

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Syracuse Scholar Fall 1980*

Article 5

1980

The Myth of the Black Death

Paul Theiner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>

Recommended Citation

Theiner, Paul (1980) "The Myth of the Black Death," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol1/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

The Myth of the Black Death

Paul Theiner



Paul Theiner has taught English literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard (where he did his graduate work) before coming to Syracuse in 1969. He is the author of *The Contra Amatores Mundi of Richard Rolle of Hampole*; a newly completed edition of Walter Burley's *De vita et moribus philosophorum*; and numerous papers on Chaucer, Middle English literature, medieval French and medieval Latin literature, and literary theory. Professor Theiner is now Chairman of the Department of English at Syracuse University.

Neither my title nor my treatment of this subject is meant in any way to minimize the physical, social, economic, or intellectual impact of the European plague of the mid-fourteenth century; nor is it intended to suggest that the Black Death never existed except in the minds of hysterical chiliasts. My intention is in fact to do quite the opposite: to separate the physical reality from the notion and feeling of the Black Death and to show that the growth of the latter soon took on the lineaments of art. By *myth* I mean such refashioning of the data of experience into art.

The Black Death, for those of us who are professionally engaged in the pursuit of historical questions, is a problem. By that I mean not simply that there are difficulties in the path of our understanding of this complex phenomenon but that the phenomenon itself has been set aside as a topic for study. That is why it often pops up as a subject for a symposium; and why indeed it appears in the Holt, Rinehart & Winston series European Problem Studies, where it has the same conceptual status as the Fall of Rome, the twelfth-century Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the unification of Italy.¹ This conceptual status may be termed a Problem (I specify the capital *P*) to the scholar and critic. It stands in the same relation to scholarship that myth stands with respect to art: Neither conceptual status nor myth as concept is determinative, but in both cases there is an impulse on the part of creator and audience to see and evaluate the results (the work of art or scholarship) in the light of the concept. Consider for a moment the series of investigations—some quite distinguished, some mechanical and pedestrian—in which an attempt is made to read a poem like *Troilus and Criseyde* or *The Knight's Tale* as informed by the concept of courtly love. In the sense I am trying to develop here, courtly love is a myth to the artist and his immediate audience, a Problem to the scholar and critic.

Now let us drop this conceptual question for a bit and look at the Black Death as a problem (with a small *p*). I should perhaps have said a complex of problems; because while the

1. William M. Bowsky, ed., *The Black Death: A Turning Point in History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971). The question in the very title of this attractive and readily accessible collection clearly sets up the problem I am trying to discuss. For the sake of compactness, I have tried to take illustrations from this volume whenever possible.

Black Death is not something from the past about which little is known, it is something about which little is actually understood. Reliable facts from documentary and other sources are missing. It has often been observed, for example, that although economic and social historians have differed widely in their interpretations of the impact of the plague, they are (at least the more recent writers) usually working from the same factual base; they show surprisingly little disagreement with respect to dates, symptoms, prices, even population figures. Where they differ is in the drawing of different patterns of coherence between these facts and other phenomena both earlier and later than the Black Death; that is, in the incorporation of the Black Death into European history.

It is a poor question, of course, that has only two sides, and the significance of the Black Death is not a poor question. Wallace Stevens rather arbitrarily stopped looking at his blackbird after trying thirteen angles; if he had been looking at the Black Death, he would undoubtedly have been at it for some time. First of all it must be remembered that although the plague raged through much of western Europe during the years 1348-50, its effects were by no means uniformly distributed throughout the entire area. Some countries were harder hit than others, of course; but as we narrow the scale further, we see that even within a fairly small area—say, Lincolnshire or the city and environs of Siena or Florence—the actual rate of devastation varied widely from one town or hamlet to another or from one district of a city to another. Thus a historian's estimate of the immediate effect of the plague is likely to depend in part on what locality the historian is studying. In a much more important way than this, the total historical environment of a place and time is crucial to such an assessment. If, for example, we were able to ascertain with absolute accuracy that the plague killed 831,952 people in England and, by some wonder of chance, precisely the same number in Spain, we would still be a very long way indeed from the statement that the plague had an equal impact on England and Spain. What was the pre-plague population of each country? What was the population of each a generation after the plague? Two generations after? What was the death rate from infectious disease in each land before and after the plague itself? What sorts of people were killed in each case? Young? Old? Male or female? Rich or poor? Lay or clergy? The variations on such questions, all of which have a bearing on the overall problem of interpretation, are endless. And if we are posing the questions about a very large entity, as England or Spain would certainly be, then we are faced with the task of asking each question about each of a very large number of smaller entities—cities, villages, monasteries, etc.—and finding ways to weight the answers so as to provide a useful analysis of the entire problem in the country as a whole.

But even all this is, of course, only the barest of beginnings. The "total historical environment" I alluded to above is much

more complex than the sum of all demographic data. If we wish to assess the economic impact of the plague on the city of London, for example, we have to know not only the answers to myriads of questions like the ones above—and they must, incidentally, be posed for many more localities than just the city of London—but also a great deal about the economic structure of London at the time. This probably entails knowing something about the pre- as well as post-plague economic history and structure of London so that comparisons and contrasts may be made. For such matters as price, wages, and availability and sale of certain commodities, we must know as much as we can about all possible causal factors, many of which may be lying unsuspected in some apparently remote field like doctrinal theology.

In the matter of intellectual and cultural history, including the history of art and architecture and of course literary history, the matter is even more complex. None of the conceptual problems faced by other historians is absent here, while a particularly knotty version of the form/content problem emerges to make even more troubles than before. First of all, we must observe that the negative effect of the plague itself, which is so easy for the social scientist to observe, is for the art historian or student of medieval literature a weird and haunting form of null category. That is to say, while the demographer, given some reliable sources of data, can tell us with a high degree of certainty the negative impact of the plague on the succeeding generations' populations, the cultural historian can perform no similarly useful feat. The difference in the two cases is that the very construction of an accurate assemblage and coherent interpretation of data which is substantive for the demographer is merely instrumental for the literary historian—and at that an instrument for which there is no known use except as an impulse to writing elegy.

If, for example, we take a question like, What was the effect of the Black Death on late-fourteenth-century English architecture and poetry? we find that the question in itself seems plausible enough, so accustomed are we to historical questions put in precisely this form. But if we think of the question as analogous to, What was the effect of the Black Death on the economic structure of urban England in the second half of the fourteenth century? we find that although there are two possible kinds of answers, one does not take us to the point of individual works of art, while the other teases us out of thought altogether. The first answer does not take us to literary or architectural history because it is merely a specialized form of demographics; that is, we could say—again given the proper data—that in England 25 percent of all architects and master builders, 30 percent of all stonemasons, 40 percent of all monastic scribes, and 34 percent of all poets known to be alive in 1348 were no longer alive in 1350. We could even go a step further and say that because of this decline in architects and masons, only half as many cathedrals were begun in the second half of the fourteenth century as were started in the first, and that half of the cathedrals

left unfinished in 1348 were never continued, or some such thing. In fact we do have what appears to be evidence of this sort. At Siena, for example an ambitious cathedral plan had been barely begun when the plague struck, and it remains barely begun to this day.² None of these observations, including the last real and concrete one, brings us to cultural history itself, but merely to its suburbs.

The second kind of answer to the question about the effect of the plague on arts and letters can be sobering, exemplary, poignant, even haunting; it is anything but revelatory with respect to the history of art or literature. A flip response would be to offer a reading of selected poems not written because their authors died in the plague, or a slide show of empty fields where there would have been cathedrals except for the demise of their architects. Such an answer, although malicious, is mordantly accurate with respect to art and literary history proper. Again, as in the case of the projected cathedral at Siena, we do in fact have real evidence in the form of the names of many already producing artists and craftsmen who died in the plague—men like the Florentine painter Bernardo Daddi or the English mystic and poet Richard Rolle of Hampole, both of whom were popular and prolific artists up to the time of the pestilence. About such men and many others of similar stature, we could certainly say with great assurance that they would have produced much in the 1350s and even later, had they lived; but the plain fact—*timor mortis conturbat me*—is that their deaths ended their participation in history, which of course can only deal with what is done. There may well be a branch of Eastern mysticism in which the inner mind is ravished by the imagined strains of Mozart's Symphony no. 42, but the frequency range at which this is played is beyond the limit of sounds audible to music history.

If, however, we were to rephrase our original question ever so slightly—by the change of one word, in fact—we could see our way to a new set of responses that hold great promise, no matter how hard the realization of that promise might be. Let us say that in place of the question, What was the *effect* of the Black Death . . . ?” we asked, What was the *influence* of the Black Death . . . ? We would then find our attention directed where it could do some good, namely, on the form of existing works of art and their grouping and articulation in time. The notion of *influence* is after all one of the three most important concepts, along with *period* and *tradition* (or *genre*), in the development of criteria of relevance and cohesion in literary history, the field to which I should like to confine the main portion of my argument. I will trace some of the outlines of influence as it can be perceived to operate in late medieval literature. The perception involved is of course mine and hence, to say the least, radically contingent.

One immediate problem in any such investigation of influence is the separation of strands. If there is an increasingly intense awareness in late-medieval poetry of the physical presence of

2. It is quite possible that the cathedral would never have been completed, plague or not. The project posed various problems, including economic problems, well before the outbreak of pestilence. Nevertheless, incomplete works of this sort are the kinds of things people usually have in mind when they consider the effects of the plague on cultural history.

3. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1956). This is the only accessible reprint of a book originally published in London in 1924.

4. Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: Vintage, 1956). This book was first published in 1936.

5. In Bowsky, *The Black Death: George Holmes, "England: A Decisive Turning Point,"* pp. 91-99; Yves Renouard, "The Black Death as a Major Event in World History," pp. 25-34; and Raymond Delatouche, "European Crisis: The Plague or Moral Decline," pp. 47-55.

death and the impulse to record graphically the surface details of this presence—and surely this awareness and impulse are convincingly logged by Johan Huizinga—then there is still the problem of relating these effects to causes, of which there is never any lack.³ The entire tendency of a myth or of a Problem, as I mentioned earlier, is to isolate the phenomenon in question from mundane chains of causality. The mythical hero's otherworldly, uncanny, or simply mysterious origins—pointed out to us so clearly by Lord Raglan—serve precisely this purpose; and so does the Problem orientation of the Black Death as turning point, or watershed, of late-medieval cultural history.⁴ On the other hand, linking such potentially isolable phenomena to others is the very soul of historical demythologizing. This can be done by so simple a stroke as showing that the famous diva from Milan, said to be the illegitimate descendant of the already deified Caruso, is really the fifth of eleven children of a machinist from Cleveland. Or it can take much more complex forms. In the general history of the fourteenth century, for example, writers like George Holmes or Yves Renouard, who stress the uniqueness and decisive effects of the Black Death are, from the point of view I am developing here, historical myth makers; others, who like Raymond Delatouche choose to emphasize the integration of plague phenomena with other features of medieval history and culture, serve to demythologize the Black Death into the bubonic plague.⁵ We should understand that, for our purposes, at least, it is not a question of which of these approaches is right and which is wrong. All we need observe is that each process reveals a vision of the ongoing process of fourteenth-century history that is denied to the other, even as the visions of two painters or poets are not contradictory, no matter what their differences may be. What I would like to do here is examine three different mid-fourteenth-century writers who were engaged in descriptions of the plague and its effects, in order to see if we cannot detect the development of mythical forms; in other words, to look at the process by which the bubonic plague, a devastating physical disease, took on the dimensions of a cultural crisis. The writers themselves are by no means previously untapped resources; in fact, they are chosen precisely because their descriptions are the most familiar ones I know of.

First let us look at a more or less straightforward chronicle, allowing for the moment that there can truly be such a thing. This is the *Cronaca Senese* of one Agnolo di Tura del Grasso. In its entirety this chronicle covers events in Siena from the year 1300 through 1351 and, for what it's worth, is said by at least one modern scholar to be much more accurate than medieval chronicles are ordinarily thought to be. For us its reliability is not so important as the implications of its form. The beginning of the entry on the plague of 1348 reads as follows:

The mortality began in Siena in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of

the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed to almost every one that one became stupified by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful thing. Indeed one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath their armpits and in their groins, and fall over dead while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and sight. And so they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered over with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled more were dug.

*And I Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands.*⁶

In all of this terribly moving passage there is almost nothing but the recitation of facts and the confession of rhetorical helplessness in the face of the plague's enormity. The items in the report are never longer than the space of a breath: nothing but simple and compound sentences; scarcely any connectives except *and*; almost perfect parataxis; as far as we dare read, a style well suited to the recitation of facts too horrible to assimilate, either psychologically or syntactically. This is even true, perhaps must needs be especially true, of the final crushing sentence: "And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands."

So it goes with the rest of Agnolo's report. Just as the bodies of the dead were often scarcely covered with dirt (one of the things he tells us right after the above-quoted passage), so also his observations and reports can scarcely cover them with words. He resorts to statistics to try to convey the extent of the plague's devastations; he begins to report events and describe scenes from the surrounding countryside. And as this physical and emotional distancing takes place, longer sentences and syntactical complexity begin to appear, until the immediate aftermath is delivered to us in a kind of stylistic serenity that nearly belies the frenzy of activity being described:

The city of Siena seemed almost uninhabited, for almost no one was found in the city. And then, when the pestilence abated, all who survived gave themselves over to pleasures: monks, priests, nuns, and lay men and women all enjoyed themselves, and none worried about spending and gambling. And everyone thought himself rich because he had escaped and regained the world, and no one knew how to allow himself to do nothing.

Considering the moral possibilities that are opened up in this situation, the passage is notably reticent. The pleasures that people give themselves up to seem relatively tame, and all the activity has a psychological plausibility that saps most of the

6. Translations of Agnolo di Tura and Jean de Venette were done by Bowsky and are taken passim (pp. 13-17) from *The Black Death*.

didactic strength Agnolo could have gathered up. By the next year, our chronicler is back to keeping track of social behavior:

1349. After the great pestilence of the past year each person lived according to his own caprice, and everyone tended to seek pleasure in eating and drinking, hunting, catching birds, and gaming. And all the money had fallen into the hands of nouveaux riches.

If we turn from Agnolo to the *Chronicle of Jean de Venette*, we can see events of a cast similar to those recorded by Agnolo—not precisely the same because Jean is writing about Paris and not Siena. The events are given a different articulation, attributable to nationality or to the fact that Jean de Venette was not only a clergyman but in fact a high-ranking one at that, head of the Carmelite order in France and a professor of theology to boot; but the differences are certainly undeniable. Jean begins his account with a prodigy:

In the month of August, 1348, after Vespers, when the sun was beginning to set, a big and very bright star appeared above Paris, toward the west. It did not seem, as stars usually do, to be very high above our hemisphere, but rather very near. As the sun set and night came on, this star did not seem to me or to many other friars who were watching it to move from one place. At length, when night had come, this big star, to the amazement of all of us who were watching, broke into many different rays and, as it shed these rays over Paris toward the east, totally disappeared and was completely annihilated. Whether it was a comet or not, whether it was composed of airy exhalations and was finally resolved into vapor, I leave to the decision of astronomers. It is, however, possible that it was a presage of the amazing pestilence to come, which, in fact, followed very shortly in Paris and throughout France and elsewhere, as I shall tell.

We are here in an entirely different world from the Siena of Agnolo. As you may have gathered from the passage quoted, we are viewing all this from some distance in time, looking backward over a completed narrative. In fact, it appears that Jean de Venette was writing the entries for the plague years in the late fifties or so, about a decade after the events themselves took place. This allows for a certain calm discretion, a recollection in relative tranquility. It also permits the chief structural difference between chronicle, which consists of individual narratives, adjacent or overlapping, and history, which consists of a narrative the beginnings of which are already informed by its end. This point may be illustrated by imagining the difference between a chronicle entry of December 1941 describing the attack on Pearl Harbor and a description of the attack that might be contained in a history of World War II written in 1946. Whatever the merits of the question of whether history as a discipline is an art or a science, narrative histories clearly share many important features with fictional narratives, the most

decisive of which, in my opinion, is this self-informing characteristic of all finished stories.

The astronomical prodigy described in this entry is thus seen, however guardedly, as a portent because the narrative is fully able to describe what it portended—not from divination but from the historical record itself. The portentous quality of the apparition is very carefully expressed. The observation that it could have meant the plague is hedged about with scientific description, but it is there nevertheless and all the more prominent for some of the reservations. For example, the narrative authentications of verisimilitude in detail (“after Vespers”) and in corroborative witnessing (“did not seem to me or to many other friars”) in the long run emphasize the event, even as their short-run effect is to play down the sensationalism. A man who so polishes an object must surely cherish it, unless of course he is trying to enhance its salability.

In Jean we also see the mythologizing of the causes of the plague. It appeared first in the Far East, after which it entered Europe via Italy, from there spreading north and west until most of western Europe, including England, was hit. Even the simplest description of this in Jean’s *Chronicle* gives the pestilence the character of a religious avenger: “This plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers, came to Italy, and then crossing the Alps reached Avignon, where it attacked several cardinals and took from them their whole household.”

To his everlasting credit, Jean de Venette refuses to join the crowd who blamed the pestilence on the Jews, who, it was widely believed, brought the disease on by poisoning the wells. Being careful again to give at least two reasons for his conclusion, Jean suggests that he does not believe the accusation and states: “Such poisonings, granted that they were actually perpetrated, could not have caused so great a plague nor have infected so many people.” To such spurious causes Jean adds both the will of God and “the corrupt humors and evil inherent in air and earth.”

Jean’s report is also filled with journalistic information. We learn a great deal about the persecution of the Jews, the heroic action of the sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu in tending to the sick, the measures taken by Pope Clement VI to insure a religious death to those who died untended, the inflation following the disaster, and even in the entry for the next year a good deal about the sect of Flagellants who flourished so briefly and luridly in the aftermath of the sickness and death. But what is more interesting to us is that the plague, which begins with a portent in Jean’s carefully shaped account, also ends with an air of miracle, paralleling the structure of many a wonder—the life of a saint, for example. Here is Jean speaking again:

After the cessation of the epidemic, pestilence, or plague, the men and women who survived married each other. There was no sterility among the women, but on the contrary fertility beyond the ordinary. Pregnant women were seen on every side. Many twins were born and even three children at once. But the most surprising fact is that children born after the plague, when they became of an age for

teeth, had only twenty or twenty-two teeth, though before that time men commonly had thirty-two in their upper and lower jaws together. What this diminution in the number of teeth signified I wonder greatly, unless it be a new era resulting from the destruction of one human generation by the plague and its replacement by another.

The Black Death of 1348–50 was not the first great pestilence of the fourteenth century, and its overall destruction of life was not appreciably greater than that of the second visitation of the bubonic plague, which set in at about 1360. Yet the presence of a mark, however dubious its authenticity, gave that first plague a status accorded no other such disaster. Its very onset and demise have been shaped into a world historical myth in at least this one chronicle; it has been given that narrative orientation toward its own end and has been assimilated to models of coherence which, as Norman Cohn and Frank Kermode show so conclusively, have long been dominant in Western history and storytelling.⁷

By far the most famous description of the plague is the one given in the introduction to the *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio. This work was written several years earlier than the *Chronicle* of Jean de Venette, but it represents a rather more elaborate stage of artistic development. Of course, the situation of the plague in the *Decameron* is complicated by the fact that the work as a whole is an extensive frame story, a narrative built to contain narratives, and as such it is structurally different from the chronicles we have been looking at. Still, it is our most instructive example of the embodiment of the myth of the Black Death.

The actual setting of the storytelling in the *Decameron* is idyllic, a villa which lay “somewhere on a little mountain, at some distance away from the roads, full of various shrubs and plants with rich, green foliage—most pleasant to look at.”⁸ A glance inside the villa reveals that it contained also the most prepossessing features of civilized existence; it was a handsome palace, decked out

with a beautiful large inner courtyard with open colonnades, halls, and bedrooms, all of them beautiful in themselves and decorated with cheerful and interesting paintings; it was surrounded by meadows and marvelous gardens, with wells of fresh water and cellars of the most precious wines.

All in all, unless it be a moral trap, this is a paradise combining the best features of nature and art. But the setting is itself a scant two miles from Florence, where the plague is raging, and from which the assembled *Decameron* company (surely the Florentine equivalent of the Beautiful People) have fled to save their physical existence by turning life into art. Boccaccio himself is quite diffident about introducing us to the horrors of the pestilence, remarking in his introduction that the agony will not last long, that

7. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 2d. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

8. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella (New York: Norton, 1977), introduction, p. 14. Other quotations from Boccaccio are taken passim (pp. 3–14) from Musa and Bondanella. The translation is quite literal and very faithful to the original syntax and style.

this horrible beginning will be like the ascent of a steep and rough mountainside, beyond which there lies a most beautiful and delightful plain, which seems more pleasurable to the climbers in proportion to the difficulty of their climb and their descent.

The whole of the art of the *Decameron* is seen as an interlude in the reality of the frame story because, at the end of the tenth story of the tenth day, it is to this very plague-stricken Florence that the company returns. What is the city like? Boccaccio is both reporter and analyst. Before he even begins to describe the effects of the plague, he speculates on its causes, mentioning two that, although certainly not proximate, were widely discussed at the time: that the pestilence was brought about either by unfortunate astrological collocations or that it was "sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities." At any rate the plague moved through human agency but was at the same time intractable to the human devices of public health measures. Florence attempted to cleanse itself, to close its doors to the sick and to effect other unspecified steps. It added to this scientific attack a good deal of public and private prayer. But the plague was inexorable.

The symptoms were the plague boils called *gavòccioli*, which appeared in groin or armpit, and then the black spots, which could appear anywhere. The course of the disease ran three days and was almost always fatal, although Boccaccio also claims that it produced neither fever nor any other attendant malady. The real terror lay in its sowing of human confusion. No one knew when it would hit; no one knew what physical causes lay behind it; no one knew how to treat it, neither the real physicians nor the fakers who inevitably arose, like cancer quacks, in the area of great distress. Its virulence was likened to the natural force of fire, and the power of death conveyed by the very rags that had come in contact with the infected was attested to by a kind of inversion of a saint's miracle, wherein Boccaccio claims to have been an eyewitness to the following:

When the rags of a poor man who died of this disease were thrown into the public street, two pigs came upon them, as they are wont to do, and first with their snouts and then with their teeth they took the rags and shook them around; and within a short time, after a number of convulsions, both pigs fell dead upon the ill-fated rags, as if they had been poisoned.

The faithless, having come in contact with the antirelics, do a little dance of death and are immediately seized into damnation, more in obedience to the rhetoric or hagiography than to the laws of medicine.

But the really interesting thing is that even in this carefully constructed plague world the effects of the disease beyond the physical are not simple. There is no single reaction to the Black Death. Some people were moved to consider that the ancient remedy of moderation was sovereign in this matter and banded

together in health communes, where strict dietary supervision was the rule. Here no news of the deaths wrought by the plague was allowed to penetrate, its place being taken by the soothing effects of music “and other pleasures that they could arrange,” as though the whole business was an exhortation from the Almighty to return once again to the virtues of Aristotle. On the other hand, there were those who opted for riotous living—eating, drinking, and wenching to their hearts’ content; not, as one might well expect, from a fatalistic desire to squeeze out the last few moments of delight in the face of the inevitable but rather from a conviction that this kind of activity was conducive to staving off the plague in the first place. Since such debauchery was usually carried on in other people’s houses, and since these houses were available largely because the owners were too terrified to make any kind of resistance to their appropriation, the resulting picture is one of societal chaos. The notions of property and propriety fell together in a heap with the other dead.

This falling apart at the seams is emphasized also in the fact that everyone, including both the adherents of moderation and the followers of Bacchus, agreed on one principle: to abandon utterly anyone who came in contact with the disease. We have already seen how the moderation crowd avoided even news of the plague, let alone its victims; it goes without saying also that the revelers invaded all houses but those of the victims. There was a third party consisting of those who could not or would not go to either extreme. They tried to conduct business as usual—avoiding the sick, of course. Their necessary trademark was the flower or spice bouquet that they carried everywhere, frequently lifting it to their noses to ward off the stench of the dead, the dying, and the noxious medications that were being used universally, if to no avail. In the society as a whole that was supposed to contain these elements, we see the following situation:

In this great affliction and misery of our city the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick or so short of help that it was impossible for them to fulfill their duties; as a result, everybody was free to do as he pleased.

The result was a total disruption of community life. Servants were no longer servile or even tractable. No one would wait on anybody else who was sick unless the attendance was supported by outrageously extortionate payment; and yet such attendance had to be bought at any price because one’s own family would certainly not come near a member who had fallen sick with the plague. The chaos became even greater when the servant who stepped beyond the bounds of the just wage attracted not only a bonanza but also his own case of the plague, whereupon he was abandoned by the lucre that had caused his death. All manner of ceremonial, that rich layer of ritual that is supposed to give shape to our formless existence, faded away. No mourners, for example, would accompany the departed to his final resting place; the mourners’ ritual offices were performed by profes-

sionals (*becchini*), who cared so little about the wishes of the deceased that they would not even take him to his own church for the funeral, merely to the nearest one. Social manners fell along with the religious rituals. Women taken ill, for instance, could not always secure other women to attend them as nurses and therefore would have to be waited on by men, with the following result:

When a woman fell sick, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble she might be, she did not mind having a manservant (whoever he might be, no matter how young or old he was), and she had no shame whatsoever in revealing any part of her body to him—the way she would have done to a woman—when the necessity of her sickness required her to do so. This practice was, perhaps, in the days that followed the pestilence, the cause of looser morals in the women who survived the plague.

This, then, is the world of death, sickness, misery, poverty, baseness, stench, corruption, and blasphemy in which the *Decameron* is set. In order to achieve the repose, or at least the respite, of art, one must secure the means of leaving this environment, to arrive at some Villa Palmieri where the surroundings are more conducive to the production, enjoyment, and contemplation of narratives. There is no question, of course, of the authenticity of the plague-ridden world in the sense that the individual data that go into it can all be confirmed by sources outside of fiction. In this connection we need only observe that Boccaccio's own beloved Fiammetta, in reality Maria d'Aquino, daughter of Robert the Wise, King of Naples, apparently died in the plague of 1348.

But I would like to draw your attention once again to the mythic force of the Black Death. The one thing we notice above all is that the setting of the *Decameron* functions as a locus of causes for a diverse lot of effects that were already well under way when the plague struck. I have already dealt with this theme to some extent, but it is worth repeating. Mythically the Black Death confronts us with the sudden and catastrophic overthrow of societal values in religion, morality, and general behavior that prevailed for centuries in the Christian world. Historically, however, one can find in the Black Death no such nexus of causes. We are certainly long past the time when we could think seriously of the fourteenth century as an extension of the ordered world of the quietly pious Middle Ages, because it just won't do. In the history of England (just to use the one country with which I am most familiar), the fourteenth century was one long series of battles, wars, famines, plagues, riots, murders, robberies, distortions, deceits, and treacheries from one end to the other. From the affair of Piers Gaveston during the first decade to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the Black Death is cushioned on either side with a full generation or more of turmoil. The economic disorders arising from inflation and the like were well under way before the plague hit. It is also the opinion of May McKisack that

the depopulation effects were greater in the subsequent attack of the plague—the *mortalité des enfants* of 1361–62, for example, or the visitations of 1369 and 1379—than they were in the Black Death itself.⁹

From other sources and in other fields we can document equally well that the fourteenth century was more a time of change, often disruptive and violent, than of tranquility and continuity. It was the century when in music history the *Ars nova* replaced the *Ars antiqua*; and certainly a fourteenth-century composer like Guillaume Machaut identified little enough with his thirteenth-century predecessors. In art history (we are speaking now of England) the century produced the first paintings in linear perspective, as well as several distinct portrait styles somewhat later, in the age of Chaucer and the Pearl-poet. In medieval philosophy the century's thought was illustrated by men like Nicholas of Autrecourt; his spirited and trenchant attack on some principles of the Aristotelian logic employed by the Scholastics can be considered more fundamentally telling than the much more celebrated attack mounted by David Hume four centuries later.¹⁰

Essentially, then, I would like to reject the thesis that the Black Death was the great agency by which one form of existence was suddenly and cataclysmically transformed into another, and to substitute a different thesis: The Black Death—not the plague itself but the *idea* of the Black Death as a magnet attracting into its causal sphere the very disturbing trends already present in fourteenth-century life—was in fact caused by the social, artistic, and intellectual upheavals that it has popularly been supposed to have brought into existence. In a sense, then, the Black Death itself is a work of art, or at least a work of the imagination. I shall not insult my readers by stressing the obvious qualification: this does not mean that the plague was less than real. Quite the opposite: the Black Death was more than merely real. If we look back at Boccaccio's little anecdote concerning the hogs who died from eating the plague victim's rags, we can recall that I likened it in form to the kind of miracle that might turn up in any saint's life. Boccaccio's grim description of the mass burial of the dead belongs in the same genre:

When all the graves were full, huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries of the churches and into them the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds; and they were packed in there with dirt, one on top of another, like a ship's cargo, until the trench was filled.

Whether or not this passage accurately sets forth the burial practices of plague-ridden Florence, the fact remains that in spite of Boccaccio's rather broad hint that he is describing with minute particularity, the passage is virtually identical with Thucydides' account of the burial of the dead during a plague at Athens, many centuries and many miles from Boccaccio's situation.¹¹ It would not be surprising, from the point of view of positing the Black Death as myth, to encounter such a borrowing, since the main influence on works of art is always other works of art. Narrative histories need not differ in this

9. May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 331.

10. See Julius R. Weinberg, *Nicholas of Autrecourt: A Study in 14th-Century Thought* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 3.

11. Boccaccio may not in fact have known enough Greek to have gotten this material straight from Thucydides, but his account surely indicates a literary borrowing of some sort rather than a first-hand account.

regard from other artifacts, though their borrowings are usually limited to structure. Nevertheless, the example we have just considered, along with everything else we have seen, serves to illustrate that whatever the bubonic plague was, the Black Death is a magnificent imaginative work and one that owes its formation and continued existence to complex and persistent habits of mind and culture.