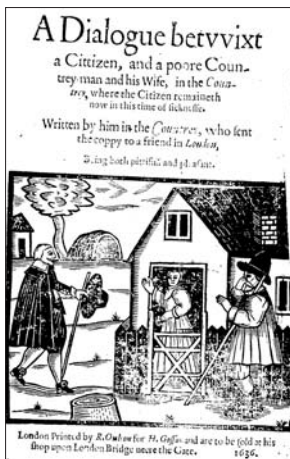


## *A Dialogue betwixt a Cittizen, and a poore Country-man and his Wife* (pub.1636)

Rin KUNIZAKI



Bubonic plague inhabited throughout Europe from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century. Especially, the years of 1592, 1603, 1625, 1630, 1636 and 1665 London were very famous for its chronic prevalence. Infectious diseases were much more common before modern-medical science made its dramatic advances.

The year 1636 witnessed London visited by the great plague. According to a bill of mortality published on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1636, a record of the total of the burials started on 7<sup>th</sup> April, and 928 people were buried of the plague from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> September in the parishes of London, S. Marg., Westminster, Lambeth, and Stepney. This figure was probably inaccurate and much more must have died because this kind of bill was for the Church of England and because it paid no attention to Jews and pagans.

There was a book published in 1636 titled *A Dialogue betwixt a Cittizen, and a poore Country-man and his Wife*. The title page had an impressive woodcut, where a gentleman gave a friendly greeting to a couple in the countryside. This stylish citizen wore black and nice garments and shoes, with a hat and a stick on his hand in case of a long journey. This visual code easily made readers imagine a rich Londoner who ran away from the spread of bubonic plague to seek an asylum. On the other hand, the farmer plainly

put his right hand just on his mouth to stop breathing, and his left hand refused this stranger's approaching.

These three people and their ways of speech significantly represented such typical characters as superstition, misunderstanding and irony which were recognized in the pestilence of the seventeenth century.

## 1. The farmer

In the dialogue, his dialect was extremely emphasized.

*Citizen.* Good Even good frend, inhabite you nere hand?

*Countrey-man.* Chy dwell not varre hence, what would you I pray?

*Cit.* No harme, I would but kindly understand,

Where I might lodge and eate, and frankly pay.

*Count.* Why sir, whence come you? masse chi veare you

From London, where the Plague is parlous hote,

And it be so, no further words but mumme:

No meate, nor drinke, nor lodging will be got.

*Cit.* Als why so? are you a Christian,

And suffer and die for lacke of foode?

I am not sicke beleeve me honest man,

I would not doe thee hurt for any good.

*Count.* Yea zo zay all that know not where to goe,

When as the Plague doth drive them from the Cittie:

But many a one doth worke himself great woe,

With foolish shewing of another pittie.

*Cit.* Why here is gold and silver for thy pains.

Ile richly pay for whatsoever I take.

(Sig. A2<sup>r</sup>, underlines mine)

The farmer pronounced the sound 's' as 'z', and 'th' as 'ch' with his provincial accent. He said to the citizen, "You do not live nearby" and "All that say so do not know where to go". The peculiarity of his grammar and pronunciation

was aimed to distinguish simplicity from civilization.

This farmer honestly showed precaution and refusal against the plague. He hesitated to speak further with this unexpected guest, and he said “I pray stant further, zome will zay, the wind | Will bring it through ones nose into their brain” (A3<sup>o</sup>). His words proved that they recognized the diffusion of the plague caused by aerial infection, not always by contagion. In addition, his testimony that “th’ infection is not so soone found” (A2<sup>o</sup>) also proved that they had a good knowledge of incubation period. He said, moreover, “A Londoner is lookt on like a sprite, | The Citi’s thought a Sepulchre or grave” (A3<sup>o</sup>). His undisguised manner indicated that the damage of London was so tremendous that everyone shared the prejudice and its rumour. The role the farmer played was to testify a possibility that evacuees were common who should expand the damage and destroy a quiet life in the countryside.

## 2. The citizen

Next, the fashionable citizen represented power of money and arrogance. As the plague widespread over London, many Londoners evacuated from the ‘graveyard’ to avoid infection. The aristocracy quickly moved by carriage/ship or on horseback, but most people walked. Those who did not afford nor abandon their jobs still stayed to see the red crosses on doors and deadcart collections. In this story, the citizen who had fortunately fled asked for mercy, specifically food and lodging. However, no one wanted to meet his need because the wayfarer might be thought as a route of infection. In such a difficult situation, a happy vagabond might be allowed to stay in a barn or a stockyard. If a wanderer promised to have a meal on the road outsides, [s]he could be provided with food. Furthermore, people were afraid of staying and standing under the lee of those plague-infected.

Great are the Woes of many flying Citizens, that for want of lodging, are forced to lie in the fields in haycocks, and beds of straw: some in Barnes, some in stables, some in sheepecots, some in hog-houses, yea most in simple cottages, where the fearfull Country people bare hardly come

neare them, but ever keepe upon the winde side, lest this doubted infection should blow upon them.

(Anon. *A Looking-glasse for city and country* ll.44-49)

There was another mysterious superstition. At the beginning of this story, the Londoner offered gold and silver for food. Generally, silver coins were more popular than gold such as 'the rose noble', and people regarded silver as one of the best materials to bring virus disease. They often tried to wash them.

Oh misery, upon misery, that one England man should thus use another and to b[e] so estranged, that they will hardly let a Traveller have a peece of bread, or a cup of small drinke for his money, unlesse he will eate and drinke it by high-way, and after receiving mony they will wash it in a bowle of clean water, for fear the silver should have the Infection.

(*A Looking-glasse for city and country* ll.61-70)

This historical document proved that people were sometimes misled by popular superstitions while they experienced a certain degree of appropriate medical knowledge.

In *A Dialogue betwixt a Cittizen, and a poore Countrey-man*, the Londoner skillfully dispelled any superstitions because he was rich. In the countryside, the farmer and his wife did not place a value on money economy as they lived on subsistence agriculture. They could share food, livestock and clothes with neighbors. However, currency introduced by the traveler could have power to make them obedient and silent. Money sometimes defeated their fear, hesitation and refusal in the pestilence.

Of course, mercy should be shown in difficulties. The Londoner said, "I would but kindly understand, | Where I might lodge and eate, and frankly pay" and "Why here is gold and silver for thy pains, | Ile richly pay for whatsoere I take" (A2). He intentionally or unconsciously added tricky adverbs "frankly" and "richly" in order to up-side-down the positions between the citizen who begged and the farmer who was to provide. The farmer still re-

fused to grant his request. Then, the Londoner suddenly spoke upset with aggravation.

*Cit.* What men are they, that in extremity,  
Will not in conscience Christian pittie shew?

(*A Dialogue betwixt a Cittizen, and a poore Countrey-man and his  
Wife A2*)

*Cit.* [...]

Beleeve me, I am free from infection:

The kind are blessed, and the cruell curst,

Beasts in their kinde will shew their kinde affection. (A2<sup>v</sup>)

The Londoner, as he was not satisfied, blamed the farmer as if he were a merciless pagan. Furthermore, this traveler instantly drew a contrast between human beings and animals, or reason and passion. He criticized the countryman as if he were less kind than beasts. He never stopped putting the farmer into a sense of sin, and offered coins on his palm.

Heeres golde and silver, send for bread and beere,

God give us health, and we will have good cheere. (B1<sup>v</sup>)

The Londoner deliberately insisted as if he were generous. In fact, he prayed for mercy to imply the name of God and haunted the farmer's conscience. As they knew a socially-accepted idea that the plague was a punishment from divine providence, the public moral often preached at sermon could force others to feel tormented by a sense of sin unless they performed pious acts<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Many materials published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries testified that people regarded the plague as a punishment from God. Here is an example from a bill of mortality: "And now in this present visitation which it pleaseth God to strike us | with, there hath died from the 17.of December 1602. to the 14. of July | 1603. the whole number in London and the liberties, 4314. Whereof of | the plague, 3310. The rest are set downe as they have followed weekly." (Henry Chettle)

### 3. The wife

The wife stood for folk medicine and ignorance/blindness. She had a neighbor Jone, who had already died of the plague in this story. Jone had given the wife's daughter a gown and her son a cloak. Fabric was so expensive that the wife did not dispose of them. Instead, she hung the clothes on the pole outside all day to "ayre them well, before they put them on" (A4). In those days, they believed this kind of folk medicine to avoid/cure infectious disease. Probably, they also knew such tiny bloodsucking parasites as fleas<sup>2</sup>. Speaking of folk medicine, there was another interesting story about a father who did not allow his son to enter his house unless the son washed himself. Considering the lifestyle that they rarely bathe themselves, this stern father, who prepared new clothes inside the house, was thoughtful.

I have heard of a yong man of this CItie that in this present sick- | nesse, went to his father in the Country to bee received, who would | give him no entertainment, till hee has washet himselfe starkes naked | in a pond of water, and so without raiment to come naked into his | house, where new cloathes were ready provided for him, and the old | ones cast quite away, this was the fear of a father to his sonne.

*(A Looking-glasse for city and country ll.50-55)*

Surely the wife was good at folk remedies, but, having another look at the picture on the title page, we can see her waving her right hand and welcoming the guest. Of course, she at first gave him a flat refusal: "A Londoner? For Gods sake come away" (A4). However, she eventually offered some pieces of white bread, some cups of beer and ale, and rest in the bed. She said "Weele doe the best we can to make you mery" (B2') and made her daughter blow the fire. What changed her mind was money.

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<sup>2</sup> As John Donne referred in his poem, a flea "suck'd me first, and now sucks thee, / and in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee" (The Flea, Donne 127). It was clear that people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries experienced bloodsucking insects, but there was no positive proof that they did know that fleas should be a cause of the spread of the plague.

*Cit.* No borrowing now, I pray you be content:  
I will supply your want, whatever it be:  
You shall not finde so ill a guest of me,  
Here's forty shillings, which I freely give.

(*A Dialogue betwixt a Cittizen, and a poore Countrey-man and his Wife B1*)

People should help each other in the pestilence, but the forty shillings the Londoner “freely” paid utterly overturned their positions. The wife’s ignorance yielded to power of money and her obedience was exaggerated as an irony. In the end, all characters seemed likely to die of the plague, and she should leave the money behind. This is how rural peace were destroyed and the pestilence widespread.

## Conclusion

This story was a typically-exaggerated cynical allegory. It did not declare the purpose of publication, premitting “To the Reader” or a prologue, and the anonymous literature did not state who should be an ideal and perfect reader. Of course, a calm reader easily understood that this book was not intended for evacuees to learn how to be welcomed. Even though those who read this book might have scorned something unreasonable, they were surely touched with ironical warning. The author’s name was T.B., which was practically anonymous. Anonymity was very convenient to give the disorderly society an enlightening message.

In the dreadful pestilence, money temporarily had great power to make rejection and repugnance mute, but property should become meaningless as people could not bring fortune in leaving for the other world. Plague bacillus was/is invisible, but it could/can our unconscious minds visible. A period of the plague was when people gazed at their psychological problems.

On the last page of this book, the anonymous author, who praised God almighty, King and Queen, their counsels and friends, deeply lamented the merciless and cruel pandemic world and said “amen”. Of course, this is a

double-ironical conclusion in that no one believed in power of prayer.

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