

Main File: Ep5 - Plague, Contagion and Contingency

Kirsty Rolfe: Plague is a real sort of moral challenge in a lot of ways. It's a challenge to ideas of morality, and a lot of writers try to work out how they can make this something that fits with belief.

Andrew: I mean, *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* is also, is also about laughing in the face of terrible tragedy and terrible kind of outbreak of plague. What else can you do? You've got no way of understanding it apart from just accepting that your number might come up anytime, really.

Archie Cornish: Welcome back to *The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe*, where we're exploring the underbelly of Elizabeth England through the life and writings of the author Thomas Nashe.

I'm Archie Cornish.

Archie Cornish: In this episode, we're going to be thinking about plague—in particular, the outbreak in the early 1590s which profoundly affected England's cultural life. It left a lasting impression on Nashe; he refers to the plague throughout his work and is always thinking through plague's implications.

I'm joined by Kirsty Rolfe of the University of Leiden and Andrew Hadfield of the University of Sussex to discuss not only theories of early modern plague's origin and transmission—but also how it was experienced: the way it took on the status of an unfolding news story and forced people to contemplate the precariously fragile status of their own lives.

In the third episode of this series, we heard from Vanessa Harding, a historian of early modern London. Vanessa reminded us that, in Elizabethan England, death really was all around:

Vanessa Harding: An intrinsic problem with death, which is very frequent and common at this time—literally thousands of people die in London—is that the bodies have to be disposed of. And that's actually a problem on a number of different levels, both a sort of psychological one, but also a very practical one. So the 1590s are when we are seeing a lot of city parishes, a lot of churches in the city centre and outside, really struggling with the problem that they don't have enough space to bury everybody.

Archie Cornish: There were many ways to die before the advent of modern medicine. Many of the illnesses that seem innocuous to us could prove lethal. And in the sixteenth century all across Europe people had started to die in large numbers of syphilis.

So when, in 1592, an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in London, it plunged into crisis a city already struggling to bury its dead. Nobody was measuring 'excess deaths,' in the manner we all recently became familiar with, but at least fifteen thousand died in London before the end of 1593. Where had the illness come from? Kirsty Rolfe explains the dominant theories.

Kirsty Rolfe: Obviously, you have this idea of miasma, this idea of bad air that spreads. And that's one of the ways that people understand the way that plague hits the city because the people that it hits the most are the lower classes who are living in the places with the stinkiest air. So one of the ways that people try to deal with the plague is to have non-stinky air and to get away from say, bogs and so forth. So there is this association between sort of lower-class spaces and getting the plague.

But of course, kind of the reason why people are getting the plague in lower-class spaces is that they're living closer together and they're less able to separate and to and to kind of engage in various hygiene activities. So in terms of how people understand how the plague arrives, there is this idea of the bad air, but there's also a very clear understanding that it's infectious.

I mean, they don't know that its rats cause you know, bubonic plague is born in fleas that are born on rats and that's how you get it. But they have this understanding that it comes from somewhere and that it can be passed between people. There's a real association between plague and the import of cloth.

So this is something that people get very sort of scared about. If there is a plague on the continent, and especially if it's in somewhere like Antwerp, where a lot of cloth is moving between there and London, there is this fear that the bales of cloth will kind of carry the plague over, which of course does bear some relation to how we now understand it.

Archie Cornish: Our language of germs and viruses is relatively new; it didn't exist in early modern Europe. But in the 1540s the Italian physician and polymath Girolamo Fracastoro had written a treatise called 'On Contagion' in which he posited the existence of tiny 'seeds of disease' that could pass from one body to another, igniting the disease like a spark transferring a flame. And as we heard, Londoners had an intuitive sense that plague could be transmitted.

So how did this all affect Nashe? He'd arrived in London a few years earlier and was looking to establish himself as a writer. The outbreak of plague came at a bad time for him. The authorities decided to close the theatres, which was bad news culturally and for writers trying to make money. The theatres were the most vibrant and lucrative site of literary production. Wealthier Londoners left the city to escape infection. Luckily for Nashe, as Kirsty Rolfe explains, the book trade remained:

Kirsty Rolfe: Something that does carry on happening through plague time is print. It's partly because stationers can't really leave the city. A lot of them are not particularly wealthy. And also you'd have to transport all of your kind of infrastructure, right? Like you've got a lot of heavy stuff. And it's also because there's money to be made in plague time. There's a lot of official plague publications, so Bills of Mortality, which become more of a thing later on, but are sort of, you know, being produced early. And also, there is a market for popular medical tracts, works of religious devotion, and so forth.

So a lot of stationers, even quite wealthy ones, tend to stay in the city and to print stuff. And so for a lot of writers, this provides an opportunity to get stuff into press and also to make a living when maybe your usual sources of living are not currently possible.

Archie Cornish: You might have heard of one of these writers, a certain William Shakespeare. In 1592, like Nashe, Shakespeare was at the beginning of his literary career. During the closure of the playhouses he wrote two long, skillful narrative poems. One of them is *Venus and Adonis*, the story of the goddess of love falling in love with the most beautiful man in the world – in very physical terms.

Excerpt of Venus and Adonis Read by Actor:

By this the love-sick queen began to sweat,
For where they lay the shadow had forsook them,
And Titan, tired in the mid-day heat,
With burning eye did hotly overlook them;
Wishing Adonis had his team to guide,
So he were like him and by Venus' side.

And now Adonis, with a lazy spright,
And with a heavy, dark, disliking eye,
His louring brows o'erwhelming his fair sight,
Like misty vapours when they blot the sky,
Souring his cheeks cries 'Fie, no more of love!

The sun doth burn my face: I must remove.'

Archie Cornish: Shakespeare's poem takes place in a world of intense heat and humid 'misty vapours'. Maybe the young poet was enduring a hot summer; maybe he was using his imagination. But I wonder whether those feverish images of sweaty weariness might have something to do with the illness gripping the nation.

Like Shakespeare, Nashe also found a way to write about the plague, and a place for what he'd written. Andrew Hadfield tells us about his one surviving play, entitled...

Andrew Hadfield: *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, which is the play that's performed in 1592.

Archie Cornish: It's not I know what you're thinking - the theatres were closed. But Nashe had snuck out.

Andrew Hadfield: The play is performed not in the Playhouse in London, but in the Archbishop's Palace in Croydon. Croydon then is a village some way away from London. It was owned by the Archbishops of Canterbury, and they sold it off, I think in the 18th century when it became really part of London overspill.

But at this point, it was an enclave, a place where the Archbishop would retreat in the summer often to escape the plague.

It's not published until 1600. Unusual for Nashe's text, he doesn't have the same control over it, so it might be, might have had all sorts of additions, but one of the things about *Summer's Last Will and Testament* is that in some ways it seems like a very kind of throwaway sort of pageant where Summer is dying and has to face the fact that he's going to be replaced by autumn and winter, and it's the cycle of the seasons and such as the way life goes really. But it's also about the horrible plague raging outside the playhouse.

So there's then this play about Summer's last will, which is all about the plague. And one of the paradoxes is that it entertains is that in the very dog days of summer, the very kind of really hot parts of the year in August, that's when Summer is at his most powerful. But it's when he becomes the sort of bringer of death as much as the warm life-giving force that makes everything grow. So Summer's death is bound up with the death of all the people that's happening through his summery rays helping to spread the plague around.

And it's got one of the most famous poems in Nashe, you know, the litany in time of plague. You know, "I am sick and I must die, Lord have mercy on us," which is the refrain. And that was—as most people point out—"Lord have mercy on us" was what was written on the houses where there was plague.

They were boarded up and you wrote, "Lord, have mercy on us." Because there was nothing else you could do. You just had to board up the house, imprison the people within and just hope that maybe it kind of passed and some of them would get out alive.

Archie Cornish: One figure in Nashe's play who's quite keen to shut himself up in a kind of self-imposed lockdown is the figure of Christmas. He's meant to stand for public generosity and good cheer. But now he wants all the good things of his table for himself, and is scared of opening up his house. Here he is:

Excerpt from Summer's Last Will and Testament Read by Actor: I should kill an ox, and have some such fellow as Milo to come and eat it up at a mouthful, or like the Sybarites do nothing all one year but bid guests against the next year. The scraping of trenchers you think would put a man to no charges. It is not a hundred pound a year would serve the scullions in dish-clouts.

My house stands upon vaults; it will fall if it be overladen with a multitude. Besides, have you never read of a city that was undermined and destroyed by moles? So, say I keep hospitality and a whole fair of beggars bid me to dinner every day, what with making legs when they thank me at their going away, and settling their wallets handsomely on their backs, they would shake as many lice on the ground as were able to undermine my house, and undo me utterly.

Archie Cornish: It was very common towards the end of the sixteenth century to complain of a decline in traditional English hospitality, or liberality as Elizabethans often called it. But it strikes me as interesting that in the text where he most directly engages with the 1592 plague, Nashe doesn't go after those who mix too freely, but those who are too closed and selfish.

Plenty of other voices, swirling around Nashe in London's literary scene, were linking the plague with moral looseness, people being free and easy. As Kirsty Rolfe explained, notions of miasma – bad air – and infection by proximity, meant that plague could easily be associated with the poor, and their supposed vices.

Kirsty Rolfe: There are particular sins that are often associated with the poor, simply in the way that people tend to associate him with the poor anyway in this period. But there are sins, particularly things like swearing, you know, kind of swearing things, swearing oaths that you

don't go through with, swearing oaths that are like sinful in some way. That's really something that gets picked up on in sort of popular plague print as a cause for this terrible outbreak.

Archie Cornish: Yet plague also poses a challenge to this predictable, snobbish kind of moralising.

Kirsty Rolfe: There are certain people who are dying and there are certain people who are saved. What's kind of difficult, like observably, for people to do is to say, well, obviously it is the sinful people who are dying.

So you get a lot in plague texts of writers going, Okay, this doesn't make sense in that way because we can see these people who are swearing and fornicating and so forth and they're fine. They're having a lovely time and they are using this time of plague to get even worse. whereas all these Godly people are dying.

So there is this tension around, okay, why are these people dying and why are these other people not? And a lot of writers try to sort of smooth that out by saying, this is this national punishment. And actually like, God is sort of selecting various people in order to send a message to the nation rather than to say this person did some fornication and so I'm going to strike them with lightning.

Archie Cornish: The plague, then, was the fault of the nation as a whole. Its capacity to be transmitted even to those who hadn't obviously done much wrong gave writers freedom to interpret it how they liked.

One respect in which Nashe is consistent in his writing—and there aren't many—is his diagnoses of what's really wrong with English society: powerful people becoming too closed off, too proud, too greedy, too jealous, unwilling to let their capital circulate healthily.

They might look like they're being prudently cautious in the face of plague, but really they're presiding over a society which is cold and selfish – and for that sin, paradoxically, God is using plague to punish the nation.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Nashe is that buried under all the satire, the snarling sentences of an angry young man, is a longing for community.

Kirsty Rolfe: It does seem to be a bit of a thread through his career that he is interested in community and very critical of people who do not act properly within it.

Archie Cornish: One of Nashe's most serious pieces of writing is his pamphlet 'Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem', published towards the end of the epidemic in 1593. Using the persona of Christ lamenting the moral fall of Jerusalem, Nashe analyses what's wrong with the London society he was trying to be a part of. This proud ambitious city is strikingly lonely:

Excerpt from Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem Read by Actor: London, look to ambition, or it will lay thee desolate like Jerusalem. Only the ambitious shaking off the yoke of the Romans was the bane of Jerusalem. The dust in the streets (being come of the same house that we are of, and seeing us so proud and ambitious) thinks with herself, why should not she that is descended as well as we, raise up her plumes as we do.

And that's the reason she borrows the wings of the wind so oft to mount into the air, and many times she dasheth herself in our eyes, as who should say, 'Are you my kinsmen, and will not know me?' O, what is it to be ambitious, when the dust of the street (when it pleaseth her) can be ambitious?

Archie Cornish: Of course, The plague didn't just happen in England. There had been periodic outbreaks over Europe ever since the Black Death of the mid-1300s which killed more than a third of Europe's population. Here's Andrew Hadfield again:

Andrew Hadfield: There's a striking passage in *The Unfortunate Traveller*...

Archie Cornish: (Nashe's work of prose fiction published in 1594.)

Andrew Hadfield: ...where there's these beautiful pleasure gardens full of all sorts of wonderful mechanical delights. And it's full of beautiful senses and it's all about man, you know, getting beyond nature and producing something of perfection that imitates nature and goes beyond it – there's all sorts of jokes about poetry. When this beautiful garden is produced and Wilton, the protagonist, goes there, immediately afterwards there's a terrible plague in Rome. And people die in spectacular ways. And you go from one kind of beautiful sensory overload where your vision is enchanted by wonderful mechanical things—there's wonderful smells and everything in the garden— to this horrific kind of charnel house of a city where everybody dies and nobody can stop anybody dying.

There's a horrible description of a woman dying in a sentence where she gives her master some soup and while he's eating the soup, she actually dies standing up. There's a kind of gothic horror to this, but Nashe undoubtedly witnessed things that were not that far different.

Archie Cornish: Part of the curiosity of writing and reading about plague was that it was new—an unfolding, ongoing event. As Kirsty Rolfe explains, Elizabethan London was only just beginning to establish news culture:

Kirsty Rolfe: You get a bit of what we might call news texts, so it's a little bit later on where you get a kind of great flood of sort of particularly serialized news. But especially in the 1570s onwards you get these pamphlet accounts of particularly what's happening in France. People are very interested in warfare. So there is this kind of topicality in print.

Archie Cornish: This is also a time of literary communities, of highly social networks of writers who have their own in-jokes and frames of reference. Nashe, of course, was part of them:

Kirsty Rolfe: You also have this discourse emerging where you sort of need to know what's, what's happening in this kind of communicative community, if you like, the, the memes, the jokes, the references in order to understand what's going on in certain texts that really is part of how Nashe's working, I think. One of the things that I found editing him is I was trying to reconstruct in-jokes from the 1590s, and trying to sort of build up: OK, so who is he referring to? Is this somebody they used to go to the pub? Is this a joke that's sort of passing through this community of young men are being reshaped and remade, and that's part of the pleasure is that recognition. And it's very, very hard to reconstruct from the outside, which is very much how memes work, right?

Archie Cornish: Nashe seems more comfortable with memes and in-jokes, the ephemeral here and now, than with pompous attempts to control the future.

Kirsty Rolfe: Thinking about it, it's really interesting how much Nashe mocks prediction. So he's thoroughly, thoroughly interested in prophecies. And prophecies are, of course, thinking about the future, but they're often presented as very new. I mean, usually, they're not. Usually, they are somebody has found a text from the Middle Ages and has edited it to be about next year or whatever. But he's really, really interested in those. He mocks them quite a lot. This idea of being able to predict the future.

Archie Cornish: As we've heard in other episodes, Nashe's principal enemy is Gabriel Harvey, the Cambridge scholar with whom he waged a long war in print. Nashe has never-ending scorn

for Harvey's certainty about things: the present as well as the future. For Nashe, as Andrew Hadfield suggests, the plague is evidence for the fact that the future is really unknowable:

Andrew Hadfield: There's passages in *Christ Tears over Jerusalem* where God appears to be an infinite jester, that there's a joke going on at our expense and we just don't get it. And the first stage in trying to understand this is knowing that you are never quite going to get God's joke, but you've just got to see the absurdity and ridiculousness of human life.

One of the themes of his writings is what do you do about forces that you can't control? How are you actually going to deal with these things? And he's, he's very good on that, on that kind of problem that's something that pervades a lot of the plague writing and a lot of his other writing...this idea that you've just got to accept things and you've got to find a way of accepting it.

There's always these figures that are kind of ineffable if you like. They're beyond any kind of description and they're all powerful. They're dangerous and they reduce people to gamblers. There's a way in which, again, in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Jack Wilton is figured as a kind of ludicrous gambler who's gambling with his own life in going on this travel.

There's all sorts of dangers in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. It's not all about the plague, also about travelling being a dangerous thing going into kind of dangerous parts of Italy where people are likely to do you in. But one of the dangers is, of course, a random disease that you, you can't ever combat.

Archie Cornish: In today's Britain, where life feels ever more precarious, lots of us might feel reduced to gamblers. What Nashe seems to tell us is that we have to find a suitable level of certainty about the world. And we have to be prepared to find meaning outside spaces which are artificially closed off from disorder.

Andrew Hadfield: I think his big thing is, if you want to understand life properly, you've got to have some kind of wit.

You've got to be able to make these connections between the ordinary, the everyday things that sustain you and high-brow ideas. And he's always, he's always looking to make, to make that connection because after all, you know, the fact of plague is a very straightforward one. You wake up one morning and then you die by the evening.

And in such a world, you've, you've got to be prepared to take what the world gives you immediately and make connections between it, between those things and think in a satisfying and interesting way about, about things. And it leads on to religion because of course most people don't expect to be alive very long.

And they expect to have quite a long afterlife. So if you bodge things up in the world you could have a pretty bad afterlife. If you get them really right in your 30, 40 years or whatever, you could have a particularly fabulous time in heaven afterwards.

Archie Cornish: So Nashe distrusts big, totalising systems like prophecies or perfectly structured texts, which pretend to explain everything and try to conceal the essentially unpredictable nature of life. What he does trust is the witty sentence.

Andrew Hadfield: I've always seen his life as one where he is trying to write ever more sophisticated, ever better sentences, particularly trying to produce ever more brilliant works of literature which are clever, witty, startling, strange, provide you with insight.

And I think wit becomes something that encompasses his whole career in lots of ways. And one of the strange things about his career, of course, is that his last two works, *Have with you to Saffron Walden* and *Lenten Stuffe*. I think are in some ways his most sophisticated ones where he's really finally getting into his own particular style.

What he likes to do is to really unsettle a reader to start off in one place. You think he's saying one thing, he then moves another way before moving a different way and then onto something else, and he makes connections that you'd never really thought of, which is why he likes the high and the low-brow stuff.

Archie Cornish: As we record this podcast, we're emerging from a global pandemic that none of us could have predicted. Covid hasn't gone away, of course, and now we live with it, making calculations and risks which suddenly seem everyday. One respect in which our society differs greatly from Nashe's is its attitude to illness and death. But something I find deeply relatable in Nashe is how his experience of plague stimulates his longing for communal experience and reveals the erosion of community by forms of selfishness.

Here's his rival, Thomas Dekker, in a pamphlet called *Work for Armourers*. It was published in 1609, eight years after Nashe's untimely and unexplained death, probably caused by some kind of illness. Its description of plague feels very Nashean.

Excerpt from Work for Armourers Read by Actor: The plague is the only cause that all inhabitants walk up and down like mourners at some great solemn funeral, the City herself being the chief mourner. The poison of this lingering infection strikes so deep into all men's hearts that their cheeks (like cowardly soldiers) have lost their colours, and their eyes (as if they were in debt, and durst not look abroad) do scarce peep out of their heads.

All merry meetings are cut off. All frolic assemblies dissolved. Play-houses stand (like taverns that have cast out their masters), the doors locked up, the flags taken down. Think you to delight yourselves by keeping company with our poets? *Pro Dolor!* Their Muses are more sullen than old monkeys, now that money is not stirring.

Archie Cornish: In the next episode, we'll be thinking about what happens after untimely deaths, and wondering why Nashe's writing is so full of ghosts.

Thanks for listening. I'm Archie Cornish. *The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe* is produced and written by myself, Cathy Shrank, and Kate de Rycker. Editing by Hannah Hethmon of Better Lemon Creative Audio. Readings were by James Tucker.

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