

Illustrations from the Wellcome Library
William Winstanley's Pestilential Poesies in *The Christians Refuge: Or Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague in this Time of Generall Contagion to Which is Added the Charitable Physician* (1665)

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Abstract: During the Great Plague of London (1665), William Winstanley veered from his better known roles as arbiter of success and failure in his works of biography or as a comic author under the pseudonym Poor Robin, and instead engaged with his reading audience as a plague writer in the rare book *The Christians Refuge: Or Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague in this Time of Generall Contagion to Which is Added the Charitable Physician* (1665). From its extensive paratexts, including a table of mortality statistics and woodcut of king death, to its temporal and providential interpretation of the disease between the covers of a single text, *The Christians Refuge* is a compendium of contemporary understanding of plague. This article addresses *The Christians Refuge* as an expression of London's print marketplace in a moment of transformation precipitated by the epidemic. The author considers the paratextual elements in *The Christians Refuge* that engage with the presiding norms in plague writing and publishing in 1665 and also explores how Winstanley's authorship is expressed in the work. Winstanley has long been seen as a biographer or as a humour writer; attributing *The Christians Refuge* extends and challenges previous perceptions of his work.

Keywords: Plague; Print Culture; London; 1665; William Winstanley; Paratext; Authorship; Poor Robin; Disease; Medicine; English Literature; Poetry

Long are the years, Sir Critic, long,
Since you your galaxy of song
Set with such pomp and proud intent

Kathleen Miller

Fair in the Muse's firmament
We can but smile at your acclaim,
Or be it praise, or be it blame; -
Whether at Milton's fame you flout,
Cry how his candle is snuffed out,
And glory, in judicial ease,
O'er his poetic obsequies;
'William Winstanley, Critic (1687)'
By Clinton Scollard¹

At the height of the Great Plague of London (1665), a physically diminutive book was made available to the reading public, *The Christians Refuge: Or Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague in this Time of Generall Contagion to Which is Added the Charitable Physician* (1665).² Signed only by the initials W. W., rendered in *duodecimo* and available for 8d., *The Christians Refuge* exemplifies print production during England's final plague outbreak. The timely text, of which a well-thumbed copy of the rare book may be found in the Wellcome Library, London, tackles plague as its subject with gripping immediacy. The work is broken into four sections: 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague', 'Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life', 'Meditations of Death' and 'Receipts Against the Plague'. The quotation prefacing this article describes William Winstanley, who I argue composed *The Christians Refuge*. The prevalence of plague in early modern England allowed Winstanley to veer from his better known roles as arbiter of success and failure in his works of biography, as described in this epigraph, or as a comic author under the pseudonym Poor Robin, and to instead engage with his reading audience as a plague writer. From its extensive paratexts, including a table of mortality statistics and woodcut of King Death, to its temporal and providential interpretation of the disease between the covers of a single text, *The Christians Refuge* is a compendium of contemporary understanding of plague. This article addresses *The Christians Refuge* as an expression of London's print marketplace in a moment of transformation precipitated by the epidemic. It will consider the paratextual elements in *The Christians Refuge* that engage with the presiding norms in plague writing and publishing in 1665 and also explore how Winstanley's authorship is expressed in the work. Winstanley has long been seen as a biographer or as a humour writer; attributing *The Christians Refuge* extends and challenges previous perceptions of his work.

Winstanley's book joins the myriad print responses to London's final plague epidemic. The affliction of pestilence was not unusual in a city that recorded plague deaths throughout the seventeenth century. The extent of the 1665 visitation, however, made it unique. The Great Plague of London killed between 75,000 and 100,000 people,³

¹Clinton Scollard, 'William Winstanley, Critic (1687)', in *Lyrics from a Library* (New York: G.W. Browning 1913), 27.

²W.W., *The Christians Refuge: Or Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague in this Time of Generall*

Contagion to Which is Added the Charitable Physician (London: 1665).

³'The Great Plague of London, 1665', in *Harvard University Library Open Collections Program: Contagion*, <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/plague.html>, accessed 5 November 2010.

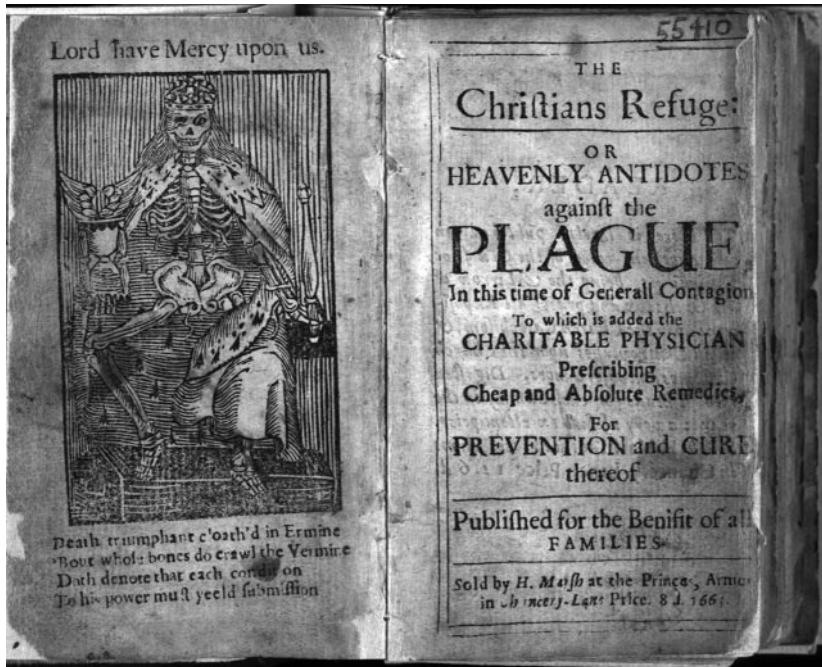


Figure 1: Frontispiece and title page from *The Christians Refuge* (Wellcome Library, London).

considerably more than during outbreaks in 1603, 1625 and 1636.⁴ Fear of the brutal disease – which erupted in sores on the skin and could kill within days – was countered by an epidemic of new publishing ventures. The print marketplace offered wide-ranging responses to plague, with cures, prayers, statistics on mortality and interpretations of the disease flourishing in the diseased city. During the final outbreak, dialogues on plague in the print marketplace increased and changed, with greater emphasis on natural interpretations of the disease, statistical analysis and natural antidotes.⁵

Plague's Paratexts

The paratexts contextualising *The Christians Refuge* capture elements central to London's print culture during this final epidemic. These paratexts challenge and corroborate statements made in the body of the text composed by Winstanley. Richard Macksey's foreward to Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (trans.

⁴Anonymous, *The Four Great Years of the Plague* (London: 1665).

⁵Paul Slack explains: 'The plague epidemic of 1665, the first serious visitation in London for nearly thirty years, generated responses which were partly familiar, partly novel. Much of the novelty lay in the amount of information about the epidemic which was made available to contemporaries. At least forty-six

publications concerned with plague appeared in 1665 and 1666, rather more than in 1625–6, and a much larger proportion of them – nearly two-thirds as opposed to one-third – dealt directly with the natural causes of plague, with natural remedies or with the incidence of disease'; Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 244.

1997) defines paratextuality as comprising those ‘liminal devices and conventions... that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords’.⁶ Commencing with a frontispiece that features a strikingly rendered woodcut of King Death decked in an ermine robe and concluding with a section detailing receipts to cure or avoid infection, the book’s message is frequently interrupted and mediated by paratextual material. Between the covers, secular and religious interpretations of the disease emerge. More than composed by a single author and given to the audience in an unaltered, text-centred state, *The Christians Refuge* instead presents the reader with a multitude of voices and messages, conveyed through statistics, imagery, prose, poetry and receipts. The complexity of the information in these paratexts parallels the chaos of the outbreak, reflecting how print matter expressed and responded to this chaos.

A stark frontispiece prefaces *The Christians Refuge*. The phrase ‘Lord have Mercy upon us’ introduces an image of death, crowned and cloaked in fur, worms crawling over his bones. Beneath the gruesome visual are four lines:

Death triumphant cloath’d in Ermine
'Bout whole bones do crawl the Vermine
Doth denote that each condit[i]on
To his power must yeeld submission⁷

The effect is determinedly bleak; the phrase ‘Lord have mercy upon us’ was plague’s calling card, emblazoned on the doors of those houses believed to harbour the illness.⁸ The *Orders Conceived and Published by the Lord Major and Aldermen of the City of London, Concerning the Infection of the Plague* (1665) instructed: ‘That every House visited, be marked with a Red Cross of a foot long, in the middle of the door, evident to be seen, and with these usual Printed words, that is to say, *Lord have mercy upon us*, to be set close over the same Cross.’⁹ The phrase further appears on the inexpensive broadsides entitled ‘Lord Have Mercy Upon Us’ that were printed during outbreaks.¹⁰ Featuring images of death, receipts, prayers and statistics from the bills of mortality, these broadsides are the abbreviated equivalent of *The Christians Refuge*. The frontispiece, with its image of death and bleak verse, functions as a *memento mori*, prefacing the work with a reminder of death. In their work *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year*, A. Lloyd and Dorothy C. Moote point to the regal signifiers adorning the image of death – sceptre, crown, ermine cloak – and interpret the image as showing that plague kills indiscriminately, making no distinction between the poor and royalty.¹¹ The reader finds solace on the opposing page, however, in the title of the work, *The Christians Refuge*. Preparing the soul for eternity was one response to the

⁶Richard Macksey, ‘Foreword’, in Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Jane E. Lewin (trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi–xxii: xviii.

⁷W.W., *op. cit.* (note 2), n. p.

⁸Slack, *op. cit.* (note 5), 203.

⁹City of London, *Orders Conceived and Published by the Lord Major and Aldermen of the*

City of London, Concerning the Infection of the Plague (London: 1665), B2.

¹⁰Slack, *op. cit.* (note 5), 242.

¹¹A. Lloyd and Dorothy C. Moote, *The Great Plague: The Story of London’s Most Deadly Year* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 69.

prospect of 'triumphant' death forcing Londoners to 'yeeld submission'.¹² The word 'refuge' suggests a space where the reader could escape the danger of plague – though only if he or she accepted the likelihood that the body would not survive this struggle, as exemplified in the image of death. The competing messages of death for the body and salvation for the soul encapsulates the spiritual and temporal concerns facing citizens during plague times – the same concerns that occupy the pages of *The Christians Refuge*.

A separate paratextual element with visual impact appears in *The Christians Refuge*: a table of mortality statistics. The ubiquitous weekly bills of mortality, in conjunction with John Graunt's *Observations on the Bills of Mortality* (1662), a text that examined, in part, the impact of plague on public health through analysis of the bills, meant statistical analysis of mortality figures was well-established by 1665.¹³ Tables comparing current plague deaths with those from previous epidemics found their way into numerous texts, such as the 'Lord Have Mercy Upon Us' broadsides. This reliance on statistical analysis features in *The Christians Refuge*, which includes a comparison of plague deaths, described as: 'A table comparing the increase of the Plague betwixt the year 1625 and this present year 1665'.¹⁴ A table lists the plague deaths from 1625 and 1665, followed by the number of deaths in each year: 'There were buried in the year 1625 of the Plague 25428, in this present year 1665 to the 11 of July 1830.'¹⁵ The figures from the bills of mortality amplify a message otherwise conveyed in the book through prose or poetry. The page presents the figures in a factual manner, but within the context of *The Christians Refuge* these numbers give credence to the warning of encroaching death. The table is flanked by the sections 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague' and 'Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life', existing in a textual purgatory between hope for an antidote and reflections on the wretchedness of life and death. The last figures in the chart for 1665 are dated 11 of July, when only a fraction of deaths had occurred as compared to those in 1625. The table fails to anticipate the staggering impact of the epidemic once it had run its course.

The most complex paratext to interpret in *The Christians Refuge* concludes the text. The body of the work clearly composed by Winstanley concludes on page 156 with the unequivocal statement made by 'FINIS'.¹⁶ At this point, the section of receipts is introduced, prefaced by a letter that reconciles a text that features divine and earthly interpretations of plague:

Having thus by holy meditation prepared thy soul, thou mayest next proceed to use some of these medicines for thy body, which we have collected out of most approved Authours, yet trust not so much in the Physick as in the blessing of God, without which all physick is uneffectuall;¹⁷

This introduction acts as a transition in a book otherwise comprised of reflections on saving the soul and meditations on the miseries of life and death, though Winstanley does comment on the value of the receipts in 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague'.¹⁸

¹²W.W., *op. cit.* (note 2), n.p.

¹³Slack *op. cit.* (note 5), 244–5.

¹⁴W.W., *op. cit.* (note 2), n.p.

¹⁵W.W., *ibid.*, n.p.

¹⁶W.W., 'Meditations of Death', in *ibid.*, 156.

¹⁷W.W., 'Receits Against the Plague', in *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁸Winstanley writes: 'These rules well practised will be a good preparatory for thy soul against the Contagion of sin, in the latter end of the book thou wilt find receipts against the Contagion of the body, such as have been approved of by manly Physicians, to which is added two short Prayers to God, without whose help all Physick Signifies nothing.' The two short prayers he refers to cannot be

The preface bridges a gap that challenged those narrating the story of plague even during the final outbreak. With plague's natural causes, practical cures and statistical understanding of the disease emerging as the primary areas of interest in 1665, writers increasingly negotiated tricky terrain where the natural and providential collided – and natural interpretations ultimately prevailed. Slack explains that ‘despite the obvious temptation to point to the role of providence, most writers, even divines, were more cautious in their conclusions than they had been in the past.’¹⁹ The products of the print marketplace focused on the natural causes of plague can be traced through to *The Christians Refuge*. A remedy collected in W.J.'s *A Collection of Seven and Fifty Approved Receipts Good Against the Plague: Taken out of the Five Books of that Renowned Dr Don Alexes Secrets, for the Benefit of the Poorer Sort of People of These Nations* (1665), ‘proved in Venice in the year 1504’, which suggests drinking a concoction of treacle, aquavive and human urine for three consecutive mornings,²⁰ also appears in the receipt collection at the end of *The Christians Refuge*. For the reader, *The Christians Refuge* offers both the medical and spiritual expertise that defined the print marketplace.

Attributing *The Christians Refuge*

While the initials W.W. concluding the letter, ‘To the Christian Reader’, gesture to Winstanley’s authorship of the work, the author identifies himself through references to his other writing in the body of the text. In a sidebar of the section entitled ‘Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life’, Winstanley instructs his reader as follows: ‘See my Book of Englands Worthies in the Life of Richard Nevil, Earl of Warwick’.²¹ Published five years prior to *The Christians Refuge*, the collection of biographies entitled *England's Worthies. Select Lives of the Most Eminent Persons from Constantine the Great, to the Death of Oliver Cromwel Late Protector* (1660) bears the author’s complete name followed by Gent.²² A later note in the same section of *The Christians Refuge* directs the reader to a separate text: ‘See my Book of Englands Triumphs.’²³ The work referred to is Winstanley’s *Englands Triumph: A More Exact History of His Majesties Escape after the Battle of Worcester, with a Chronologicall Discourse of His Straits and Dangerous Adventures into France, and His Removes from Place to Place till His Return into England, with the Most Remarkable Memorials Since* (1660).²⁴ Based on this textual evidence, I suggest that Winstanley authored *The Christians Refuge*. Winstanley has not previously been thought of as a plague writer. In *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (2009),

found in the receipt section of the text, but notes to the copy state that the ‘last leaf of Remedies’ is missing: ‘Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague’, in *op. cit.* (note 2), 14–15.

¹⁹Slack, *op. cit.* (note 5), 247.

²⁰W.J., *A Collection of Seven and Fifty Approved Receipts Good Against the Plague. Taken out of the Five Books of that Renowned Dr Don Alexes Secrets, for the Benefit of the Poorer Sort of People of These Nations* (London: 1665), 4.

²¹W.W., ‘Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life’, in *op. cit.* (note 2), 4.

²²William Winstanley, *England's Worthies: Select Lives of the Most Eminent Persons from Constantine the Great, to the Death of Oliver Cromwel Late Protector* (London: 1660).

²³W.W., ‘Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life’, in *op. cit.* (note 2), 39.

²⁴William Winstanley, *Englands Triumph. A More Exact History of His Majesties Escape after the Battle of Worcester, with a Chronologicall Discourse of His Straits and Dangerous Adventures into France, and His Removes from Place to Place till His Return into England, with the Most Remarkable Memorials Since* (1660).

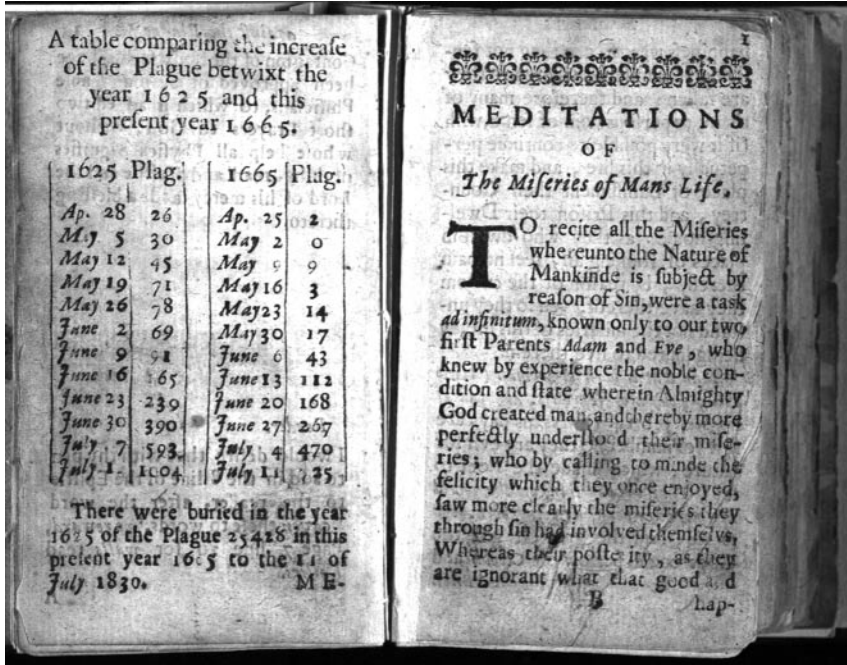


Figure 2: Table of mortality statistics from *The Christians Refuge* (Wellcome Library, London).

however, Ernest B. Gilman proposes that we ‘consider all literary texts written during plague times as plague texts’, and qualifies this statement by suggesting that ‘all such texts may be seen to respond more or less directly to the constant threat of epidemic meltdown in which their authors lived.’²⁵ In this context, literary writers who practised their trade during England’s early modern period were, to a greater or lesser extent, plague authors due to the enormous impact of the disease. What remains unclear is why Winstanley chose to write under only his initials in a work that, once read, unequivocally identifies him as the author. Winstanley obscures the reader’s access to his identity in *The Christians Refuge*.

Winstanley’s other literary efforts suggest he did not fear self-promotion, complicating an understanding of why the poet chose to compose *The Christians Refuge* only under his initials; however, the author often manipulated authorship. Known as a biographer and a poet, Winstanley published his work extensively and, as relevant to this discussion of authorship, chose at different times and under different circumstances to publish under his name, a pseudonym or his initials. Winstanley’s first foray into print culture was a collection of poems entitled *The Muses Cabinet, Stored with Variety of Poems, Both Pleasant and Profitable* (1655), published ten years prior to his treatise on the plague.²⁶

²⁵Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 48.

²⁶William Winstanley, *The Muses Cabinet, Stored with Variety of Poems, Both Pleasant and Profitable* (London: 1655).

Winstanley also turned his pen to the work of compiling biographies and asserting his opinion of the various characters in English history, both political and literary. His compilations of biographies, *England's Worthies*, *The Loyall Martyrology* (1665) and *The Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* (1687),²⁷ clearly name Winstanley as author. Alternatively, his adaptation of the character Poor Robin as a pseudonym and applied to the very popular almanacs Winstanley composed shows flexibility in his approach to authorship, depending on the forum. William E. Burns notes this: 'Although the works Winstanley published under his own name were clearly much more erudite than the Poor Robin material, there was traffic back and forth between the two personae.'²⁸ Burns points to one example of Winstanley writing anonymously in *The Path-Way to Knowledge* (1663), where '[t]his traffic was. . .suppressed', but provides no hypothesis for Winstanley's anonymity in the work.²⁹ *The Path-Way to Knowledge* is not Winstanley's only anonymous work. The same suppression Burns describes with regard to Winstanley's anonymity in publishing *The Path-Way to Knowledge* is also evident in *The Christians Refuge* – at least for the reader without access to the other two works referenced in the book.

Attributing *The Christians Refuge* goes far to explaining the text's linguistic and stylistic eccentricities. Though the work's title suggests a righteously religious text, verging on sermon, *The Christians Refuge* is composed in a literary voice. The text is written in prose interrupted by verse breaks. Many of these breaks feature another author's work, where that author's name is referenced or the verse is introduced with a phrase such as "'Tis good counsel that the Poet gives'.³⁰ These interruptions emphasise or amplify Winstanley's prose, creating layers of intertextuality within the body of the text and forcing to reader to reckon with the work as literary. An example of this intertextuality occurs in the section 'Meditations of Death'; Winstanley recalls an epitaph:

the latter part of an ancient Epitaph I have read might prove this, yet because the whole is short, I have presum'd to give it you all as follows

*Ho, stay, who lies here?
I the good Earl of Devon-shire;
And Maud' my wife, who lov'd full dear,
We liv'd together forty five year.
What we spent, we had,
What we gave, we have,
What we left, we lost.*³¹

The lines literally address two corpses, invoking the voice of the dead. Like a warning from the grave, the epitaph points to the levelling effect of death. Introduced as an 'ancient Epitaph', the short verse is granted authority; however, Winstanley's use

²⁷William Winstanley, *The Loyall Martyrology, or, Brief Catalogues and Characters of the Most Eminent Persons who Suffered for their Conscience During the Late Times of Rebellion either by Death, Imprisonment, Banishment, or Sequestration Together with Those who were Slain in the Kings Service* (London: 1665); William Winstanley, *The Lives of the Most Famous English poets, or, The Honour of Parnassus in a Brief Essay of the Works and Writings of Above Two hundred of Them, from the Time of K.*

William the Conqueror to the Reign of His present Majesty, King James II (London: 1687).

²⁸William E. Burns, 'Winstanley, William (d. 1698)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29760>>, accessed 5 November 2010.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰W.W., 'Meditations of the Miseries of Mans Life', in *op. cit.* (note 2), 21.

³¹W.W., 'Meditations of Death', in *ibid.*, 96–7.

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of the word 'ancient' is misleading, given that the epitaph is thought to be a creation of the Renaissance. In 'Two Renaissance Epitaphs', Curt F. Bühler relates the history of the epitaph. Believed to commemorate the early fifteenth-century death of Edward de Courtenay, the epitaph was first cited by Tristram Risdon in *Survey of Devon* (1605–1630) and 'on the basis of composition and of transcription may be considered a Renaissance epitaph'.³² Winstanley later incorporates the same epitaph in his work *The New Help to Discourse: Or, Wit, Mirth, and Jollity Intermixt with More Serious Matters Consisting of Pleasant Astrological, Astronomical, Philosophical, Grammatical, Physical, Chyrurgical, Historical?, Moral, and Poetical Questions and Answers* (1672).³³

In addition to these verse breaks, Winstanley appeals to his reader through creative prose, at one point crafting a medical metaphor to convey his message in the spirit of the topic. As the author's primary concern is with spiritual healing, a sentiment at odds with the receipts at the end of the text, he provides his own advice for mending the soul in the section 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague':

[L]et me advise thee to use this medicine.

Take a quart of true Repentance, mixed with fasting and prayer and put thereto four handfulls of faith in the blood of Christ to which ad as much hope and Charity as you can procure: let a clean Conscience be the vessell to receive all these, this done, boile it on the fire of love till such time as by the eyes of faith you may perceive the darke scum of the love of this world to be obnoxious to your stomach; then with the spoon of fervent prayer make all clear and having added to it the powder of patience strain it altogether in the Cloath of Christs innocency, and drink it for thy morning and Enemings draught;³⁴

He introduces the receipt as a medicine. In *The Christians Refuge*, the medicinal metaphor clarifies the folly of focusing only on the body at the expense of eternity. The language gains impact from its similarity to the plague cures that found their way into many of the printed materials addressing the disease and which often appeared alongside prayers to save the soul. Unlike receipts that combine a multitude of ingredients to cure the body of plague, in 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague' Winstanley appeals to divine healing. In his earlier collection of poetry, *The Muses Cabinet*, the poet employs a similar turn of phrase in the poem 'Contempt', which instructs the reader to 'Turn ore the leaves of famous Poets, swallow/Whole Streames of *Aganippe*'.³⁵ Again, in *The New Help to Discourse*, Winstanley describes his writing as having medicinal qualities:

If thou art melancholy here are rare fancies to make the merry; so that with what disease so ever thou art troubled with, here i[. . .]a Medicine for thy Malady.

*No Mountebank that thou on staged canst find
Can heal the body, as these will the minde.*³⁶

³²Curt F. Bühler, 'Two Renaissance Epitaphs', *Renaissance Society of America*, 8, 1 (1955), 9–11: 10–11.

³³William Winstanley, *The New Help to Discourse: Or, Wit, Mirth, and Jollity Intermixt with More Serious Matters Consisting of Pleasant Astrological, Astronomical, Philosophical, Grammatical, Physical, Chyrurgical, Historical,*

Moral, and Poetical Questions and Answers, 2nd edn (London: 1672), 249–50.

³⁴W.W., 'Heavenly Antidotes Against the Plague', in *op. cit.* (note 2), 10–12.

³⁵William Winstanley, *The Muses Cabinet, Stored with Variety of Poems, Both Pleasant and Profitable* (London: 1655), 47.

³⁶Winstanley, *op. cit.* (note 33), n.p.

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A precedent exists for Winstanley's medicines for the soul and the power of reading. In *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (1998),³⁷ Adrian Johns describes the Renaissance belief in the physiological impact of reading: 'the powerful effects of reading... were not only widely attested, but supported by contemporary knowledge about human beings and the physical world they inhabited.'³⁸ Winstanley instructs his reader to ready the soul through the act of reading and to engage with the text to a spiritual end. The metaphor elucidates Winstanley's perception of the author's important role in plague times, providing spiritual relief by producing texts that could heal the soul through the act of reading. If the act of reading is pivotal, the act of writing gains significance. Winstanley urges his readership to consume these spiritual remedies in the fight against plague.

³⁷Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 384.