William Bullein, *A Dialogue [...] against the feuer Pestilence* (London: John Kingston, 1564, 1573, 1578; STC 4036, 4036.5, 4037, 4038)

*A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence* (1564) is the last of four treatises by the medical practitioner William Bullein (c. 1515–1576). Born in the Isle of Ely, Bullein began his professional life as rector of Blaxhall in Suffolk, but his strongly Protestant sympathies led him to resign his rectorship at the time of Queen Mary’s accession in 1554. It was at this point that he turned to medicine, practising first in Northumberland and Durham and later, after the death of his patron Sir Thomas Hilton, in London. His moves may or may not have been prompted by the accusation that he had murdered Sir Thomas, by his subsequent trial and imprisonment for debt, or by putative attempts by a former client to have Bullein himself killed.  

Bullein’s medical interests and his religious principles come together in the *Dialogue*. His three previous works, *The Government of Health* (1559, STC 4041), *The Bulwarke of Defence* (1562, STC 4033), and *A Comfortable Regiment against Pleurisi* (1562, STC 4035), form a serious contribution to the medical knowledge of the day; although each is ‘fictionalised’ to a degree by being presented in dialogue form, their content ranges from a rehearsal of traditional regimens and remedies in the *Government* to what Patrick Wallis has identified as ‘some of the earliest printed references to Paracelsus and chemical medicines in English medical writing’ in the *Bulwarke*.  

The *Regiment*, which again takes the form of a dialogue, is slightly more wide-ranging, setting its medical discussion of pleurisy in the context of an overview of plagues and other illnesses visited upon humanity by way of divine judgment; in one of the prefatory epistles to the *Bulwarke*, Bullein speaks of his work as a service to the commonwealth. The *Dialogue*, Bullein’s last and most popular work, further explores the idea of the writer as physician, as Bullein seeks to remedy not only the physical suffering of his compatriots, but the moral evils that beset his nation.

The *Dialogue* was written in response to the serious outbreak of the plague in London in 1563. First published in 1564 by John Kingston (STC 4036), new editions followed in 1573 (STC 4037) and 1578 (STC 4038). Its popularity may in part be attributable to its serious advice on how to avoid the ‘fever pestilence’. In one of its many distinct dialogues the medic (named Antonius Capistranus in the 1564 edition, Doctor Togrub thereafter) advises his client Antonius on the causes of the plague and the best ways to avoid it, and he goes on to give the precise recipes for a number of remedies. The way in which these remedies are presented gives them great weight. In the dialogue between the doctor and Antonius each of the doctor’s assertions is supported by a marginal attribution to an acknowledged medical authority, such as Galen or Avicenna, while in the subsequent dialogue, the text gives the receipts in Latin, in an extremely detailed form including the precise weights and measures, while simplified English versions appear in the margin. Bullein’s advice can thus be accessed both by the professional and the layman. The implication is that it is to be taken very seriously indeed.

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The main strand of the narrative concerns the good citizen Civis and his wife Susan. We first encounter them when they are visited by an itinerant beggar, whose skill as an extorter of alms immediately introduces the theme of self-interest that will prove to be central to Bullein’s vision of English society. In subsequent episodes, we follow Civis, Susan, and their servant Roger as they flee the city in the hope of escaping the rapidly advancing plague. As they ride, they pass the time in the telling of beast fables and tales of miraculous births, many of which elicit moral interpretations that further satirise the self-interest that Bullein perceives as rife in his society. A similar function is served both by the allegorical wall hangings in the tavern where the travellers pause for dinner and the stories related by their dinner companion, the traveller Mendax. These focus on the various countries he has recently visited, including Taerg Natrib (i.e. Great Britain spelled backwards): a nation which, as might be expected, presents an exaggerated mirror image of Bullein’s own society. Yet Mendax’s tales show the extent to which Bullein is interested in the creation of fictions as a process in its own right, as well as with the moral message they can be used to convey. The description of Taerg Natrib does not appear in isolation, but is prefaced with stories of Mendax’s travels to Terra Florida; Teneriffa; an island called Ruc where there are owls as big as horses, nightingales as big as geese and parrots that sing descant; and Zanzibar, where diamonds are gathered with rakes. Such elaboration makes manifest Bullein’s pervasive interest in the layering of his fictions, resisting the reader’s attempts to establish a single, stable perspective. It also slows the narrative to an expansive, leisurely pace – and this renders the conclusion of the work the more startling: immediately after their departure from the tavern, Civis and his company are overtaken by Death (who appears fully personified, like a figure from a medieval morality, and strikes Civis with his dart). Despite initial resistance, Civis makes an exemplary end, as if he were the protagonist of an ars moriendi – although his good example is rather lost on his wife and servant, who abandon him with alacrity.

While the many genres incorporated into the main narrative of the Dialogue reflect indirectly on the breakdown of social cohesion, the intervening episodes engage in direct social satire through their portrayal of the wealthy but plague-ridden Antonius, who is so concerned to preserve his riches that he neglects to preserve either his life or his soul, and the doctor and lawyers who prey on him. Thus, despite its formal diversity and its fragmented narrative, the Dialogue is thematically remarkably coherent, returning again and again to the collapse of social cohesion.

In line with Bullein’s own Protestant beliefs, there are repeated suggestions that the persistence of Catholicism is at least in part to blame for the parlous state of the nation. The two corrupt lawyers, Avarus and Ambodexter, are self-proclaimed Catholics and enthusiastic admirers of Bishop Bonner, while one of the marginal notes regrets the fact that Thomas Cromwell was cut off in his prime before he was able to complete the eradication of Catholicism. Moreover, in Mendax’s Taerg Natrib, ‘There is no mingled doctrine, no tromperie of Papistrie, but the naked, true, and perfite word of God’ (sig. Lviii); although Taerg Natrib is not a perfect mirror image of Great Britain, but stands in a slightly more complex relationship to its original, here the implication clearly is that in Bullein’s own society the reverse is the case. Yet there are indications elsewhere that the nation’s most besetting evil is not a lingering Catholicism, but the want of any strong religious faith. In the opening scene, the beggar betrays his lack of principles by professing his willingness to say his Debrafundis in any form, English or Latin, that pleases his potential benefactors, while in the second episode, Antonius and the doctor congratulate themselves on being ‘Nullafideians’. Although they claim to be afraid that their conversation will be overheard by ‘Protestants’, which momentarily suggests followers of the reformed religion as potential moral guardians of the state, there is a strong suggestion that the religious question is only one sign of the more general moral disorder in a society where every man is out for himself.

An obsession with material rather than spiritual good remains a theme throughout. The beggar sees the plague as beneficial because it increases his chances of receiving alms, Antonius proclaims that he ‘could neuer haue died in a worse tyme, my busines is suche’ (sig. BiI), while the lawyers fear that the doctor will cure Antonius and thus take away their trade as his executors. Civis, whose very name suggests that his good citizenship is his defining characteristic, and whose generosity to the beggar shows him living up to his name, seems for a time to provide an alternative example. Yet it is Civis who is ultimately overtaken by the plague, in an episode that marks a significant shift of emphasis in the Dialogue. Where the first episodes combine a satirical anatomy of society with a genuine medical response to the plague that has been sent to scourge it, the final section is concerned not with this life but with the next. In the first episodes, good citizenship is contrasted with avarice and self-interest, but when Civis is confronted with death, he must abandon his roles as husband, father, master, and man of the world in order to face death alone. The question that Civis asks at the outset – ‘Alas, what shall I doe to saue my life?’ (sig. FviI) – is thus shown not to have been the right question. The Dialogue ultimately recommends that those in its path should seek to save their soul – their eternal life – rather than their life in this world. Yet prior to this point, it is almost obsessively concerned with the metaphorical plague of societal breakdown, for which the literal plague serves as a scourge.

It is Civis who connects these two distinct concerns. The fact that he is able to make the transition from seeking to save his body to seeking to save his soul renders him exemplary in death as in life. When he makes a ‘good end’, willingly letting go of his earthly attachments in order to resign his soul to God, the implication is that he is able to do so precisely because he (unlike any of Bullein’s other characters) has lived as responsible member of society, concerned as much for
the general good as he is for his own worldly gain. This is a point to which Bullein returns repeatedly, and on which the Dialogue presents some highly idiosyncratic views. Civis’s civic responsibility is apparent not only in his concern for the beggar and for the well-being of his wife, children, and servant, but also in his easy familiarity with the history and culture of his society. When he and Susan view the allegorical wall hangings in the tavern where they pause in their flight from the plague, Civis is a ready interpreter. These hangings take the form of emblems: that is, allegorical representations in a visual medium accompanied by a motto or ‘poesie’, the two of which combine to convey to the attentive reader a single, moral truth about the world. An emblem is thus a complex cryptogram: both the verbal and the visual elements demand to be unriddled, and their separate meanings then have to be combined to make a third. Despite this complexity, the hangings hold no secrets for Civis; he is not only able to translate proverbial sayings out of Latin into English and discover their application to the accompanying images, but he is also able to discover highly specific contemporary references in a number of the emblems, such as that which cryptically depicts Henry VIII’s minister Thomas Cromwell. Thus, emblems that illustrate universal moral truths prove to be juxtaposed with those whose message is more contentious, and whose secrets Civis is reluctant to reveal. For example, the emblem of a man with ‘a locke of Gold linkyng his lippes together […] and a paire of blinde spectacles vpon his nose, with a golden penne fallen from his hand’, which Civis elucidates as ‘the noble Tallente of wisedome hidden’, is followed by a tableau that proves to represent three different types of priest, two false and one true. This last Civis will interpret only in part, confessing to his wife that: ‘I dare saie but little to this matter to others, but to you I wil speake a little, and not so much as I doe thinke’ (sigs Iii”–Iiiiv).

Civis’s reluctance to make public his interpretations furthers Bullein’s satire, implying the degree of power held by the objects of his attack, and thus the full extent of the corruption he condemns. At the same time, however, the ease with which he is able to read the emblems suggests a means of remedying the social disintegration that Bullein presents as the root cause of all the country’s ills. As I have argued elsewhere, the Dialogue presents emblems, adages, and ‘commonplaces’ as an expression of a communal collective understanding. As Rosalie Colie has demonstrated, the use of pithy verbal sayings as an integral part of the emblem connects the emblem tradition to the sixteenth-century practice of adage-making. The adage, as she defines it, is:

a sententia, a quotation from an authoritative source […] which sums up a mass of experience in one charged phrase, demonstrating the community of human experience – in short, the adage is literally a common place, a convergence-point of consensus […] or [a convenient agent] of cultural transfer.

Civis’s ability to read the emblems in the tavern thus confirms his position as a member of that putative community, as he displays the ability to read their ‘universal’ message, rather than focusing exclusively on their applicability to his own situation. Civis’s response stands in stark contrast to that of the corrupt Doctor in an earlier scene. As Antonius and the doctor congratulate one another on their lack of social conscience, the apothecary Crispinus enters from Antonius’s garden to give a detailed description of the statues he has found there. These include a microcosm of the world, a garden of the muses, and a number of English and Scottish poets and satirists of the past. His description is almost hallucinatory in its detail, yet the self-centred Doctor responds without the slightest interest, merely reaffirming the importance of his own immediate business. When Crispinus concludes with the mention of a ‘dial’ he has seen, adorned with the motto ‘tempora labuntur’ (the times are uncertain), the Doctor claims he has no time to hear more: ‘For Tempora labuntur is to saie: by little and little tyme doe slip awaie. […] What is it a clock?’ (sigs Bvi”–Bvii”). A comparison of the Doctor’s response to this emblem with Civis’s response to the hangings in the tavern reveals that the proverbs and emblems in the tavern scene do not merely express corrective moral truths. Rather, by presenting them as the object of Civis’s interpretation, in implicit contrast to the Doctor’s refusal to interpret, Bullein suggests that interpretation itself is a moral process: a means of imaginative collaboration that counters the self-interest at the root of social corruption, and thereby arguably counters the plague too.

Such emphasis on the emblem as locus of a shared set of values suggests that Bullein views writers and artists as having an important function as satirists and ‘correctors’ of society. This is made most explicit in the statue scene. The statues of the poets of earlier ages are described with extraordinary vividness, as if they weren’t so much statues as a cross between living men and vessels of inspiration: Skelton ‘satte in the corner of a Piller with a Frostie bitten face, frownyng, and is scante yet cleane cooled of the hotte burnyng Cholour, kindled against the cankered Cardinal Wolsey’ (sig. Bvi”), while ‘Chaucer satte in a chaire of gold couered with roses, writyng prose & rime, accompanied with the Spirites of many kynges, knightes, and faire ladies. Whom he plesantly besprinkeld with the sweete water of the welle, consecrated unto the Muses, ecleped Aganippe’ (sig. Bvi”). Yet despite this almost visionary description, the lines that accompany each statue are not taken from their own works, but represent Bullein’s understanding of the kernel of truth at their core. These take the form either of a ‘summary’ of the writers’ actual works or of a more general moral that may have remarkably little to do with the writer in question. Thus, Skelton’s lines form a condensed attack on Cardinal Wolsey, the object of his satires Speke Parrot, Collyn Clout, and Why Come Ye Nat to Court?, but Chaucer’s lines lament that
‘Coueteous menne doe catche, all that thei maie haue’ (sig. Bvi).

The use of words that are not the poets’ own suggests that Bullein’s imaginary statues should be viewed in the tradition of the Pasquinade. The idea of the ‘speaking statue’ has its origins as far back as the Greek epigram, originally an inscription on a statue or monument. Closer to Bullein’s time, in 1501, a damaged statue was dug up in Rome, and the practice developed of attaching satirical epigrams to it. The statue was given the name of ‘Pasquino’ or ‘Pasquillio’. In England the Italian tradition is reflected in literary use of the figure of Pasquin or Pasquill as a satirical mouthpiece, as for example in Sir Thomas Elyot’s *Pasquill the Playne* (1533), and in the works of later writers such as Nashe and Breton.2 The fact that the statues in the *Dialogue* ‘speak’ words that Bullein puts into their mouths suggests that they represent an idiosyncratic appropriation of the same tradition. The names of the poets serve as the figure of ‘Pasquin’ did, as a figurehead to which to attach opinions. Yet even as their names lend authority to the satirical views they express, the substitution of Bullein’s words for their own allows Bullein to present these dead poets as his own natural ancestors. Even as he claims authority for his own satirical, corrective practice by shaping previous writers in his own image, the implication is that the abuses current in 1560s London are both a natural development from earlier abuses and the result of a failure to heed the warnings of earlier writers. He and they all speak with one voice, in such a way that the dead poets are co-opted as a corrective to Bullein’s own disjointed times.

This process of internalising other writers is key to Bullein’s practice, and in view of the emphasis that is placed on interpretation as evidence of good citizenship, it is significant that two of the writers who ghost through Bullein’s work demand a high level of engagement from their own readers. The most obvious of these is Thomas More, whose *Utopia* is a clear influence on Mendax’s travelogue, with its layered fictions spoken by a spectacularly unreliable narrator. Yet an equally important source for Bullein is William Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat* (c. 1553), an elaborate and absurd anti-Catholic satire in which Baldwin presents himself as the editor of a tale told one Christmas night by a friend of his, William Streamer, in proof that animals (and specifically cats) have the powers of speech and reason. Although Baldwin’s work does not survive in any editions earlier than 1570, several years after the *Dialogue* was published, a version of it was composed for the aborted court revels of Christmas 1552/3, and it may have been in circulation in alternative versions. Certainly Bullein’s *Dialogue* contains clear verbal echoes of Baldwin’s work.8 Among the subjects under discussion as Civis, Susan, and Roger flee the plague is the question of whether animals can speak, and in defending this position, Roger seems to allude directly to Baldwin, first arguing that he is willing to believe that animals once had the power of speech on the grounds that ‘our Parate will saie, Parate is a minion and beware the Catte’ (sig. Gii), and later recounting a number of stories of women being brought to bed of cats, each of which has a counterpart in Baldwin’s work.

The immediate effect of these allusions is to re-emphasise Bullein’s satirical message, and specifically its anti-Catholic element. *Beware the Cat*’s anti-Catholic satire is almost immediately apparent: first in the marginal glosses, which explicitly interpret the man-eating cats and their ringleader Grimalkin as figures of the Catholic Church and the Pope, and second in the text itself, which features bawds devoted to the Virgin, priests who are unable to answer Protestant arguments, and credulous lay Catholics who twice mistake noises made by their cat for the work of the Devil. The object of Baldwin’s satire would thus have an appeal for Bullein. Yet Bullein and Baldwin do not only share a satirical target. Baldwin’s influence is equally apparent in the elaborate construction of Bullein’s *Dialogue*. *Beware the Cat* consists of a series of narratives that encase other narratives like a nest of Russian dolls, and its form significantly complicates its subject matter. On first reading, the text seems concerned to contrast the stability of the written word with the unreliability of oral traditions; the former is associated with Protestantism, the latter with Catholicism. But on further reading, the layered fictions spoken by a spectacularly unreliable narrator suggest that Bullein is not simply contrasting oral with written traditions, but is also implicitly interpreting the man-eating cats and their ringleader Grimalkin as figures of the Catholic Church and the Pope, and giving a new meaning to their fancies. The object of Baldwin’s satire would thus have an appeal for Bullein. Yet Bullein and Baldwin do not only share a satirical target. Baldwin’s influence is equally apparent in the elaborate construction of Bullein’s *Dialogue*. *Beware the Cat* consists of a series of narratives that encase other narratives like a nest of Russian dolls, and its form significantly complicates its subject matter. On first reading, the text seems concerned to contrast the stability of the written word with the unreliability of oral traditions; the former is associated with Protestantism, the latter with Catholic superstitions with no basis in the Bible. Yet (as Edward Bonahue has demonstrated) the effect is precisely the opposite. The very device that the editor ‘G.B.’ uses to make ‘book-like’ the oration at the centre of the narrative prove ultimately to bring the status of the written word into doubt, as they give a frankly incredible, careless, and incoherent narrative a certain spurious status.9

In consequence of this lack of a stable vantage point, as in More’s *Utopia*, the onus of making sense of the text is placed upon the reader, who is challenged to an independent act of interpretation. As Baldwin presents it, the Catholic faith he satirises depends upon passive acceptance of the irrational, so that to read critically becomes analogous to – or is the precondition for – living critically, or ‘Protestantly’. Baldwin’s working assumption that it is the reader’s responsibility to complete the text thus appears to derive from a specifically humanist belief in the moral efficacy of reading. Something extremely comparable is apparent in Bullein. He too experiments with the absence of a stable perspective through the use of multiple dialogues, multiple genres, and speakers of dubious degrees of reliability; like Baldwin, too, he further destabilises the text by providing it with glosses that signal failure to fulfill their expected function of guiding the reader to a secure understanding.10 Moreover, the statue and the tavern scenes make explicit his interest in interpretation as a way of both expressing and establishing a communal meaning. In the latter Civis comes to stand as a model of the type of response that the *Dialogue* seeks to elicit from its own readers, encouraging them to interpret it through the lens of established – that is, shared – literary traditions. Thus, Bullein’s own text makes demands of its readers similar to those which are placed upon its characters in their search to save their life. The *Dialogue* encourages an exchange between author and readers that is itself ultimately the surest remedy against societal breakdown – and with it, it is implied,
against the plague.

Jane Griffiths
University of Bristol