theory of Fiction" 662), observing the *Journal* as a structured fiction. As Novak says, "[T]he *Journal* . . . is, in spite of considerable historical accuracy, fictional in its narrative viewpoint and overall structure" ("Disordered City" 243). In addition, Everett Zimmerman also proposes similar viewpoint, regarding that Defoe's narration "follows historical sources rather scrupulously" (417). John Richetti, on the other hand, emphasizes more of the *Journal*'s historicity and comments it as "a thickly factual, even grossly truthful, book" (*Defoe's Narratives* 240) that is "too firmly based in fact to be regarded as part of his fiction" (*Daniel Defoe* 119); hence the book is referred as a kind of "pseudo-history." Similarly, as G. A. Starr proposes, "The apparatus of history . . . serves to reinforce the author's opinions by conferring on them the status of experienced verities. At the same time, it lends them greater urgency by shifting the context of enquiry from the novel's realm of hypothesis to history's domain of actuality" (54); whereas Robert Mayer indicates that Defoe employs fiction in history, conceiving of fiction as "a legitimate strategy in historical representation" (532), and hence regards it as a "pseudomorph" (542).

II. HISTORICITY AND FICTIONALITY

It is widely agreed that Defoe's *Journal* is a "non-fictional fiction" (Ellis 79), or, "factual fictions" (G. Gabrielle Starr 500). The borderline between historicity and fictionality is therefore obscure, and such ambiguity allows the reader of *Journal* to have more flexibility in interpretation. As Diana Pérez García proposes:

> The very fact that Defoe has chosen to title his forged account "A" *Journal*, as opposed to "The" *Journal*, is an indication of his awareness of the narrative's status as a document amongst many possible others. All this helps to explain H.F.'s anxiety to report incidents as faithfully as possible . . . [and] he is producing a document left open for the reader to verify. (85)

However, the anxiety does not make Defoe lay undue emphases either to authentic documents or imaginary happenings, and he seems to enjoy oscillating between the boundaries of fact and fiction instead.

In the *Review* of September 13, 1711, Defoe says, "He that can think on the calamities of his fellow creatures without any concern ought to be very sure the turn shall never be his own. . . . To move your thoughts a little in this case [of the plague at Elseneur], and prepare you in some measure for that which I have long believed, and do still, will be your own case ere long . . ." (218-19). William L. Payne annotates this journal to be "the threat of plague Defoe exploited eleven years later in his *Journal of the Plague Year*" (*Review* 218). Defoe's *Journal* is more like an admonition to warn his contemporary fellows as well as the later generations of the befalling of unpredictable calamities, and through verisimilar depictions of the hellish scenes and sufferings of people, he tries to offer the reader a lesson through the eyewitness of the plague. Proclaiming himself "a Citizen who continued all the while in London," H.F. accounts:

> This was a very terrible and melancholy thing to see…, it filled me with very serious thoughts of the misery that was coming upon the city, and the unhappy condition of those that would be left in it. (8)
>
> London might well be said to be all in tears . . . but the voice of mourning was truly heard in the streets. . . . Tears and lamentations were seen almost in every house . . . for toward the latter end men's heart were hardened, and death was so always before their eyes. . . . (16)

These terrifying and melancholic scenes would not be unfamiliar to Defoe's eighteenth-century contemporaries. In recording the plague history, Gideon Harvey (1636/7-1702), the medical practitioner physician of Charles II, states, "Terror and apprehension led people into a thousand weak, foolish, and wicked things . . . this was, running about to fortune-tellers, cunning men and astrologers, to have their narrative cast, and to know their fortunes" (300), whereas in the *Journal*, Defoe proposes the same about the chaotic conditions in London (24).

In addition, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), who had experienced the pestilence of 1665 and whose diary is regarded as one of the authentic sources among others that Defoe refers to, states in the diary dated August 16, 1665: "It was dark before I could get home; and so land at church-yard stairs, where . . . I met a dead Corps, of the plague, in the narrow ally. . . ." About two weeks later, Pepys observes, "Every day sadder and sadder news of its increase. In the City died this week 7496; and all of them, 6102 of the plague. But it is feared that the true number of the dead this week is near 10000…." The numbers of death are the most immediate materials that reflect the infection. In reality, the bills of mortality function as an indication of the development of the visitation, while in the *Journal*, the bills are the bases with which the narration moves on. As Richelle Munkhoff states, "[T]he bills give identifiable shape to an event which is disturbingly amorphous…" (8). Through the numbers of death in the bills, the threat caused by the plague permeates and becomes concrete. The bills should have offered authentic information as they were conducted by the local power, and yet the process of collecting the raw data is rather blemished and controversial. The ambiguous nature of the bills provides Defoe, or, H.F. with a lieu to construct a verisimilar world in which history and facts are intertwined and therefore allow the reader to have multiple interpretations of this historical event.

III. BILLS OF MORTALITY

In the beginning of the *Journal*, H.F. states, "We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumors and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men. . ." (3). The juxtaposition of "rumors" and "reports" suggests the ambiguity of oral communication. Since information is spread "by word of mouth only" (3) and the *Journal* is partly structured on the basis of miscellaneous "heard of" (46) stories,

H.F. in effect attempts to announce the obscure nature of *Journal*, and the boundary between fact and fiction is therefore further blurred.

H.F.'s observations of the plague develop with the progression of the Bills of Mortality during December 1664 and September 1665. Bills of Mortality, which indicate a sense of impending danger, are printed documents dispersed regularly by the official clerks to announce the numbers of death and the causes of the dead in the parishes. Through the bills, the plague transforms from a pathological cognition into a numeric understanding, and the announcement of the bills becomes a means to communicate information. As Munkhoff suggests, "Bills of mortality gave the general populace a means to keep abreast of potential threats to their local communities. . ." (6). The bills as collective evidence relentlessly reflect the development of the infection, as the outcome of the pestilence turns out to be a dichotomy—survival or death. Aside from rumors and "Innumerable dismal stories" (67), the bills, which function as a warning to alert the people of the would-be circumstances, become authentic documents that people could rely on and is thus vital both in institutional operation and individual health management.

The statistic data imply a definite result of the rage of the plague, and yet the fidelity of the sources of information and the accuracy of the bills is contentious even to the narrator. H.F. points out, "The weekly bills are the only evidence on the other side, and those bills were not of credit enough, at least with me, to support any hypothesis or determine a question . . . for it was our received opinion at that time, and I believe . . . that the fraud lay in the parish officers, searchers, and persons appointed to give account of the dead. . ." (175). He aligns the bills, which are presumably to be valid and authoritative, with rumors, as both are "received opinions" and hence "not of credit enough" (175). The reliability of the bills mainly consists in their sources—information and materials collected by the executors assigned by the parishes, and yet H.F. denounces local authorities and imputes the blame to "parish officers, searchers, and persons appointed" (175) in particular.

According to the "Orders" of the Lord Mayor quoted in the *Journal*, the women searchers, who are appointed to "make due search and true report to the utmost of their knowledge," should be "of honest reputation, and of the best sort as can be got in this kind" (35). The searchers played a crucial part in the regulation of public health in England for more than 250 years. However, the dispatch of women searchers had long been controversial. Poor, old, and illiterate in most cases, the women searchers are inexpert individuals; meanwhile, the symptoms of the plague sometimes might be indiscernible, which would be another difficulty for the searchers to implement their duties with their limited knowledge and experiences. Moreover, as the searchers report to the official clerks, the truthfulness of oral transmission of messages would be another concern. As Munkhoff proposes, "The contradiction between the vagaries of common understanding and the supposed tautness of authoritative knowledge is embodied in the very figure of the searcher who is caught in a double bind: hired to be a reader of signs, while dangerous, are apparently unambiguous, she is nevertheless continually under suspicion" (9-10). Though questionable as they were, the women searchers' reports, compared to rumors and invented stories, were still the more trustful sources of information.

Yet in the *Journal*, the importance of the searchers seems to be deliberately disregarded. The accusation of their "fraud" is the only account of the women searchers in the *Journal*. As Paula McDowell indicates that the "repeated erasures of 'Women-Searchers'" further blur the reliability of the Bills; therefore, the bills become "inaccurate printed information" (95, 96). Incorrect interpretations of the infection and erroneous reports of the number of death would result in unreliable bills. Consequently, the bills are intrinsically dubious, just as Defoe observes that "those bills were not of credit enough" (175). Though disputable, the Bills are still important documents providing the information of plagues in early modern England, and H.F.'s narration progresses with the updated death numbers in the bills each week.

Intertwined with the changing numbers in the weekly bills, the incidents that H.F. depicts are his observations during the visitation. On the one hand, he would make comments and propose possible causes of the changes in the bills. For instance, after enumerating the bills during December 20th, 1664 and January 27th, 1665, H.F. attempts to relate the reducing numbers of the dead to the cold weather with good reasons while criticizing the unduly optimistic attitude of the people, which is an indication to warn the people of the possible visitation in the coming days. On the other hand, he would analyze and then propose his own opinions in the light of certain unreasonable figures in the bills. H.F. claims, "I am far from allowing them to be able to give anything of a full account" (100). He indicates the absurdity of the dramatic augmentation of the number of death of the abortive and still-born when the populace in town massively decreases. Then he concludes, "Our

bills of mortality could give but little light in this. . .” (102). H.F.’s query of the credibility of the bills of mortality is explicit as it shows in the way H.F. questions the reliability of the seemingly true “fact” that the bills convey with definite figures; meanwhile, its ambiguity lies in his indirect accusation of the unreliability of the bills that he leaves the judgment to the reader, instead of making an unequivocal interpretation.

Ironically, as H.F. accuses of the truthfulness of the “stories” and regards them as rumors, he himself is also the person who tells the stories happening during the plague period. As Degabriele suggests, “H.F. withdraws, then, from his authoritative position as eyewitness and from his narrating ‘I’ in order to narrate what he has heard” (12). Indeed, H.F. voluntarily forfeits his authoritative status as a reporter. While claiming that “Innumerable dismal stories” (67) would make the situation worse, H.F., regarding himself as an observer of the plague, also tries to tell the stories, he has seen during the visitation as the manifestation of his empirical observations.

To H.F., the significance of fact is more important than numbers. Even claiming himself an observer of the plague, H.F., just like those citizens who have experienced the disaster, could simply accounts each event with his memories. However, the authenticity of memories is questionable, as H.F. indicates that exactness is hard to be achieved “in such a time of dreadful distress” (85). The definition of truthfulness, therefore, becomes ambiguous in H.F. If numeric data could not guarantee the credibility of the bills, arithmetical calculation would lose its importance in the interpretation of the plague, not to mention the possible flaw of human memories.

As John Richetti observes, “H.F.’s narrative is the unfolding of a mystery and its reduction to facts—statistics, measurements, causes and effects” (*Defoe’s Narratives* 236). Based on the factual happenings in history, the narrator constructs a verisimilar world, in which records, reports, orders, and systems are examined. Near the end of his narration, H.F. purports, “A plague is a formidable enemy, and is armed with terrors that everyman is not sufficiently forfeited to resist or prepared to stand the shock against” (201). Apparently, through the voice of the narrator, Defoe the author addresses not only to his contemporary reader, and he indeed has the ambition to present the historical truth along with imaginary stories in this “non-fictional fiction.”

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