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Professor Kloss

Eng. 638

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Black Death in Fourteenth Century England

Perhaps it began as inobtrusively in England in the autumn of 1348 as it did (fictitiously) in Oran, Algeria, six hundred years later:

Good
quoting

When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a further thought, continued on his way downstairs.¹

Nevertheless, by the time it would relinquish its two-year strangle hold, only to reapply it four more times that century, approximately "one third of the population living between India and Iceland"² would be destroyed. The killer, then called "The Great Mortality or The Great Pestilence,"³ later given its more infamous names, bubonic plague or Black Death, was to have a lasting effect on those it held under its pall. Therefore, the purpose here will be to take a look at how people behaved in the midst of impending disaster and determine what the twentieth century might learn from this retrospection.

NICE
IMAGE.
SORT OF A
DEADLY
HULK
HOGAN?
HULK?

Certainly, the people of Melcombe Regis (Weymouth), where the plague is supposed to have first entered the British Isles, as well as the rest of the country, were well aware of the

advancing horror:

Men had dreaded its coming for many weeks. Laggard, incomplete, but numerous reports had informed them of an exceptionally rabid pestilence, which in the spring had reaped a heavy human harvest in Italy, Spain, and Southern France. By high summer it was known to be in Paris and Normandy . . .⁴

there was simply nothing that anyone could do, and because no place could provide sanctuary, there was simply nowhere anyone could go. Perhaps, then, the "special prayers, solemn processions, and widespread repentance"⁵ echoed more than just a desperate attempt to beg for mercy. It is just as feasible that William of Ockham's philosophical influence was especially prevalent during this time. Ockham, developing his ideas during his tenure at Oxford in the 1320's, espoused religious beliefs diametrically opposed to the Thomist (disciples of Thomas Aquinas) "synthesis of faith and reason"⁶ which was widely accepted in fourteenth century England. As an answer to the omnipresent question of what could be God's reason for unleashing such fury against mankind, "he argued that religious belief was entirely based on faith, which could not be supported by reason because it was concerned with matters which were beyond the scope of rational argument."⁷ Rather than grapple to find a reason for the plague, "he played down the rational, comprehensible aspect of God's actions and emphasised [sic] the irrational, incomprehensible of God's Absolute Power, which lay behind them."⁸ Thus, one can easily see how, by observing the rampant suffering and death suddenly inflicted upon a large part of the world, the English people

I'm not sure this is necessary; perhaps. I would hope readers would realize the British origin.

of Ockham's time would have embraced the idea of God working in mysterious ways. And, if they needed any further proof, they might have looked, as a case in point, at William of Ockham. In 1326 he was excommunicated, and in 1349 he died, according to many scholars, of bubonic plague.

SICK
TRANSIT
GLORIA
MUNDI?

Of course, the real culprits, present in great profusion throughout fourteenth century England, were the rats and their fleas, which were even more likely to bite people, thus spreading the disease. However, "ignorance of the cause augmented the sense of horror. Of the real carriers, rats and fleas, the 14th century had no suspicion, perhaps because they were so familiar. Fleas, though a common household nuisance, are not once mentioned in contemporary plague writings, and rats only incidentally, although folklore commonly associated them with pestilence."⁹ The main carrier, it seems, was Rattus rattus, a small, black creature commonly found in houses or ships, and not Rattus Norvegicus, a larger, greyish-brown kind normally found in fields and sewers. Though now common and, in fact, "the predominant species throughout Europe ... most authorities are generally agreed that the field-rat was unknown in Europe before the eighteenth century, and that it did not arrive in Britain before 1728."¹⁰ On the other hand, the house-rat was evidently thriving in fourteenth England since, in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the Pardoner tells us:

1 good
instance

And forth he gooth, no longer wolde he tarie,
Into the town unto a pothecarie,
And preyde hym that he hym wolde selle

Som poyson that he myghte his rattes quelle,¹¹ (851-4)

Still, the medieval mind would have little cause to blame the tiny,

rather timid rodent, which had already established itself as a veritable fact of everyday life.

*cf. the mosquito and
"M.A.-A.I.A."*

Besides, there were other causes much more readily perceivable. For some, most notably the scholarly, the plague was the result of air infected by celestial occurrences. John Ashenden and William Rede, two fourteenth century astronomers, "were seriously believed to have foretold the Black Death after studying an eclipse of the moon, and, both individually and jointly, these two scholars wrote several treatises on such topics as, 'The consequence of the coming conjunction of Jupiter and Mars on 7 August 1349', and, 'The significance of the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in October 1365 from calculations made at Oxford in March 1357.'"¹² However, such elaborate theory was confined exclusively to the scientists who could fathom it. "To the people at large there could be but one explanation--the wrath of God. Planets might satisfy the learned doctors, but God was closer to the average man. A scourge so sweeping and unsparing without any visible cause could only be seen as Divine punishment upon mankind for its sins. It might even be God's terminal disappointment in his creature."¹³ The penitent "processions" which resulted did not present a pretty picture:

*Remember the
etymology
of
"disaster"*

Barefoot in sackcloth, sprinkled with ashes, weeping, praying, tearing their hair, carrying candles and relics, sometimes with ropes around their necks or beating themselves with whips, the penitents wound through the streets, imploring the mercy of the Virgin and saints at their shrines.¹⁴

It is also sadly ironic that these processions, often involving thousands of people, lasting for several days, and covering

They also provided a "rational" excuse for open exercise of the sexual mania that pervaded medieval society. Bender 5

distances of many miles, inadvertently helped to spread the very pestilence the penitents had hoped their supplication would end.

And there was one ["]cause["] which was not only perceivable but also most convenient--Jews. For over a hundred years before the plague of 1348 Jews had known persecution and blame:

In 1215 by a decree of the Fourth Lateran Council the Church, then at the height of its power, took a leaf from the Caliphs' [Moslems'] book and ordered Jews to wear a distinguishing form of dress. The distinctive yellow patch, horned cap and other emblems of Cain invited the hostility of those who saw the Jews as the 'murderers of Christ.'¹⁵

When the plague struck, the Jews, already expelled from England, robbed of their property, and deprived of virtually all rights to free enterprise, felt the wrath not only of the disease but also of a diseased society:

The hostility of man proved itself against the Jews. On charges that they were poisoning the wells, with intent 'to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world,' the lynchings began in the spring of 1348 on the heels of the first plague deaths. The first attacks occurred in Narbonne and Carcassonne, where Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires. While Divine punishment was accepted as the plague's source, people in their misery still looked for a human agent upon whom to vent the hostility that could not be vented on God ...¹⁶

There was to be no stopping of the cruelty. Pope Clement VI twice

issued bulls decrying the treatment of the Jews, pointing out that they were as much a victim of the plague as were any Christians. But the people, whipped to a frenzy by their fear, insecurity, and hatred, had their minds set on revenge, not rationality, and the benign Clement's efforts were largely ignored. The slaughtering would, like the plague itself, have to run its course.

Just how disastrous, then, was the Black Death of fourteenth century England? Most people would agree that it was a catastrophe "so unprecedented and so great that it engraved itself upon the collective memory of Englishmen for many generations to come and has coloured the interpretation of the later middle ages by historians of all ages."¹⁷ More than just the economic and social upheaval, gradually brought about by the sudden population shortage, the ensuing rise in labor costs, and the levying of a severe poll tax, would be the suffering which lingered long after the plague had abated. It was not until the people had a chance to start rebuilding their lives that they could pause and fully comprehend the magnitude of their ordeal:

Reaching out to us in the future, Petrarch cried, 'Oh happy posterity who will not experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable.'¹⁸

But is it merely a fable? Or is posterity not quite as happy as the gallant Petrarch prophesied? Medical technology today has reduced the pandemic threat of bubonic plague to an occasional, individual, and isolated case usually well within the limits of treatment. There is, however, in this last quarter of the twentieth century, a plague, already begun, which has a potential equally sinister to that of its predecessor. Were Petrarch or

the fictitious Dr. Rieux alive today, they would see afflicted people gradually waste away to death, and they would read about the steadily increasing number of cases. They would learn an acronym, AIDS, for the disease which breaks down the victims' natural immunity and resistance, thus rendering them targets of opportunity for any malady or infection. They would, in summation, see a brewing pestilence challenging a seemingly sophisticated society.

~~But~~ or I see below ↓

Yet, for all our sophistication, we, like the people of fourteenth century England, are revealing the ugliness that our insecurity has unchained. First we chose to ostracize the homosexual, the supposedly original carrier of this twentieth century plague. Next it was the drug addict, the hemophiliac, and now, apparently, anyone who comes in contact with a contaminated syringe. Worse, children of AIDS victims acquire the usually fatal disease at birth but live long enough to be barred from attending school with unaffected children. We are deeply troubled. Doctors or other so-called experts espouse theories which they cannot prove, and we are left not knowing whether we are safe or imperiled. Thus, if Black Death has taught us anything, it is that society, no matter how advanced, will never be free from threat. It is a disquieting realization, one expressed so succinctly by twentieth century poet E. E. Cummings:

--all nothing's only our hugest home;
the most who die, the more we live¹⁹

yes.

Good
use of
quotation

Notes

- ¹ Albert Camus, The Plague (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 7.
- ² Barbara W. Tuchman, A Distant Mirror (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) xiii.
- ³ J. F. Shrewsbury, A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles (London: Cambridge UP, 1970) 37.
- ⁴ J. J. Bagley, Life in Medieval England (New York: Putnam) 156.
- ⁵ Bagley 156.
- ⁶ George Holmes, The Later Middle Ages (New York: Norton, 1962) 169.
- ⁷ Holmes 169.
- ⁸ Holmes 169.
- ⁹ Tuchman 101.
- ¹⁰ Shrewsbury 8-9.
- ¹¹ John H. Fisher, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Holt, 1977) 229.
- ¹² Bagley 116-7.
- ¹³ Tuchman 103.
- ¹⁴ Tuchman 103.
- ¹⁵ Friedrich Heer, The Medieval World (New York: Mentor, 1961) 310.
- ¹⁶ Tuchman 109.
- ¹⁷ M. M. Postan, The Medieval Economy and Society (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 41.

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18 Tuchman 99.

19 George James Firmage, ed., E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems
(New York: Harcourt, 1968) 560.

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AL,

Very nicely researched and written. I suspect it would be more powerful if you had included, for example, perhaps a II describing the plague's symptoms and course. I believe Tuchman does this at one point. I like the sense of structure here and the notion of an audience as well. If you were to write "back words" - with the parallel's first - and quote Jerry Tallent, etc., you'd have a nice Op-Ed article or magazine piece on kids/Bubonic Plague and mankind's always repeating the same..

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