

sionally frustrated—albeit with an ineffable sense of having absorbed something significant.

Ernest Gilman. *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xi + 256 pp. index. bibl. \$35.00. Review by JOHN GIBBS.

Bubonic plague's endemicity in early modern England placed London at perpetual risk of epidemic. In the seventeenth century, the plague appeared annually but with minimal impact in the City and its liberties. However, in 1603, 1625 and 1665, London's Weekly Bill of Mortality did record the minimum of forty plague deaths the city government required to recognize plague as an epidemic. Epidemics generated a tremendous amount of print matter—broadsides, religious and medical tracts, satire and philosophy—all a part of the plague discourse ostensibly designed to help its residents recognize, interpret and survive the epidemic. In *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, Ernest Gilman examines the matrix of such texts actively engaged in constructing the dominant ideology of plague in seventeenth-century England before adroitly engaging modern trauma theory to re-imagine familiar works by Ben Jonson, John Donne, Samuel Pepys and Daniel Defoe as texts negotiating an unremitting cultural anxiety over the threat of epidemic.

Consequent to Reformation iconoclasm, early modern England was deprived of the popular rituals that reinforced plague's identity as a universal punishment, the severity and duration of which could be influenced by communal religious observation. Plague epidemic, Gilman contends, was thereafter an event bereft of ritual and defined almost exclusively by language. The cultural certainty and consolation provided by traditional religious ideology was replaced with a stark, analytical theodicy allied with the pragmatic and sometimes contradictory interpretations of an urban epidemic offered by the nascent medical establishment. The combined religious and medical plague discourse sanctioned by the State replaced coherency with enigma. "It would be increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible," observes Gilman, "for most people to reconcile logically or theologically the

conflicting views of the plague as moral and infectious agent" (152). In the literary texts Gilman offers as evidence of this condition, plague constitutes the principle, repressed center around which these works are organized.

Gilman begins his analysis of literary texts with an extraordinary reading of Ben Jonson's poem "On My First Sonne," written in the epidemic year of 1603 when his seven-year-old son, Benjamin, died, as the book ably argues, of the plague. Flight from London during epidemic was a common, though controversial practice, frequently and popularly addressed in seventeenth-century plague tracts. The poet struggles with his grief and guilt of being safely beyond the reach of the disease (and his family) in Huntingdonshire at the home of Sir Robert Cotton when the child died. More significant to the reading of this poem is Gilman's presentation of Jonson's struggle with plague epidemic bereft of meaning, for there appears no adequate justification for the child's death contained in any of the formulations of epidemic as God's punishment for (whose?) sin. The three works by Donne that Gilman arranges to explain the prelate's (ultimate) textual production of plague show, not unexpectedly, no similar expression of confusion or doubt: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), the 1625 edition of the earlier *Anniversaries* of 1611 and 1612 and Donne's sole plague sermon ("arguably the finest of that dismal genre" [192]), delivered at St. Dunstan's on 15 January 1626. The first, Dr. Donne's meditation on illness and death, was composed following his recovery from "the spotted fever" not long before the epidemic of 1625. The second, an unauthorized edition appearing during the epidemic, was published by the opportunistic printer William Stansby, obviously to capitalize on the brisk market for advice, understanding and solace such texts might provide. The sermon was delivered as the epidemic waned in mid winter. Though the homily is the only text that is an immediate and obvious engagement of a specific epidemic experience, trauma theory provides a lexicon whereby we may discern a plague text in its silence and by omission. Broadly defined, "social trauma can result from a prolonged 'period of severe attenuation and erosion as well as from a sudden flash of fear'" (56). In this calculus, this sampling of Donne's works, intellectually provocative but ultimately consoling textual constructions of sickness, morbidity and death, exemplify

“an age and its literary production marked by the threat and reality of plague” (37).

Gilman continues his analysis of previously unrecovered literary negotiations of plague’s depredations with shorter readings of Pepys’s *Diary* and Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague* that reveal “an engagement with infectious disease that hovers between “the providential and the quotidian” (217). Indeed, Pepys’s *Diary* records his robust pursuit of both business and pleasure throughout the epidemic year of 1665. Tenuously yet intriguingly, Gilman interprets how Pepys, surrounded by the horrors of this experience, successfully represses such sustained trauma; we find it unconsciously subsumed and obliquely expressed in such subjects as his recounting of an erotic dream (“the best that ever was dreamed” [219]) and his delight with his increase in worth through successful business engagements. In the *Journal of the Plague Year* (1721), written for a reading public anxious over a contemporary epidemic in Marsailles, the record of Defoe’s narrator’s personal participation in London’s 1665 epidemic is neither private nor repressed, and, asserts Gilman, the stark sights and sounds of epidemic here illustrate the epistemological shift evident in the plague writing of the period that is part of a larger movement in the sciences, signaling “a changing relationship between metaphysics and epistemology” (234). The harrowing spectacle of the plague pit and the incessant wails of the dying and the grief-stricken, challenge the reader’s default explanation for the overwhelming suffering in plague time as providence—harder still to reconcile than it had been in 1603. What Defoe seems to be repressing in *Journal of the Plague Year* is, finally, unbelief.

Plague Writing in Early Modern England provides a lucid, learned and sophisticated answer to crucial and (thus far) ever-frustrating questions concerning the culture’s long-term relation to the plague phenomenon and the apparent and puzzling dearth of literary plague. “We have always known that plague was there,” Gilman states, “relentlessly taking its toll on England for more than three hundred years” (38). Now we have a much better idea of how to answer these questions.