

NARRATIVES OF PLAGUE

Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994)

As the Black Death swept across Europe from 1347–51, bringing death and destruction, it seemed to many as though it was the end of the world. Yet, from Florence to England, writers set down their experiences of plague and its immediate aftermath, giving a voice to the despair, confusion and turmoil of those plague years. The Florentine Giovanni Boccaccio compiled the stories of *The Decameron* (Penguin, 1995) in those first years after the plague. The preface to this work is one of the most compelling accounts of the impact of plague on a city. Now, Rosemary Horrox has brought together in *The Black Death* (Manchester University Press, 1994) an extended range of contemporary narratives and records that illustrate not only the details of the epidemic itself but also the concerns of those who suffered through those years as well as the explanations for and reactions to the epidemic.

The immediate impact of the Black Death was often panic and fracture, yet, people were seldom passive in the face of the epidemic. Boccaccio describes the three modes of living by which Florentines attempted to avoid the epidemic. Some would attempt radical asceticism; others hedonism; a third group moderation.¹ While he maintains that no method was effective against the disease, these attempts should not be seen as irrational responses. Rather, they each had their basis in fourteenth century medical theory. In his popular tract, John of Burgundy, for example, prescribed a strict regimen of purgation, fumigation, bloodletting and diet to avoid or to cure the plague.² According to many contemporaneous medical experts, plague was the result of an unfortunate astrological conjunction that released poisonous air that in turn affected the bodily humors of sufferer. Manipulating the humors

through such means would restore the natural balance of the body and assure renewed health. While these theories may seem peculiar and even foolish to modern readers, they did have a compelling internal logic and thoughtfulness that seems to have convinced many in the plague years.

While many did remain in the cities, hoping to earn exemption from the plague through medicine, many others fled. Boccaccio decries such a response as not only ultimately selfish but also self-defeating, for none could escape the wrath of God.³ Certainly, in many cases it would be a futile and even dangerous gesture. Plague was so widespread that there were few places to hide. Moreover, often travelers carried the epidemic with them to their destination. However, it also suggests that people understood that plague was contagious, even if they did not understand the mode of transmission. Given such a realization, flight was a definitive act of self-defense.

Contagion theories also influenced corporate bodies, especially city governments, to definitive action. Boccaccio notes that Florentine officials banned admittance to the city to those already sick and undertook a wide-scale sanitation project.⁴ Similarly, records from Pistoia show the determination of city officials to act, banning the sick from their cities among other hygienic measures.⁵ However, scholars should take care interpreting some of the later regulations, which may have used fear of plague as an excuse to force through legislation for other motives. Certainly, the Milan Ordinances of 1375 appear to be a particularly egregious means for the lord of Milan to seize the property of the sick and those that helped them.⁶

These reactions to plague based on medieval medical theory, both individual and corporate, also imply that many did not fully accept the theory that God's wrath

¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by G.H. McWilliam, Second Edition (London: Penguin, 1995) 7–8.

² Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Source Series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 186.

³ Boccaccio, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Horrox, 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 203

alone caused the epidemic. If such a theory were true, surely the only response could be to pray and do acts of penance. Indeed, such documents as the “Vox in Rama” letter of the Bishop of Winchester in England strongly urged people to rely upon spiritual means of avoiding the plague.⁷ Spiritual responses, both panicked and proactive, certainly existed alongside the secular. The flagellant movement of Germany is an extreme example. Yet, despite David Herlihy’s assertion that such a movement was “massive,” there is little evidence to suggest it achieved widespread acceptance.⁸ Indeed, Heinrich of Herford describes such penitents as “ignorant and stupid,” while Robert of Avesbury notes only one hundred and twenty such men in England.⁹ Rather, most people appear to have continued to pursue a moderate religious course, often alongside other methods, to lessen the plague’s impact. Boccaccio himself seems ambivalent about the singular role of the divine in the epidemic. While he evokes God in arguing against flight, there is little other mention of God in his prologue. Moreover, the failure of medicine to ameliorate the high mortality he attributes either to the incurability of the disease or the incompetence of the physicians.¹⁰

Despite the responses, both secular and spiritual, little availed the people of Europe. Mortality was enormous. Cities and villages were depopulated and the delicate fabric of early fourteenth century society was fractured. Disruption occurred within families, between genders and between the social classes leading to tensions that would ultimately erupt into clashes. Boccaccio particularly evokes the tragedy of family collapse. Parents abandoned children, husbands their wives, brothers their siblings.¹¹ Probably the most meaningful social unit to many before the Black Death, the family was integral to the success of society as a whole. It was seen as a natural structure, a source of strength and continuity. If a parent

could abandon a child, Boccaccio implies, what hope could there be for other, less instinctive relationships, or indeed, for society? Yet, *The Decameron* itself suggests that family relations before the Black Death were not clear-cut or free of lechery. The theme of lust and adultery is common to most of these stories, which had been in circulation before 1348. Nevertheless, according to some narratives, after the plague, Boccaccio’s fears seemed to have been borne out. Thomas Brinton, writing in 1375, bemoans the sins of the English, which included lechery, adultery and a reluctance to marry.¹² Jean de Venette similarly notes that “Evil spread like wildfire.”¹³ However, de Venette also claims that people continued to marry and resumed having children. The truth is hard to gauge by narrative accounts, which bias or ignorance may skew. Brinton, for instance, was writing a sermon and would have cause to over-emphasize sin to make his point. Moreover, such narratives would not necessarily address other potential factors hindering marriage. However, the continuing strength of the family as a societal unit remains clear in the centuries after the plague and so while significant family fracture probably did occur in the immediate years of the plague and some changes did undoubtedly occur in family and gender relations, the long-term effects of the plague were less a reaction to the plague than to the plague among other factors.¹⁴

While the consequences upon family relationships may have been intense yet short-term, those upon the relations between social classes were more profound and long lasting. Boccaccio rues the greed of servants and the rising wages in Florence and seems to show little sympathy for working class aspirations.¹⁵ Other authors, particularly in England, also note the response of the poor and decry rapid wage inflation. The *Historia Roffensis*, for example, saw the rebelliousness of the workers as a sign of the inversion of the accepted (and acceptable) “natural order”

⁷ Ibid, 116.

⁸ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 68.

⁹ Horrox, 152 and 153.

¹⁰ Boccaccio, 13.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Horrox, 141

¹³ Ibid., 57

¹⁴ For an example of fifteenth century family dynamics see Norman Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, Oxford World’s Classics Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Boccaccio, 9.

of society.¹⁶ Of course, tensions had not been absent before the plague years. The stories of *The Decameron* such as the tale of the baker speak to a class tension running through Florentine society.¹⁷ However, in the wake of the Black Death, this tension became acute and ultimately led to open discord. With the labor shortage and land surplus that followed the first wave of epidemic and worsened with later outbreaks, workers sensed a shift in power and began to aspire for higher wages or more rights with regard to land. Governments responded with measures like the Ordinances and Statutes of Labour and the Sumptuary Laws.¹⁸ While the former were rather blunt weapons for attempting to protect elite rights and economic interests, the latter laws speak to a growing unease in the upper classes at the presumption and pride of the “new men.” Clothing was a potent symbol of elite status but now rich peasants and burghers were blurring the lines between noble and lower classes. That must have been profoundly disconcerting to the elite. Yet, working men’s aspirations created an unstoppable force. Government intervention could not suppress aspirations and the attempt to do so created an undercurrent of frustration and anger that grew over the century.

Just as the working classes responded to the consequences of the plague, so to did the clergy. Horrox includes numerous records that tell of a growing greed among regular priests that translated into a demand for higher wages and a refusal to take on the onerous tasks associated with pastoral care. Yet, scholars should not imagine that these tensions did not exist prior to the plague. In the *Decameron*, corrupt and grasping clergy are common; in England, the anonymous political poem known as “On the Pestilence” decries simony and the “limitless depravity” of the clergy; Heinrich von Herford evokes an intrinsically corrupt church in which simony abounds and religious orders were torn apart “as a birth of vipers tears apart the maternal womb.”¹⁹ The plague may have brought

such clerical tendencies to a more public light and certainly seems to have intensified concern over clerical wickedness and lack of responsibility, yet the changes that occurred during and after the plague had their roots in pre-plague tensions.

Examining the multitude of sources on the Black Death, analyzing their context and authorship, can bring valuable new light to the study of late medieval society. Firstly, society – individuals and corporate groups – attempted to ameliorate the damage the plague had wrought. Neither passive observers nor simply panicked mobs, the people of the fourteenth century often responded in ways that were reasoned and reasonable according to the standards of their time. That they ultimately failed to halt the plague should not undermine the value of this effort. Furthermore, no scholar should deny the changes in European society that occurred in the years both during and after the plague in light of the documents that Horrox presents. Class dynamics, economics and anti-clerical sentiment, in particular, had long-term effects on late medieval society. Yet, neither should they define the Black Death as the singular cause of such changes but rather as one – albeit critical – factor that intensified changes and attitudes that had already begun to shift in the pre-plague period. Analyzing a limited range of sources might lead to the first, simplified proposition but with a wider range of sources available, the subtleties of the latter conclusion become more compelling. Thus, Horrox, with this rich variety of sources, has provided a very important tool to historians, enabling a more complex and comprehensive view of their crucial period in medieval history.

¹⁶ Horrox, 72–73.

¹⁷ Boccaccio, day 6, tale 2, 448.

¹⁸ Horrox, 287, 312, 340.

¹⁹ Boccaccio, especially Day 1, Story 2, p 37 and Horrox 126–129.