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'It is No Time Now to Enquire of Forraine Occurrents': Plague, War, and Rumour in the Letters of Joseph Mead, 1625

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In early September 1625, in a letter to his friend Sir Martin Stuteville, the Cambridge scholar Joseph Mead described women in Essex “crying & howling as if Tilbury camp were to come againe”.¹ Mead’s words hark back to an old danger: that of August 1588, when troops gathered at Tilbury in order to repulse attack by Philip II of Spain’s Armada. The women in Essex wailed, Mead writes, as if they feared a return to an event, 37 years earlier, that had become synonymous with national peril and Spanish threat.

Their fears were not abstract: the long peace between England and Spain, which had endured since the Treaty of London in 1604, had finally been broken. Under the new King Charles, who had acceded at the end of March, England was about to embark upon a naval war with Spain on behalf of Charles’s sister Elizabeth and her husband Frederick of the Palatinate, who were living in exile in The Hague following Frederick’s unsuccessful bid for the Bohemian crown.² Meanwhile, British troops were already fighting on the continent, under the mercenary commander Ernst von Mansfeld; in February they attacked the Spanish Army of Flanders, which was besieging the town of Breda in the Low Countries. Fears of Spanish retaliation were rife, and rumours of a large Spanish fleet preparing to attack the English coast had been current for much of the summer.

In 1588, the Spanish threat had been destroyed by storms, a clear sign, in the eyes of many, of divine assistance: “God blew and they were scattered”.³

1 Joseph Mead to Sir Martin Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9, at fo. 487v. For the spelling of Mead’s name (variants of which include Mede and Meade), I follow the spelling used by D.A.J. Cockburn (see n. 5), which is the one Mead uses most frequently in his letters to Stuteville.

2 See Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621–1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3 A medal struck in Middelburg, the Netherlands, to commemorate the defeat of the Armada in 1588 famously featured the words ‘*Flavit Jehovah*’ [‘Jehovah’ is in Hebrew] *et Dissipati Sunt*—‘God blew and they were scattered’. See the medal held in the Coins and Medals Department of the British Museum, London, museum number M.6898.

However, in the late summer of 1625, such heavenly assistance may have seemed very far away. The country was gripped by one of the most destructive outbreaks of bubonic plague in living memory, and the women in Essex wailed because they had heard “that our King (whom God blesse) was dead”⁴

Mead did not “cry and howl”—as far as we know—but he did write. He had been writing weekly letters of news to Stuteville from around 1619, drawing both on the oral news he heard in Cambridge and on news gazettes and printed pamphlets received from London, England’s primary hub for news. However, what with fear of infection and prohibitions on travel and trade, it became difficult, if not impossible, for Mead to obtain these dispatches. Though he continued to write to Stuteville, his letters from the summer of 1625 contain information about the plague, and rumours such as those he heard from Essex, in the place of reports gleaned from professional newsmongers. In particular, Mead was cut off from his usual sources of foreign news, thus making it difficult for him to assess the truth of rumours regarding Spain’s preparations for war.

In early September, as the trained bands gathered and the plague raged, a perfect storm of rumour centred on two unknowable threats: an invasion fleet lying off the coast of England, and plague bacteria multiplying in the body of the king. Cut off from his usual sources of news, even the self-styled “Novellante” Mead could only observe preparations for war, quiz his colleagues, and speculate darkly.

The wailing women in the streets of Essex—and the provincial letter-writer who reported their cries—demonstrate both the practical fragility of local news networks in seventeenth-century England, and their psychological durability. Although news about ‘*forraïne occurents*’ was scarce, people continued to feel connected to—and threatened by—events on the continent. The rumours of September 1625 demonstrate that moments of crisis or dysfunction in a network such as Mead’s can give us crucial insights both into how these networks functioned, and into the mindsets of people involved in them.

Mead’s News Network

The friendship between Mead and Stuteville was well-established by the time Mead began his letters of news in around 1619.⁵ D.A.J. Cockburn and Brian W. Ball

4 Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9, at fo. 487v.

5 D.A.J. Cockburn, ‘A critical edition of the letters of the reverend Joseph Mead, 1626–1627, contained in British Library Harleian MS 390’, 2 vols., PhD thesis (University of Cambridge, 1994), 1: 35.

both suggest that Mead's connection to Stuteville was a major factor in Mead's appointment to the King Edward VI fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1613. Valentine Cary, master of the college, had opposed Mead's candidacy, but "may eventually have been disposed to view him more favourably" because he was himself friendly with Stuteville.⁶ Mead visited Dalham regularly, and tutored two of Stuteville's sons in Cambridge: the eldest, Thomas, between 1615 and 1618, and John from 1625 until 1628.⁷ John arrived in Cambridge in April 1625, and Mead's letters during the spring and summer contain details of his progress in his studies and the provision of "stuffe for a gowne" alongside items of news.⁸ The progress of the plague, and the protective measures taken in Cambridge, were presumably of especial interest for a father with a son residing in the city.

This relationship was preserved and cultivated through letters. Mead wrote to Stuteville almost every week until Stuteville's death in 1631, keeping his friend up to date with both domestic news from London and Cambridge, and foreign news from all over Europe and beyond. Although Stuteville's home in Dalham was under twenty miles from Cambridge, it was isolated: as Cockburn writes, "it did not lie on any major carriage routes and the difficulty of getting letters there meant that Sir Martin was in no position to receive the detailed reports available to Mead in Cambridge".⁹

On Mead's part, the letters enabled him to maintain a relationship that had proved, and continued to prove, financially and professionally beneficial. His unpaid newsgathering was both a form of sociability—his tone is frequently humorous and fairly informal—and a form of service to a social superior. Mead's subscriptions give a sense both of how he valued his role as Stuteville's news-gatherer, and of the way in which this service took place within an established relationship of patronage. He signed himself "your faithfull Novellante" twice—on 3 March 1621, and 4 May 1622—but generally used some variation on "yours most ready to be commanded".¹⁰

The packages that travelled from Christ's College to Dalham were made up of at least two documents, drawn from a range of sources. First, Mead sent Stuteville a personal letter containing news from Cambridge (including, from

6 Cockburn, 'Critical edition', 1: 29–30; Bryan W. Ball, 'Mede, Joseph (1586–1638)', *ODNB*, ed. by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); <www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18465> [24/06/14].

7 Cockburn, 'Critical edition', 1: 32.

8 Mead to Stuteville, 25 April 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 429–31, at fo. 429r.

9 Cockburn, 'Critical edition', 1: 35–6.

10 Mead to Stuteville, 3 March 1620/1, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 30–1, at fo. 31r, Mead to Stuteville, 4 May 1622, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 184–5, at fo. 184r.

April onwards, news about John), local rumours, accounts of texts he had seen in others' possession, and his own thoughts on events. Secondly, enclosed within these personal letters were usually separate transcripts of news taken mostly from manuscript newsletters, sometimes supplemented with reports from printed sources. At times, Mead also sent Stuteville his own copies of print or manuscript texts: news, prophecies, verse and libels. These parcels demonstrate that news could change once it entered local news networks. The news that passed through Mead's hands was reframed and recontextualised, glossed with his own interpretations of events and his own assessment of the accuracy of the letters, manuscript gazettes, printed news, and oral rumours he received.

Most of Mead's transcribed enclosures of foreign news have the distinctive format of the professional anonymous newsletters, known as *avvisi* or gazettes, which had developed in the sixteenth century.¹¹ News was collated in centres of news exchange, and presented in successive short paragraphs, headed with titles like 'News from Frankfurt': Frankfurt being the centre from which the news was sourced, rather than the place where events took place. As Paul Arblaster writes:

The trade in [gazettes] was enormous, with professional news-writers in all the major cities copying them out in whole or in part, collating them, commenting on their reliability in the light of other news, and passing them on to their subscribers and colleagues. Any competent merchant or statesman would soon be aware of what they contained.¹²

Mead may not have been a merchant or a statesman, but he was well-connected. He received much of his foreign news from three London correspondents: William Boswell, one of the Clerks of the Privy Counsel, the professional newsletter writer John Pory, and the clergyman James Meddus, the rector of St Gabriel Fenchurch. Pory charged his client Viscount Scudamore an annual fee of £20 for weekly letters of news.¹³ However, Cockburn suggests that all

11 For more on the development and form of these texts, see Paul Arblaster, 'Posts, newsletters, newspapers: England in a European system of communications', in *News Networks in Seventeenth-Century Britain and Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 19–34, and Mario Infelise, 'From merchants' letters to handwritten political *avvisi*: notes on the origins of public information', in *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*, III: *Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe 1400–1700*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Florike Egmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 33–52.

12 Arblaster, 'Posts, newsletters, newspapers', p. 20.

13 William S. Powell, *John Pory 1572–1636: The Life and Letters of a Man of Many Parts* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 55.

three men may have “provided [Mead] with news without expecting payment”, as they were all close acquaintances.¹⁴ Meddus appears to have provided much of Mead’s foreign news; he lived near the Royal Exchange, where gazettes and other sources of foreign news were sent.¹⁵

As well as these sociable links, Mead made increasing use of commercial relationships when, as he put it in a letter of January 1623, “purveying for neues”.¹⁶ Mead was writing during a period in which Europe’s news economy was changing rapidly; printed news in particular was being produced and marketed in increasingly innovative ways. In response to the worsening conflict on the continent, stationers in the Netherlands began printing serialised broadsheets of news in English, which they exported to London. Mead included several in his letters to Stuteville during 1621, complete with explanatory annotations. He later makes one of the earliest and most quoted references to serialised news printing in England, in a postscript to a letter dated 22 September 1621. Mead wrote “My Corranter Archer [the stationer Thomas Archer] was layd by the heeles for making or adding to Corranteres &c as they say: But now there is another who hath gott license to print them & sell them honestly translated out of Dutch”.¹⁷ This stationer was ‘one “N.B.”, almost certainly Nathaniel Butter, an experienced publisher who began to produce news broadsheets soon after Archer’s arrest, “at irregular intervals [of] between two and eleven days”.¹⁸ Another candidate for “N.B.” is Nicholas Bourne, who also began to publish quarto pamphlets of continental news around this time. Both men became key members of what Folke Dahl terms “a news syndicate” publishing numbered pamphlets of serialised news.¹⁹ By 1625, Butter and Bourne were publishing news pamphlets together, under the collaborative pseudonym ‘Mercurius Britannicus’.²⁰

Mead appears to have maintained a standing commercial relationship with the London stationers selling printed foreign news during the 1620s, although he repeatedly complains of the freshness and accuracy of these texts. He frequently

14 Cockburn, ‘Critical edition’, 1: 38.

15 See Cockburn, ‘Critical edition’, 1: 37–41.

16 Joseph Mead to Sir Martin Stuteville, 18 January 1622/3, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 272–3, at fo. 272r.

17 Joseph Mead to Sir Martin Stuteville, 22 September 1621, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 121–2, at fo. 122r.

18 Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 132.

19 Folke Dahl, *A Bibliography of English Corantos and Periodical Newsbooks 1620–1642* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1952), p. 19.

20 Dahl, *Bibliography of English Corantos*, p. 133.

includes news from printed texts in his enclosures, often marking it as such.²¹ In March 1623 he sent Stuteville a coranto that he described as worthless and, worse, out-of-date: “nothing but an old repetition of the Holland conspiracie”; but he added that “because I am a customer I must refuse nothing they send me”.²² Two months later he sent Stuteville another “2 bookes”, along with a similar complaint: “there is not so much newes in them both as is worth the money I payd for carriage. But being a customer, I must take one with another & rest contented”.²³

In order to receive manuscript gazettes and personal letters of news from Meddus, Pory and Boswell, and printed news from London stationers, Mead relied on carriers travelling between London and Cambridge.²⁴ Such men were a crucial part of sociable networks: John Earle describes “A Carrier” in *Micro-Cosmographie*, his 1628 book of ‘characters’, as “the ordinarie Embassadour betweene Friend and Friend” who enabled the dynamics of face-to-face interaction to be stretched over wide distances: the carrier resembles “the Vault in Gloster Church, that conveyes Whispers at a distance; for hee takes the sound out of your mouth at Yorke, and makes it bee heard as farre as London”.²⁵

According to John Taylor in *The Carriers Cosmographie* (1637), carriers to Cambridge operated out of two London coaching inns: “The Waggons or Coaches from Cambridge” came to the Bell “every Thursday and Friday”, while “the Carriers of Cambridge” came to the Black Bull on Bishopsgate Street “every Thursday”.²⁶ Both of these inns were a short walking distance from both Meddus’s lodgings and the Royal Exchange: the Black Bull was close to St Gabriel Fenchurch, while the Bell was slightly further away, towards St Paul’s Cathedral. Taylor’s assertions should be treated with caution: Michael Frearson warns that “the *Carriers cosmographie* was without doubt an understatement of the scale of the trade in our period”.²⁷ Whether Meddus took his packages to

21 See, for example, Mead’s transcribed newsletter dated 19 July 1622 (BL Harley MS fos. 218–19), which contains headings reading “Out of Printed newes” (fo. 218v) and “Partly out of Printed newes partly *lettres*” (fo. 219r).

22 Mead to Stuteville, 15 March 1623, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 298–9, at fo. 298r.

23 Mead to Stuteville, 17 May 1623, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 326–7, at fo. 326r.

24 See Michael Frearson, ‘The distribution and readership of London corantos in the 1620s’, in *Serials and Their Readers*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester: St Paul’s Bibliographies, 1993), pp. 1–25. See also Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 122.

25 John Earle, *Micro-Cosmographie, or, a Peece of the World Discovered in Essayes and Characters* (London, 1628), sigs. D4v–D5r. Quoted in Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters*, p. 122.

26 John Taylor, *The Carriers Cosmographie* (London, 1637), sigs. Bv–B2r.

27 Frearson, ‘London corantos’, p. 10.

the Black Bull, the Bell, or elsewhere, however, they appear to have regularly left London on Fridays, and travelled to Cambridge overnight. The news did not then go straight on to Stuteville, however. Meddus's letter usually arrived after the Saturday carrier to Dalham had departed, taking Mead's letter to Stuteville with him.²⁸ Consequently, Mead usually sent the news from Meddus with the following week's letter to Stuteville. Even though the journey from Cambridge to Dalham was a short one, it introduced a week's time-lag.

The carriers travelling between Cambridge and Dalham also seem to have been less reliable than those from London: Mead frequently complains about delays, and occasionally letters got lost or temporarily misplaced. In February 1621 he writes that his previous dispatch, which contained "a great packet of reports" had been "carried farre about by reason of Parkers mans incorrigible stubbornesse".²⁹ The report of a letter's late arrival in November 1622 left Mead scrambling to excuse himself:

It was no fault of mine I am sure, who wrot, sealed & sent the *lettre* before dinner; & I use now & have of long used to make my *lettre* ready before I dine, least the messenger should be gone by twelve.³⁰

There appears to have been a particular breakdown in communication in June 1622, when Mead discovered that the carriers had not been treating his letters with the appropriate "hast":

Because I heare not what becomes of my *lettres*: I find too late, that those I betrust with the deliverie of them make bold to keep them sometimes a week after, they are out of my hands. How often I have bin served so I know not but of late I had given my Sizer a *lettre* to *Master Warner* to leave at *Jeffery Finches*, as I do yours; It concerned some speciall busines that required hast. But speaking with *Master Warner* & finding it & one more never came to his hand, by examination I found both how I had bin abused my selfe & you deprived, as I feare, not that time onely, but divers others, notwithstanding the care I alwaies took not to misse. I pray send me word how often you have wanted my *lettres*. For I am sure that I never missed to write so much as one week since Christmas, & had my *lettres* alwaies ready in time.³¹

28 Cockburn, 'Critical edition', 1: 50–4.

29 Mead to Stuteville, 3 February 1620/1, BL MS Harley 389, fos. 9–10, at fo. 9r.

30 Mead to Stuteville, 9 November 1622, BL MS Harley 389, fos. 254–5, at fo. 254r.

31 Mead to Stuteville, 22 June 1622, BL MS Harley 389, fos. 206–7, at fo. 206r.

Through the carriers, Mead and Stuteville were each connected into a network that linked them all the way to Amsterdam and Venice and Constantinople, and beyond. But this individual epistolary link altered the nature of the news: it made it older. The link could also be fragile. If the carter was ill, or dishonest, or was robbed, or if Mead did not get to the coaching inn before he left, the weekly communication was disrupted.

The Plague

This kind of fragility is demonstrated by what happened to Mead's news network during the summer of 1625. As early as April 5, instructions issued by John Gore, Lord Mayor of London, indicate that the plague had taken hold in the capital and that measures put in place to contain it were proving ineffective. Although "the infection of the Plague is daily dispersed more & more in divers parts of this City and the Liberties therof", Gore writes, "the houses infected have not been, nor yet are kept shut up", despite a "Proclamation, and many Precepts and Orders in that behalfe made and taken, aswell by the Kings most excellent Majestie, as by mee and my Brethren the Aldermen". Gore instructed Londoners to avoid leaving their houses, and not to "come into, or frequent any publike assemblies".³² One of Mead's transcribed enclosures of news, dated 15 April, comments on the precautions taken after this:

Our King is very carefull for the whole Cittie against plague, which in one week is started up from 4 to 10 parishes & most in the heart of the Cittie; the last Billes were 24. The order taken by proclamation is very good & seasonable & may have successe, unlesse the wrath of God do hinder our prevention.³³

Gore's instructions were issued three days after Charles summoned MPs for the first parliament of his reign. The predicted effect of the plague on the parliament is explained in a letter of news dated 22 April, most of which is foreign, presumably sent by Mead to Stuteville but signed "Your Observant Pupill J.S.". It is possible that J.S. was Stuteville's son John, recently arrived in Cambridge,

³² John Goare, Mayor of London, *By the Major. Whereas the Infection of the Plague is Daily Dispersed More & More in Divers Parts of This City* (London, 1625).

³³ Transcribed enclosure of news dated 13 and 15 April 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 422–3, at fo. 422v. Presumably enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 26 April 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 424–5, which does not mention the plague.

and that the letter was a composition or transcription exercise. “Of the Plague”, J.S. writes, “there dyed this weeke 25; the number of infected Parishes is Eleven, and the Citizens hope that yt will cease, otherwise they loose both tearme & Parliament”.³⁴ The parliament was eventually adjourned on 12 July, less than a month after first meeting, because “the infection of the Plague” put members in “manifest perill”.³⁵

Despite the attempts of officials to limit the spread of infection, it didn't abate. London's population density and centrality in trade and social networks ensured that, like in previous epidemics, the city was hit particularly badly. Paul Slack has estimated that 26,350 people died in the city itself: over 20% of the city's population.³⁶ The official bill of mortality for the period December 1624 to December 1625 issued by the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks lists total deaths in London, Westminster and the surrounding villages as 63,001, of whom 41,313 had died of the plague.³⁷ The plague was not confined to the capital. J.F.D. Shrewsbury notes that “Most of the counties bordering on the English Channel seem to have been more or less extensively involved in this outburst of plague”: a particularly problematic situation for a country preparing to embark upon a European war.³⁸ The economic effects of the plague were severe: Charles Creighton writes that it “stopped all trade in the City for a season and left great confusion and impoverishment behind it”.³⁹

The disastrous effects of the plague in London are illustrated by the startling woodcut from the title page of Thomas Dekker's *A Rod for Run-Awayes* (London, 1625).⁴⁰ The image is dominated by a skeleton, dancing on a pile of coffins and holding an arrow in each hand. One arrow points at a group of people—a man, a woman, and a small child—lying crumpled against a haystack in the lower left-hand corner, with the words “Wee dye” over their heads. The skeleton's face and its other arrow point to the right, where men level pikes and halberds at a fleeing band of Londoners—men, women, and children—ordering them to “Keepe out”. Their attempt to escape the plague is in vain: “I follow”, the skeleton

34 J.S. [John Stuteville] to [Sir Martin Stuteville], 22 April 1625, BL Harley Ms 389, fo. 426v.

35 Charles I, *A Proclamation Concerning the Adiournement of the Parliament*, 12 July 1625 (London, 1625).

36 Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (1985; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 7–17, 145–51.

37 Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks, *A Generall or Great Bill for This Yeere* (London, 1625).

38 J.F.D. Shrewsbury, *A History of the Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 338.

39 Charles Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, vol.1, rev. edn. with additional material by D.E.C. Eversley and others (London, Frank Cass, 1965), p. 511.

40 Thomas Dekker, *A Rod for Run-Awayes* (London, 1625), title page.

says to them. Elsewhere in the image, dogs feed on corpses, and bones and human skulls lie unregarded on the ground. Behind it all, the words of a prayer—"Lord, have mercy on London"—flank a cloud from which lightning strikes the city. Inside, Dekker's text paints a doleful picture of a "desolate and forsaken" London.⁴¹ The trades that had sustained the city now figured its ruin: "Few woollen Drapers sel any Cloth, but every Church-yard is every day full of linnen Drapers: and the Earth is the great Warehouse, which is piled up with winding-sheetes".⁴²

Mead wrote to Stuteville on 9 July 1625 informing him that Meddus—as of a week previously, presumably—could no longer supply foreign news:

Henceforth you must not look to be supplied as you were wont. The plague is in the Doctors parish & the rest of our intelligence is fled, & it growes very dangerous on both sides to continue an intercourse of lettres, not knowing what hands they passe through before they come to those to whom they are sent.⁴³

It appears from this that both Pory and Boswell had left the city. Meddus remained behind, but he was no longer able to send Mead his weekly letters of foreign news. The plague had infected his parish, and it was no longer safe for him either to gather news from the Royal Exchange or to send it on. The short walk from St Gabriel Fenchurch to the Royal Exchange was now unsafe for a man whose duty it was to stay away from places where people congregated, and instead to minister to his sick parishioners.

Meanwhile, even if Meddus had made it to a coaching inn with a letter to send, it is unlikely after this point that he would have found somebody to carry it. Mead also reports in this letter that the carriers from London were to be stopped from travelling to Cambridge: "Our Hobson & the rest should have bin forbidden this week, but that the message came too late, howsoever it is his last".⁴⁴ The next week Mead did receive a letter from Meddus—but it "contained nothing almost but lamentation and desire of our prayers". It was "no time now to enquire of forraine occurents".⁴⁵

And after this "forraine occurents" did more or less cease to feature in Mead's letters to Stuteville. There are no separate enclosures of news in the British

41 Dekker, *Rod for Run-Awayes*, sig. D3r.

42 Dekker, *Rod for Run-Awayes*, sig. A2v.

43 Mead to Stuteville, 9 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 472–3, at fo. 472r.

44 Mead to Stuteville, 9 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 472–3, at fo. 472r.

45 Mead to Stuteville, 17 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 476–7, at fo. 476r.

Library volume between one containing news dated 30 June and 1 July (presumably enclosed in Mead's letter of 2 July) and one dated 8 September (presumably enclosed in Mead's letter of 10 September).⁴⁶ Mead does transcribe some foreign news in his letter of 17 July. Immediately following his assertion that it is "no time now to enquire of forraine occurents", he adds a snippet of news about events in Todos los Santos in Brazil, and then proceeds to transcribe another newsletter he has seen into the body of his letter.⁴⁷ However, from this time forward foreign news becomes much less frequent in Mead's letters, and phrased much more in terms of rumour and uncertainty.

It is also clear that printed news texts did not usually reach Cambridge during the epidemic. An unexpected arrival is recorded in Mead's letter dated 30 July, in which he told Stuteville "I send you a Corranto brought me besides expectation & almost against my will", and excused his decision to forward it by explaining that "it was well aired, & smok't before I received it, as our lettres all use to be. nor was the plague then in Paules Church yard, whence it came".⁴⁸ Cockburn suggests that this text was part of a haul of books—as well as oranges and raisins—illicitly imported by the carriers Hobson and Cutchie, who had apparently continued to operate a service from London. The carriers were punished by Cambridge's Plague Court, which dictated measures to prevent and control infection, to "air the books, one by one, 3 times over, in a barn specially provided for the purpose".⁴⁹

This anecdote does, however, demonstrate that printed news texts were still available in London. There is a notable gap in the Stationers' Register over the summer: no publications are registered between 20 July (when Miles Flesher registered Thomas Hastler's sermon *An Antidote Against the Plague*) and 8 November (when Nicholas Bourne registered Daniel Featley's *Ancilla Pietatis*).⁵⁰ However, the fact that stationers did not trouble, or were not able, to register publications does not mean that they did not produce them. In fact,

46 Transcribed enclosure of news dated 30 June and 1 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 468–9. Presumably enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 2 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 470–1. Transcribed enclosure of news dated 8 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 485–6, at fo. 485r. Presumably enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9.

47 Mead to Stuteville, 17 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 476–7, at fo. 476r.

48 Mead to Stuteville, 30 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 478–80, at fo. 478r.

49 Cockburn, 'Critical edition', 1: 71.

50 Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, 5 vols. (London: privately printed, 1875–94), 4: 107. Thomas Hastler, *An Antidote Against the Plague* (London, 1625; erroneously dated 1615 in the online ESTC). Daniel Featley, *Ancilla Pietatis: or, The Hand-Maid to Priuate Devotion* (London, 1625).

printed news appear to have been among a wide range of texts produced during the epidemic. In Thomas Cogswell's words, "as the populace fled the city, the printers grimly stuck to their printing presses in a feverish attempt to gain market share".⁵¹ The promise of profit—whether financial, civic, or spiritual—was enough to keep London's presses running, turning out government orders, instructions and recipes to preserve the reader from infection, and lamentations over the city's sufferings and the sins that God must be chastising. The utter desolation that Dekker stresses in *A Rod for Run-Awayes* is belied by the fact that it was amongst the texts published during this time.

Notably, it appears that Nicholas Bourne and Nathaniel Butter continued to sell serialised pamphlets of foreign news (in their usual irregular fashion) throughout the summer, reporting news from all over Europe and as far away as Brazil and Baghdad. The title page of a pamphlet dated 28 June 1625 gives a sense of the geographical scope:

The continuation of our weekely newes, from the 21. of *June*, unto the 28. of the same.

Containing a discourse concerning the fleetes of Spaine, and Portugal, and the present state of the Bay of Todos los Santos, which was rumoured to be recovered by the Spanish.

The victorie of the Venetians against the Spanish in Italie.

The great warlike preparations both of the French and Spanish with their severall confederates.

The overthrow given to the Grand Signeur by the King of Persia.

The forces which the Emperour and the King of Spaine have in Germanie, and in the Emperours dominions.

The taking of divers Dunkerkeres by the Hollanders.⁵²

Two more of Butter and Bourne's news pamphlets from the summer of 1625 are extant: number 31, dated 22 July, and number 32, dated 4 August.⁵³ The next extant publication in the series is number 40, an undated pamphlet covering

51 Thomas Cogswell, '1625', in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, vol. 1: *Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. Joad Raymond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 589–98, at 595.

52 *June 28. Numb. 28. The Continuation of Our Weekely Newes, 28 June 1625* (London, 1625), title page.

53 *The Continuation of Our Weekely Newes, from the 14. of July, to the 22. of July*, no. 31 (London, 1625; STC 2nd ed., 18507.174); *The Continuation of Our Weekely Newes, from the 22. of Julie, to the 4. of August*, no. 32 (London, 1625; STC, 2nd ed., 18507.175).

the period from 4–26 October, which Folke Dahl dates to the beginning of November.⁵⁴ It is, of course, possible that Butter and Bourne did not publish pamphlets numbered 33–39, and that the numbering of no. 40 is intended to disguise a gap in publication. However, extant copies of the pamphlets preceding and following the gap in the summer of 1625 are extremely scarce, which suggests that the missing seven pamphlets are more likely to have been lost or destroyed than never to have been printed.⁵⁵

Despite the fact that Mead did not usually receive printed news or letters from Meddus, Cambridge was not cut off from textual networks during the epidemic. Mead's letters to Stuteville are themselves clear testimony to the continued movement of people and texts around East Anglia. In addition, although Mead's observation that Paul's churchyard was free from plague may repeat an excuse offered by Hobson and Cutchie, it may also testify to his consumption and dissemination of the weekly bills of mortality from London. Mead frequently transcribed the weekly figures from bills into his letters to Stuteville in various levels of detail, sometimes only giving the total number of burials and the number of these due to the plague, but often giving separate figures for different areas of London: "all the 97 Parishes within the walles", "the 16 Parishes without the walles part within part without liberties &c", and "the 9 Out Parishes".⁵⁶

His letter of 30 July gives an insight into the precautions he took when acquiring this information. Enclosed within the letter was a small printed sheet, which survives in the first volume of Mead's letters at the British Library. This sheet has a long list of London parishes, both inside and outside of the city walls, with blank columns to the right of the names, each headed by the word "Plag". At the top of the sheet there are spaces for a date range, which Mead has filled in ("From the [21 of July] to the [28] 1625"). In the columns, and in the margins, Mead has added figures of plague mortality, with those for "the Totall of all the Buryals this Weeke" and "Whereof of the Plague" (3,583 and 2,471 respectively) highlighted in red ink.⁵⁷ Mead explains his process in the body of his letter:

54 *Number 40. The Continuation of Our Newes* (undated, containing news reports for 4–26 Oct.; London, 1625; STC 2nd ed., 18507.176).

55 There is only one known copy apiece of STC 18507.174, STC 18507.175 (both held at the British Library) and STC 18507.176 (held in Trinity College library).

56 Mead to Stuteville, 4 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 483–4, at fo. 483r.

57 'Clerks Bill', BL Harley MS 389, fo. 479. Enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 30 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 478–80.

I send you the Clerks Bill. You shall not need be afrajd of it, It hath layne by me this 3 weeks, I had a sheet of them, this is the last whereinto. I transcribed with mine owne hand the numbers out of the Kings Bill at the Bookbinders.⁵⁸

At other times Mead refers to enclosed bills of mortality that are no longer in the volume: it is unclear whether these documents were also printed forms in which figures had been added by hand, or the printed bills themselves.⁵⁹

The presence of the bills of mortality in Cambridge demonstrates that texts did continue to move around the south-east of England during the epidemic, and various techniques—airing and fumigation—were employed in order to keep important texts circulating. The plague did not break the domestic news networks in which Mead took part. It did, however, prompt both authorities and individuals to alter their priorities: the movement of texts during infection was a matter of managing risk. The London Bills of Mortality entered Cambridge not because receiving them was not dangerous, but because mortality figures were considered necessary information. Meanwhile, Mead continued to write to Stuteville, and Stuteville to Mead, via known carriers and over a space that was not badly affected by plague. Both men clearly felt that their continued correspondence was worth whatever risk this movement posed, and both knew each other well enough to trust that, should the situation get worse, their correspondent would not risk his friend's life by continuing to write. It is likely that Mead was Stuteville's main source for the plague figures from London; he also sent news of plague mortality in places closer to Cambridge, acquired by word of mouth. Mead thus supplied Stuteville with information that had not only a practical use—tracking the movements of the plague might allow one to avoid it—but a spiritual one. Mead also enclosed a bill of mortality with his letter of 17 July “the more to kindle your devotions on Wednesday”.⁶⁰ Like many of his contemporaries, Mead appears to have seen the plague as a divine punishment, prompting the faithful to repentance.

58 Mead to Stuteville, 30 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 478–80, at fo. 478r.

59 For example, Mead sent a bill of mortality to Stuteville around the end of May, with an explanation: “I send you the wofull Bill of London. It is the generall or the Kings Bill, that you may see the fashion of both, if you knew it not before” (Mead to Stuteville, undated [note at the top of document lists it as “about *the* end of May 1625”], BL Harley MS 389, fo. 450r). See also Mead to Stuteville, 16 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 474–5, at fo. 474r, discussed below.

60 Mead to Stuteville, 16 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 474–5, at fo. 474r.

Spinola's Fleet

The difficulty of obtaining news from London opened up a space for rumour, speculation, and uncertainty, regarding “forraine occurents”. In a letter dated 27 August—about a month after Meddus’s letters stopped—Mead reported a worrying rumour about Ambrogio Spinola, the commander of the Spanish Army of Flanders. Mead wrote, “Tis generall talk here that Spinola lyes at Dunkirk & marvailles wherefore. Some imagine a designe upon Callice, others a feare our Fleet will not go farre from home”.⁶¹

In his next letter, dated 4 September, Mead gives further information, both about Spinola’s forces and about his rumoured intentions:

It holds, that Spinola is at Dunkirk with an Army, & a Fleet of 50 sayle made ready & riding before it. which makes our vulgar maritime people afrayd he entends (if our Fleet goes out of these Seas) to transport his Army into England.⁶²

Mead dismisses this rumour, opining that the “vulgar maritime people ... are more afrayd then hurt”. He does, however, conjecture that Spinola’s move to Dunkirk may be in response to English preparations for war with Spain: “It may be he is somewhat jealous of our Fleet”. “And”, Mead adds darkly, “I could wish he might have just cause”.⁶³ Mead dismisses the idea that Spinola intends to invade England, but he does give some credence to the idea that the Spanish fleet might frustrate the British naval force preparing to depart for Spain.

Between this and his letter of 10 September, however, Mead heard two further pieces of news—domestic, this time—which made the rumours of Spinola’s fleet rather more concerning. The first was of a muster in key coastal defensive positions. Mead wrote, “I shall not need tell you of the suddaine march of our train-men in Essex on munday morning to Harwich & Tilbury ... We heare the like was done in Suffolk at least about Ipswich”. Meanwhile, the trained bands in Cambridge were inspected, and their supplies found wanting:

On tuesday the Justices came hither to see our provision here. & of 90 barrells of powder found never a graine of armes for a 100 men scarce for twenty, & that altogether unserviceable, The pikes all without heads. & the Keeper one Day run away against their coming & is not heard of yet ...

61 Mead to Stuteville, 27 August 1625, BL Harley MSS 389, fos. 481–2, at fo. 481r.

62 Mead to Stuteville, 4 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 483–4, at fo. 483r.

63 Mead to Stuteville, 4 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 483–4, at fo. 483r.

Rumour was quick to connect this increase in military activity to the threat from Spinola. Observable events were interpreted in the light of rumours about the international situation:

What the reason of this hurleburly was, they talked diversly, most agreed upon feare of an Invasion by Spinola. 40 ships (some say 25 & 60 Frigats) being discovered neere our shore to whom a pinnace or 2 being sent to know what they intended, returned not againe.

Meanwhile, word came from Essex, where “it was added, all the Country over, that our King (whom God blesse) was dead, the women crying & howling as if Tilbury camp were to come againe”. Although Mead seems to dismiss this rumour, he gives more credence to a report current in Cambridge:

With us it hath bin a wondrous rumour all this week that His Matie was sick of the Plague, has a sore but by the ... mercifull favour of God & the diligence of his Chirurgions & Physitions was now past danger. & well recovered.

“Till yesterday”, Mead writes, “I thought it a thing in credible & laught at it as an idle rumour”. However, “Master Crane, Reading, Tabor, Dr Ward by name, & other of our heads averred it as true. which made me stagger in my unbileefe”.⁶⁴ This rumour had credible sources on its side.

If the reports of Charles’s sickness were true, this gave a precise and disturbing reason why a Spanish fleet might be present off the coast of England:

It is added that when he first began to be sick (which they say was 3 w since) Spinola had notice given of his danger by some ill Patriots, & thereupon was encouraged to adventure our shoares if it were but to intercept the Successor.⁶⁵

Charles was without an heir, so next in line to the English throne were Elizabeth and her children, who would need to travel by sea from The Hague to take up the throne. In this version of events, Charles was dangerously ill, and Spinola had been tipped off about this by British traitors and was loitering off the coast, waiting to intercept the ship carrying Charles’s successor. This would fatally weaken the already suffering country, and allow the Spanish to succeed where

64 Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9, at fo. 487v.

65 Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9, at fo. 487v.

they had failed in 1588. Trained bands had therefore mustered at Harwich and Tilbury because an invasion was imminent.

Dramatic as this rumour might be, it is not an inconceivable state of affairs. The king's health was a matter of national concern: Mead had sent Stuteville a transcribed newsletter in March reporting that Charles was suffering from a tertian ague.⁶⁶ As the plague spread, Mead conveyed a number of reports that the infection had struck members of the royal household. On 9 July he wrote "Tis true that the Plague was broken out in the Pastry the Kings Bakers Son dying thereof on Sunday & another (a woman) then sick & sent away dyed next day. The bread was all given away".⁶⁷ On 30 July he reported that "One of the Kings Guard died of the plague at Windsore about last Saturday. Whereupon the King, being not farre thence returned no more thither as he was purposed".⁶⁸ The presence of plague amongst the people who guarded the king or prepared his food compromised his safety, which in turn compromised the safety of the nation.

The idea that the trained bands were preparing for Spanish invasion may also have seemed well within the realms of possibility. Tilbury had, famously, been the site of the English muster against the Spanish Armada in 1588. The return of a large number of troops there may indeed have seemed, quite literally, to be "Tilbury camp ... come againe". Reports of imminent Spanish attacks against England—and, crucially, of armed support for such action by domestic recusants—were common throughout the 1620s. Such rumours intensified following Charles's declaration of war against Spain in April 1625.

Dunkirk was the obvious place from which such an attack would be launched. It was close to the English coast, and had been recently remodelled in order to take advantage of a new, heavily protected, approach to the port discovered in 1621; "[a] fort was quickly thrown up to provide artillery cover at the entrance to this channel, near Mardyck".⁶⁹ Along with these strengthened fortifications, "The Armada of Flanders was given additional strength in 1624 when Spain decided to reduce the Army of Flanders in order to concentrate offensive operations at sea".⁷⁰ During the spring of 1625, "Prospecting ventures into the fishing

66 Transcribed enclosure of news dated 18 March 1624/5, BL Harley MS 389, fo. 417. Presumably enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 19 March 1624/5, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 415–16.

67 Mead to Stuteville, 9 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 472–3, at fo. 472r.

68 Mead to Stuteville, 30 July 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 478–80, at fo. 478r.

69 R.A. Stradling, *The Armada of Flanders: Spanish Maritime Policy and European War, 1588–1668* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 35.

70 Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 177.

grounds had begun to yield sufficient information to permit the planning of a major attack".⁷¹ After the surrender of Breda in June 1625 Spinola made Dunkirk his headquarters, and at the time of this rumour he and the Archduchess Isabella were indeed conducting a review of the Spanish fleet at the port ahead of action against the Dutch and English alliance.⁷² There was ample reason to believe that the presence of the Spanish fleet in Dunkirk indicated an imminent attack on England—after all, an English fleet was readying to attack Spain.

Most notable when considering Mead's "stagger in unbileefe" is the fact that the letter of 10 September that carried the rumours of Charles's illness and the imminent invasion was also the first in several months to contain a separate enclosure of foreign news. This short newsletter, dated 8 September, both corroborated the presence of the fleet and connected it to the muster in English port towns:

Upon the long lying of the Infanta & Marq. Spinola at Dunkirk with a great Army, 20 good ships of warre with many other Flatbottomes & Sloupes; our trayned men in the Counties all along the coast are gone to secure the port Townes: Although we hope the Narrow Seas be by gods help well guarded; 25 Holland men of warre lying before Dunkirk to wait on the Spanish Ships there, besides there are 12 of our Soveraignes navy & 8 good Marchants Ships in the Downes, to meet with any Enimie, that shall assaile us.⁷³

The rumour of "ill Patriots" prepared to aid Spinola tapped into fears that were not confined to the ordinary people of East Anglia. Thomas Cogswell describes the actions taken in Leicestershire in 1625 under Henry Hastings, the fifth earl of Huntingdon, in response to rumours "of the local Catholics stockpiling arms, tales of midnight musters in Charnwood Forest, and whispers of a larger Catholic plot across the entire Midlands". Huntingdon "set a watch on the county's powder magazines, while loudly proclaiming it part of a broader scheme to intercept plague-ridden Londoners in order not to tip off the Catholic conspirators".⁷⁴ Following instructions from the Privy Council, Huntingdon

⁷¹ Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, p. 43.

⁷² I am grateful to Paul Arblaster for alerting me to this. See Henry Kamen, *Spain's Road to Empire: the Making of a World Power, 1492–1763* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 2002), pp. 325–6.

⁷³ Transcribed enclosure of news dated 8 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 485–6, at fo. 485r. Presumably enclosed in Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9.

⁷⁴ Thomas Cogswell, *Home Divisions: Aristocracy, the State and Provincial Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 53.

ordered co-ordinated raids on Catholic households in October. This well-executed operation did not turn up the suspected stashes of arms, but it does demonstrate both that the authorities were not immune to rumours of insurrection, and that many believed they could not afford to ignore such rumours.

The strength of the fleet at Dunkirk, and its scouting ventures into Dutch fishing grounds, would also be a very real threat to members of the Palatine royal family travelling from The Hague to claim the English throne in the event of Charles's death. Charles himself had experienced the risks of crossing such fraught waters in September 1623, during his return journey from Santander following his unsuccessful bid to accelerate his marriage to the Spanish Infanta Maria at the court in Madrid. "In the open sea of the Channel approaches", R.A. Stradling writes, "[Charles's] squadron sailed directly into a battle in which 'certain Dunkirkers [Belgian and Spanish privateers, operating out of Dunkirk with Spanish support] and Hollanders were at it pell-mell'".⁷⁵ Charles managed to make peace between the opposing commanders in 1623, but by 1625 England had declared war on Spain, while those next in line to the throne had been opposing Spanish forces and their allies since 1620. Such an encounter would be unlikely to have a peaceful outcome.

These rumours appear to have been particularly troublesome to Mead because he was not in a position to confirm or deny them through his usual sources. His implicit disapproval of the "crying & howling" women is undercut by the fact that he was, at least initially, unable to demonstrate greater knowledge or understanding of events than they had. With access to his usual means of acquiring foreign news, Mead would be in a more privileged position than these women, able to judge the situation more clearly by comparing his sources or, if this failed, at least waiting for the next week's news. Cut off from his usual network, he knew no more than anyone else did, and can only demonstrate his skills as a "Novellante" by expressing worry through measured, doubting explanations rather than through wailing in the street. However, he was in luck: his letter includes a slip of paper added after the main letter was written, with a postscript noting that "a gentleman came to Towne last night ... affirming he had bin at Court within this week, & was sure that for 3 weekes before, the King went almost every day on hunting". Tabor, one of the men who had initially "averred" the news of Charles's illness "as true", "now confesseth he receiued a *lettre* newly, That the King was never sick". Lastly, "a Post came to Towne" from Charles himself, "for 10 Ministers for the Navy".⁷⁶

75 Stradling, *Armada of Flanders*, p. 41, quoting F. Fox, ed., *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol* (Bristol, J.W. Arrowsmith, 1910), p. 208.

76 Mead to Stuteville, 10 September 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 487–9, at fo. 488r.

This postscript conveys a sense of relief: both that the king, and therefore the country, was more safe than previously feared, and that domestic news networks had, to a degree, reasserted themselves. With the arrival of the “gentleman”, the letter received by Tabor, and the “Post from the K.,” Mead was able to employ his skills in “purveying for newes”, comparing reports received at different times and from different sources in order to arrive at the most accurate information.

In the next letter in the British Library volume, dated 3 October, Mead reports that “There are brought into Plymouth 3 great long boats full of Dunkirks who were upon the coasts of Suffolk found sounding the depth of our Channell”. The Dunkirkers “would excuse it by saying they were chased by Hollanders & fled thither for releife. But they are all in prison & lye at the Kings mercy”. “Is not this a strange piece?” Mead adds, underlined.⁷⁷ The rumour of a fleet from Dunkirk in English waters had been proved, it appeared, to have some truth to it. Perhaps most worryingly, those waters were close to where both Mead and Stuteville lived. The capture of the ‘Dunkirkers’ demonstrated the danger that the men could be in from foreign attack: that enemy ships could be a few miles from them, and without reliable news they might never know of it until it was too late.

The rumours of Charles’s death and of imminent invasion proved to be untrue, but the version of events spun out from them through rumour does have a sort of logic. The women that wailed at reports of the king’s death in September 1625 were precipitate, but they were not illogical. After all, there *was* a camp at Tilbury again, and there was a large fleet at Dunkirk under Spinola’s command, from which ships had been sent to assess the feasibility of attacks on Protestant interests. In addition, the plague increased the likelihood of the king’s premature death, and this in turn left the country vulnerable to foreign harassment or even invasion: something against which the troops, in Essex at least, were unprepared to defend.

These rumours demonstrate that, for Mead—and the people he got the rumours from, and presumably plenty of other people around the country—having their connection to international news networks disrupted or even broken did not necessarily mean that they stopped thinking internationally. Networks might be fragile, but a sense of connection was not. The rumour of the king’s death was interpreted in the light of observable military activity, memories of past threats to the nation’s security, and knowledge about recent events on the continent. Mead, and for that matter the assorted rumour-mongers of East Anglia, may have been cut off from news about continental events, but they remained acutely conscious that events in England had international ramifications.

77 Mead to Stuteville, 3 October 1625, BL Harley MS 389, fos. 490–1, at fo. 490r.