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Killing Time: Historical Narrative and the Black Death in Western Europe

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PREFIX

Dates adhere to the Julian calendar. The New Year is 1 January.

Unless otherwise cited, all biblical quotations are translated from the Latin Vulgate.

When this thesis refers to “plague,” it is referring to the generic disease and not to any modern connotations of the term. “Contagion” and “infection” are also used colloquially, not according to a strict epidemiological definition.

Because the term “Black Death” is a construction of early modern historians, I will refer to the 1348-1351 outbreak as the “Great Death,” “pestilence,” or “plague.”

Figure 1



Fig. 1. *Spread of the Black Death (from the original outbreak to its end), 1346–1353.* Source: D. Cesana, O. Benedictow, and R. Bianucci, “The origin and early spread of the Black Death in Italy: first evidence of plague victims from 14th-century Liguria (northern Italy),” 3 in *Anthropological Science*. 2016, Digital Image. Available from: J-STAGE, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ase/advpub/0/advpub_161011/pdf (accessed 7 April 2019).

Introduction

*“And so the terrible violence of death, running through the world threatening ruin, devoured mortals by a sudden blow, as I shall describe below. Mourn, mourn, you peoples, and call upon the mercy of God.”*¹

After years of rumors of a terrible pestilence sweeping like wildfire through central Asia and Asia Minor, plague entered Europe in October 1347 through Sicilian and Italian ports. From 1348 to 1351, the disease gutted the populations of every European country, leaving economic networks and survivors alike reeling in its wake. With medieval population centers packed with people living in close proximity, plague leaped from village to village and city to city.² In each case, plague raged from four to six weeks before the population diminished below its carrying capacity and the “sorrow-bearing pestilence” faded into a nightmarish memory.³ In any given area, the plague would leave one-third to half of the population dead.⁴ Piacenzan notary Gabriele de’ Muissis (1280-1356) offers one of the most haunting records of the first days of the epidemic in his 1348 chronicle *Historia de morbo*. “It so happened,” he begins, “that

when the ships left Caffa— some bound for Genoa, some for Venice, and some to the other parts of the Christian world— a few of the sailors were already infected by the fatal disease. One sick man was enough to infect the whole household, and the corpse as it was carried to the grave brought death to its bearers. Tell, O Sicily, and ye the many islands of the sea, the judgments of God. Confess, O Genoa, what thou has done, since we of Genoa and Venice are compelled to make God’s chastisement manifest. Alas! our ships enter the port but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are

¹ Gabriele de’ Muissis, *Historia de morbo*, trans. A.W. Henschel in Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 16.

² Benedict Gummer, *The Scourging Angel: The Black Death in the British Isles* (London: Vintage Digital, 2014), 128-132.

³ Henry Knighton, *Cronicon Henrici*, trans. J.R. Lumby in Horrox, 76.

⁴ Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy” in *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Fall 1994), 485. For more, see Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, Inc., 1978), 98: “Although the mortality rate was erratic, ranging from one fifth in some places to nine tenths or almost total elimination in others, the overall estimate of modern demographers has settled— for the area extending from India to Iceland— around the same figure expressed in [Jean] Froissart’s casual words: ‘a third of the world died.’ His estimate, the common one at the time, was not an inspired guess but a borrowing of St. John’s figure for mortality from plague in Revelation, the favorite guide to human affairs of the Middle Ages.”

spared. We reach our homes; our kindred and our neighbors come from all parts to visit us. Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn soon infected their whole families, who in three days succumbed, and were buried in one common grave. Priests and doctors visiting the sick returned from their duties ill, and soon were numbered with the dead. O, death! cruel, bitter, impious death! which thus breaks the bond of affection and divides father and mother, brother and sister, son and wife. Lamenting our misery, we feared to fly, yet we dared not remain.⁵

The modern reader can only imagine the terrifying reality these fourteenth-century chroniclers faced as they watched the pestilence creeping towards them. Part of the horror these chroniclers experienced at the approach of the epidemic would have stemmed from its inevitable human cost. At its height in Milan, the epidemic claimed eight hundred lives per day; in Pisa, five hundred per day; in Vienna, five to six hundred per day. Florence, weakened by famine in 1347, lost up to four-fifths of its population while Venice, Hamburg, and Bremen reported losing two-thirds. Avignon, fatally overcrowded, suffered drastically in the grip of contagion. With the current papacy residing in and drawing international attention to the city, local chroniclers embraced lurid descriptions of the mortality as they “let normal exaggeration take wings and put the Avignon death toll at 62,000 and even at 120,000, although the city’s total population was probably less than 50,000.”⁶ Overflowing graveyards left city centers bustling with carts of the dead. Florentine Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (1336-1385) commented that “the bodies looked like a macabre lasagna: corpses piled row upon row separated only by layers of dirt.”⁷ The inconceivable scale of the mortality depicted in these chronicles brings to the modern mind John Ford’s infamous passage: “One news straight came huddling on another/of death! and death! and death!”⁸

⁵ De’ Muissis in Francis Aidan Gasquet, *The Black Death* (Hamilton, UK and Kent, UK: S. Marshall, 1893), 18.

⁶ Tuchman, 98.

⁷ Gummer, 33.

⁸ John Ford, “The Broken Heart” (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1895), V:III:69 in Gasquet, 32.

Echo epidemics would sweep through Europe well into the eighteenth century, yet none would parallel the terror and drama particular to the first, nor would they inflict as violent an injury upon paradigms of historical writing. This thesis explores and evaluates how the Great Death affected medieval historical narrative. I am not explaining the work of medieval historians on the Great Death as a whole, but focusing primarily on how they describe what it means to live through and comprehend the plague. Narrators across the continent reacted to the human devastation with both awed horror and a profound existential confusion. Contemporaries questioned whether the Great Death was the end of the world: French physician Gilles li Muisis (1272-1352), Florentine historian Matteo Villani (1283-1363), and the chroniclers of Padua explicitly compared the epidemic to the biblical Deluge in both ontology and execution. In many ways, as plague traumatized the population, it also devastated medieval historians' ability to continue recording history. Some, such as Kilkenny friar John Clyn (c. 1300-1349), would die as they chronicled the epidemic; others, like De' Muissis, quoted above, would stop their narration, overwhelmed by the human loss they documented. Overwhelmingly, while some authors strove to discern the cause of plague, most seemed shell-shocked, caught up describing the physical, economic, religious, and political casualties they witnessed rather than continuing their historical narratives.

The history-writing of the Great Death displays how medieval narrators grappled with how to conceptualize historical time when the models of historical narrative they inherited could not explain the present moment. I organize my analysis in four chapters that illustrate the following conclusions. Medieval history-writers inherited a model of narrative where people were the actors in history, in which they recognized that there would in the future be a period of apocalyptic time but didn't yet consider themselves in it. However, when the Great Death consumed Europe, historians struggled with how to narrate what they experienced. The older narrative models were irreconcilable with the horrific human and material cost of the

plague. A pattern emerged. The Great Death forced medieval historians to explicitly decide what time they were in within a broader apocalyptic timeline. Plague drove authors to use experimental patch-job models of historical narrative that changed the traditional roles of author, audience, and actor, and gave history-writers a new subject: the narrative people recorded from this period was not a history of people, but a history of plague. The anxiety that accompanied this shift echoed the tensions endemic in firsthand accounts from the Plague of Justinian, raging across eastern Europe eight centuries earlier. These patch-job narrative models, developed in the heat of crisis, served as a stopgap measure to keep the tradition of history-writing alive through the Great Death. In the aftermath of the 1348 epidemic, as plague outbreaks became a constant of life, plague became something people could localize and handle within older narrative structures, and history-writing again stabilized.

Several fundamental curiosities about the broader relationship between historical narrative and catastrophe spur this investigation: To what extent can the impact of plague on medieval narrators be separated from its impact on medieval narrative? Do narrative patterns visible in history-writers' reactions to plague indicate the formation of a larger genre of historical writing— and, if so, what does this imply about narrative as a processing mechanism of catastrophe? And, finally, can what historians learn from the story of the Great Death be applied to other catastrophes and their narratives?

Historians have already produced an extensive body of work on the Great Death. By the early nineteenth century, the reactionary miasmatic fear that for centuries had dominated narratives of plague lessened in favor of a more detached epidemiologic and biohistorical focus. Historians found fascinating the idea of the Great Death as the “beginning of a new age, a break with a decadent past and the ushering in of a more vigorous time.”⁹ Philosopher-

⁹ Faye Marie Getz, “Black Death and the Silver Lining: Meaning, Continuity, and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague” in *Journal of the History of Biology*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 278-9.

historian Egon Friedell (1878-1938) embraced the suggestion that the Renaissance themes of reason, refinement, intellectual curiosity, and scientific knowledge were rooted in pestilence. As he exclaims in his 1927 *Cultural History of the Modern Age*: ““The world that had been, that strange world of the Middle Ages, so limited and so luminous, pure and depraved, soaring and fettered, foundered in misery and thundered into the depths of time and eternity, never to return!””¹⁰ Friedell celebrated the destruction of “universals”—referring to the narrative constant of divinity that permeated medieval history-writing—as yet “another sign that a wonderful new age had begun.”¹¹ Epidemiologists and biohistorians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries embraced the idea of the Great Death not only as a “laboratory for their own speculation on nature and epidemic disease, but also evidence for man’s progress toward a new age, the Renaissance, which was born after a horrible cataclysm just as the world was renewed after the Great Flood.”¹² The obsession with a world rising from its own ashes permeated the writing of these scientist-historians. Studying the “silver lining” of the plague in many ways supported a biologic and anthropological fascination with the ongoing Third Pandemic, a series of major plague outbreaks consuming India and China from 1855 to the early twentieth century. This focus on the biological history of the Great Death shaped much of recent scholarship and led to an obsessive interest in quantifying the Great Death: calculating the death toll and mortality rates, identifying the organism behind the disease (bacteria *Yersinia pestis*), and using this gleaned information to compare past and present epidemics. The huge body of historical analysis, translation, and curation work of medievalists such as Francis Aidan Gasquet, Ole J. Benedictow, and Rosemary Horrox

¹⁰ Egon Friedell, *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, vol. 1, trans. Charles Frances Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1933), 86, qtd. in Getz, 282.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 89, qtd. in Getz, 283.

¹² Getz, 266.

propelled this field forward and buttressed the production of plague scholarship in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

With the popularization of Foucauldian philosophy after the world wars, the historical study of catastrophe focused much more on the way people write about disaster, and what that reveals. In the past fifty years, as Nancy Wood succinctly declares in her 1999 book *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, “Memory is decidedly in fashion”¹³: groundbreaking narrative theory established by academics Hayden White, Gerald Prince, and Dorrit Cohn spurred the application of narratology to historical catastrophes. Disaster theory work from scholars such as Christian Rohr, Alan Mintz, Regina Bendix, Peter Gray, and Kendrick Oliver guides this expanding field. Yet scholars have not yet applied these theories to the Great Death, and so a Great Death-shaped gap remains in the scope of this expanding interest in catastrophic narrative. On a fundamental level, this thesis aims to fill that blank space.

Because non-historical sources from the fourteenth century hold just as great a value as explicit narratives of history, the narrators and narratives that offer us insight into the Great Death span a broad range of genres. We will examine poems, prose, and correspondence from the plague years. Professional historians such as De’ Muissis, Clyn, and English court chronicler Henry Knighton (d. 1396) document the Great Death from both secular and religious institutional backgrounds; authors prolific as Petrarch (1304-1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) lend their own testimonies, as do tax records, Court rolls, and lists of property inheritances.

The creators of these narratives operated within the historiographical traditions of the great writers of the earlier Middle Ages and were deeply familiar with the ways in which

¹³ Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 1 in Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, *The Memory of Catastrophe* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 2.

these authors conceptualized time in their works. To evaluate how history-writers during the plague repositioned the present in relation to apocalypse, it is essential to understand how medieval writers viewed history *before* the contagion hit.

The Medieval Past

This chapter will first lay out the models of historical narrative inherited in the Middle Ages through the mid-fourteenth century, then evaluate in what ways medieval eschatology shaped these various models.

Models of historical time in the Middle Ages

In the late Middle Ages, a majority of written work produced for historical purposes¹⁴ took the form of either chronicle— a continuous narrative— or annal— a series of narratives organized by years. In the chaotic everyday of medieval Europe, historical accounts that dealt “in qualities rather than agents” provided a concise, clean communicative device.¹⁵ The two forms of writing share noticeable traits: both are modes of narration via interconnected vignettes or event blurbs ordered in some way around a common subject. Annals are an older form of historical writing, while chronicle histories emerged during the Crusades, a time of thundering, near-revelatory excitement in medieval memory.

These forms of recording history were conducive to various models of structuring historical narrative. The established framework of historical time in the fourteenth century was an amalgamation of three foundational models normalized over the previous millennium. They are: universal history, eyewitness or vernacular history, and local and institutional history.

¹⁴ The idea of designating a singular form of writing “historical” was alien to the writers of the late Middle Ages. The medieval concept of *historia* could extend from chronicles and annals to works of art, saints’ chronicles, selections from the bible, interpretations of scripture, liturgical writings, epics, and any text or object that could be interpreted as “narrative.” For more, see Michael I. Allen, “Universal History 300-1000: Origins and Western Developments” in Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Historiography in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, The Netherlands and Boston: Brill, 2003), 2-3.

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Content of the Form* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 10.

Universal history

From the fourth to the fourteenth century, the medieval historian's conceptualization of "the past" rested to a large extent on universal history, a conception of the history of human existence based in Christian mythos. This model of historical time conceptualized time as beginning with Creation and ending with a period of divine revelation, as based on the text of the Latin Vulgate.¹⁶ Because universal history contextualized time in terms of the biblical timeline, the medieval recorder was deeply aware of the fragility of human history in the face of divine providence. Medieval authors wrote with the presupposition that history unfolded in accordance with a divine plan, and thus, according to Hayden White, it was "sufficient simply to note its happening and to register it under the appropriate 'year of the Lord' in which it occurred."¹⁷ Ergo, universal histories were often efficiently recorded in annals form, reciting the events of history with little awareness of citation other than the author's fact-checking (itself a vague concept at this point in time. This model of universal history formed from groundbreaking concepts of time-telling produced by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Augustine (354-430 CE). These historians' foundational works were produced over a millennium before the Great Death, yet it would be unfair to study the chronicles of the fourteenth century without understanding the historical paradigms generated by these authors.

Still by the late Middle Ages, Greek philosopher Aristotle's remaining writings shaped many of the scientific and political beliefs held as truth. His temporal theory that "things that last forever are not in time" critically guided historical study because it was understood by Christian historians as saying God, as an eternal being, existed outside of history.¹⁸ It separated divine historical time from human historical time. Aristotle's emphasis on human time as something

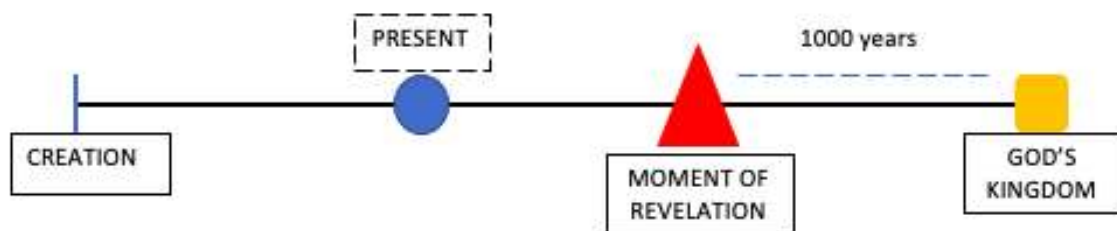
¹⁶ Allen in Deliyannis, 20.

¹⁷ White, 13

¹⁸ Andrea Falcon, review of *Time for Aristotle* by Ursula Coope, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2006), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/time-for-aristotle/>

“essentially *countable*” further normalized historical narrative conceptualized as an unfolding list.¹⁹ Six centuries later, Augustine of Hippo, an early Christian theologian and philosopher living in the Roman Empire, published a temporal model of Six Ages of the World that went on to dominate European concepts of historical time well into the late fourteenth century.²⁰ This timeline begins at Creation. Human history moves forward from Creation through six distinct Ages. According to Augustine, each Age of the World extended for one thousand years between two great milestone events (i.e. the birth of Adam, the Flood, or the rule of King David).²¹ Augustine asserted that the Sixth Age began with the birth of Christ and continued up through the present because the moment of Revelation, which would usher in the final and Seventh Age, the World to Come, had not yet occurred.²²

An image of a “standard” medieval historical timeline according to Augustinian-Aristotelian creed looks like this:



Narrators in all foundational models of medieval history-writing placed the present moment somewhere between Creation and the prophesized apocalypse, which would begin in a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Augustine, *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, trans. Raymond Canning, ed. Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 2006).

²¹ This theory built off temporal traditions from the Old Testament and earlier proto-Christian works. This idea is rooted in the biblical texts of Psalm 90:4 KJV (“For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past”) and II Peter 3:8 KJV (“But of this one thing be not ignorant, my beloved, that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”). Hebrew Kabbalah also asserts, “Happy are those who will be left alive at the end of the sixth millennium to enter the Sabbath, which is the seventh millennium” (Zohar, Vayera, 119a).

²² As the Ages reflected the seven days of Creation, the seventh day on which God rested corresponded to the undefined Seventh Age. This illustrated the human journey to find eternal rest with God, a common Christian narrative.

moment of Revelation. Here, history as a human-centric model would end and a divine timeline would begin. Adhering to the Six Ages model of historical time, scholars expected this revelatory moment to kick off one thousand years of the Antichrist's reign apocalypse before God's kingdom came to be on Earth. God's kingdom was not a concrete image, but an idealized concept of a world sans sin. The bible left unwritten a description of this post-Revelatory world, opening it up to the medieval imagination, with the only known truth that the Seventh Age adhered to divine rather than human historical time.

Augustine's concept of Six Ages interacted with Aristotelian temporal theory to build a strong model of historical narrative rooted in both human and divine time. This model kept the medieval audience recording history up to the present day, no more. Friar John Clyn would display this chilling model of historical narrative in his *Annals*, contextualizing the entrance of contagion into Ireland in 1349:

“And the first age of the world was from Adam to the Flood, and it comprised 1,256 years, the second age was from the Flood to Abraham and it comprised 292 years, the third age was from Abraham to David and it comprised 942 years, the fourth was from David to the migration to Babylon and it comprised 473 years, the fifth was from the migration to the coming of Christ and it comprised 588 years and the sixth age has no fixed sequence of years.”

Universal histories concerned the past, not the present, and apocalypse²³ hovered in the nebulous future as an abstract milestone. Exploring the present moment as a critical event in the larger universal timeline would wait until the emergence of the Crusades and the foundation of “eyewitness” history.

“Eyewitness” or vernacular history

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries ushered in a wholly new model of historical narrative. From 1096 to 1291, the Christian authorities of Europe launched the Crusades, a series of militant Christian quests in the eastern Mediterranean. Armies traveled to retake the

²³ *Apokálypsis*, from the Greek ἀπό and καλύπτω, literally meaning "an uncovering."

Holy Land (Palestine) from non-Christian occupation.²⁴ These campaigns were bloody and brutal, characterized by violence aimed explicitly at Jews and Muslims but often waged against the general population of invaded territories. In large part due to the exoticization of the East in the European imagination, crusading occupied a major space in popular literature for centuries. Along with an influx of material goods and an outpouring of religious fervor, the Crusades brought to Europe a gigantic change in the way writers focused on history. Historians lauded the Crusades. Authors emphasized history-writing as an “eminently honorable role fulfilled by the chronicler as recorder and memorialist,” in comparison to what they viewed as the basic slog of the annalist.²⁵ English historian William of Malmesbury (1080-1143), for example, describes himself in his work as *compiler*, his quest for truth comparable to a crusading knight’s.²⁶ Now, historians had a spectacle to document; now, they had something novel that needed to be put down for posterity. Everyone wanted to get in on the narratives of the Crusades. The romance of Christian conquest had medieval historians striving to share their own eyewitness accounts.

“Eyewitness” or vernacular history differed from Augustine’s paradigmatic model, yet emerged as both a localized trend as well as a popular model of historical narrative in the late Middle Ages. Five centuries earlier, Isidore of Seville (560-636) had stated, “history is from those same times which we saw,”²⁷ and the same emphases on witness and historical narrative comes through clearly in crusade chronicles. As the sweeping socioeconomic and political implications of the Crusades resonated through the West, the sheer scale of this historical event

²⁴ At the time of the Crusades, the term “crusade” did not exist. Historians adapted it as the leading descriptive term around 1760.

²⁵ Peter Ainsworth, “Contemporary and Eyewitness History” in Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Historiography in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, The Netherlands and Boston: Brill, 2003) in Deliyannis, 273.

²⁶ Ibid in ibid, 252

²⁷ “*Historia est eorum temporum quae uidimus.*” Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* in ibid, 252, trans. Kirk Ormand.

reinforced recorders' need to "speak the truth' about what the crusaders had witnessed."²⁸ In crusade histories, then, the genre of chronicle merged with that of memoir and the chronicler's present existence and "personal recollections of what [they] experienced [took] precedence over the objective memory of events."²⁹ Bibliographic citation did not exist in this era of history-writing, and so historians verified their narratives by assuring the reader of their own truth-telling, "[avoiding] picturesque background detail, [and] limiting [their] frame of reference to the essentials of how [they] saw the expedition unfold."³⁰ This trend would continue into the next century of history-writing as well. French historian Jean Froissart (1337-1405) self-designates his narrative role as "safeguard[ing] factual accuracy" over half a century after the final battles of the Eighth Crusade.³¹ Truth-telling, rather than contextualization, consumed the vernacular historian's focus and dictated the relationship between audience and the writing of history in the late Middle Ages. Indeed, the dominance of "eyewitness" history generated a narrative tradition authenticated via and *only* via author participation.

In 1348, therefore, the sheer incredulity with which many experienced the Great Death forced medieval history-writers to contemplate far too many insecurities. To writers, plague seemed unbelievable, surreal, and wholly incomprehensible to any future generations— if they were to ever exist. Historians attempted to rely on the inherited eyewitness model of historical narrative to solidify the realness of their experience. Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio would pursue this reassurance in his 1353 *Decameron*, one of the most lurid accounts of the Great Death in Florence:

"It is a remarkable story that I have to relate, and were it not for the fact that I am one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe it, let alone commit it to paper, even though I had heard it from a person whose word I

²⁸ Ibid in Deliyannis, 259.

²⁹ Michael Zink, *Medieval French Literature* (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995), 18, trans. Ainsworth in ibid in ibid, 267.

³⁰ Ainsworth in Deliyannis, 263.

³¹ Ibid in ibid, 270.

could trust.”³²

Similar to Boccaccio, Italian poet and historian Petrarch found himself straining to justify as valid history what he was seeing. He echoes Boccaccio’s anxiety to the recipient of a 1348 letter:

“Will posterity ever believe these things when we, who see, can scarcely credit them? We should think we were dreaming if we did not with our eyes, when we walk abroad, see the city in mourning with funerals, and returning to our home, find it empty, and thus know that what we lament is real.”³³

Panicked by models of historical narrative that could not accurately make sense of current events, historians would fret about whether the Great Death was worth narrating at all.

Local and institutional history

Local and institutional histories appear frequently in our examination of the Great Death. They allow us to explore how the model of divine providence shaped all breadths of history-writing in the fourteenth century, from the specified records of the monastery to the rolls of the town to the entire history of the world. With the development of urban centers and family institutions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they too became the subjects of historical writing. By the fourteenth century, local and institutional history covered the history of religious institutions, ruling families, and cities as well as the history of monasteries or bishoprics. The annals and chronicles used in the early Middle Ages were adapted to record these complex urban subjects in list format: martyrologies, episcopal diptychs, and, later, the catalogues of abbots.³⁴ The primary historical concern lay in establishing the chronological continuity of the holders of episcopal or abbatial authority. Gesta, or lists of ecclesiastical

³² Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* in John Aberth, *The Black Death* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 194.

³³ Petrarch, letters, 1348, in Gasquet, 14.

³⁴ Deliyannis, 11. See Michel Sot in Deliyannis, 91: *The Liber pontificalis*, or “Book of the Popes,” can be considered the prototype of local and institutional history both “because it was developed [...] from a catalogue that was progressively enriched and continued; [and] because it served as a formal model for the development of those texts.”

appointments, allowed an author to show how political “succession took place [and] how it was a normal succession.”³⁵ The ability to “witness” the beginnings of these institutions imbued them with authority: local and institutional histories became valid only “after these catalogues [had] been established.”³⁶ The universal historical model largely intersected with the local and institutional model as authors strove to authenticate their content: the origin and the contemporary period of local history were emphasized “to show that the local church is rooted in the origins of Christianity” and therefore in divine truth.³⁷

Apocalypse in medieval models of historical narrative

With divine providence already regarded as a proximate fact of human quotidian life, it wasn't a leap to understand that apocalypse metered the history of the world. This was an age in which the expectation of imminent cataclysm governed the present. Michael I. Allen explains that, for a medieval audience, “every dawning day decided the fate of the world and of man”: the universal model of historical narrative established that God's will would eventually run the clock down to apocalypse and everyday reality correlated directly with God's will.³⁸ The idea that the end of human history was proximate didn't stop with Augustine. Apocalypse, to the medieval writer, existed as concretely a milestone of historical narrative as Creation.

By the mid-fourteenth century, the end of the world on the mind was not new, but Revelation did not only manifest in the medieval mind as a fearful future. The belief that humanity would be saved by perfecting itself also ran deep, and Crusade chronicles widely viewed their historical context as a golden age bringing about Revelation through a human

³⁵ Bert Roest, “Later Medieval Institutional History” in Deliyannis, 108-9.

³⁶ Ibid in *ibid*, 91.

³⁷ Ibid in *ibid*, 108-9.

³⁸ Allen in *ibid*, 38.

state of final utopia.³⁹ Augustine's idealized "present of Christian revelation" seemed brought to life once and for all.⁴⁰ However, the implications of this connection grew darker as, in the mid-fourteenth century, plague began to hound Europe's shores. Portents such as natural disasters, wars, and the reemergence of chiliast prophecies dominated the environmental and social stage of the fourteenth century.⁴¹ Heaven on earth no longer seemed the certain aftermath of the apocalypse.

³⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), p. xii in Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, "Introduction" in *The Memory of Catastrophe*, ed. Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 2.

⁴⁰ Ainsworth in Deliyannis, 249.

⁴¹ See Bernadette Williams, *The Annals of Ireland by Friar John Clyn* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 49: "It is not surprising to find that, at a time of great uncertainty, the [Tripoli] prophecy appeared once again— in 1347."

Chapter 2: Killing Time: 1348-1351

*“Wretched, terrible, destructive year, the remnants of the people alone remain.”*⁴²

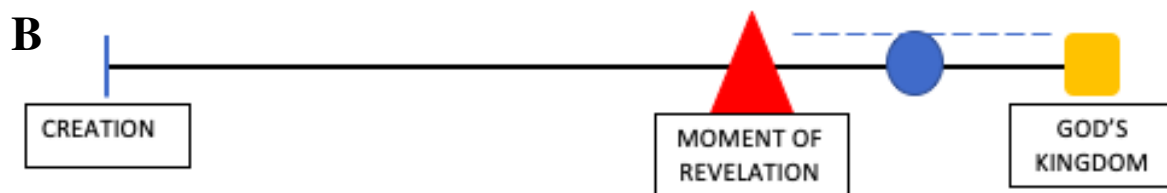
With the dying down of Crusade fervor in the late thirteenth century, universal, spectacular, and institutional histories blended in a model of historical narrative that sustained the depiction of history while adhering to the medieval conception of the world. Historians would maintain this paradigm until the entrance of the Great Death to Europe. Chapter 1 identified inherited models of medieval historical narrative; Chapter 2 examines how the Great Death forced a break from the inherited structures of historical narrative that grounded every aspect of written tradition, and identifies the radical models of historical narrative used in writing from the plague years instead. Chapter 2 also evaluates in what ways the Great Death forced narrators to explicitly decide what moment they were in within a larger conception of historical time. In the assorted media from the Great Death left behind by living and dead alike, three patterns emerge in how medieval authors fit the present in a larger conception of historical time. The overwhelming difference between the three lies in how they interact with the temporal model of apocalypse. They will be explored in depth below.

Pattern A [below] displays a present moment teetering on the brink of apocalypse, not quite *in* the moment of Revelation but careening terrifyingly close. Medieval narrators lived with the knowledge that apocalypse would come, but the Great Death revealed it to be nearer than previously assumed, far too close for comfort. The plague, people concluded, lit the fuse to the moment of Revelation.



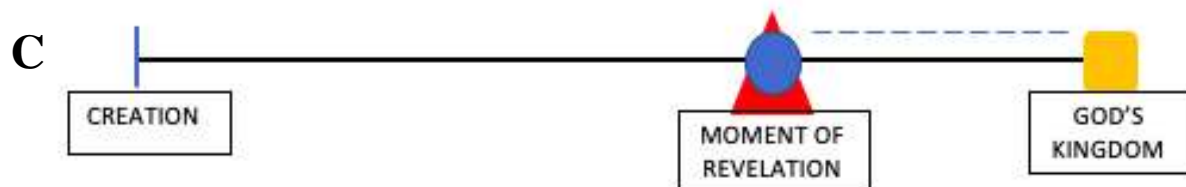
⁴² Carved inscription for the year 1349 at St Mary's, Ashwell, Hertfordshire in J. Bolton, *The World Upside Down', Black Death in England*, ed. Ormrod and Lindley (1996).

Pattern B [below] displays a present moment already past the moment of Revelation, deep in apocalypse. Some writers interpreted their reality as if they literally already lived in the thousand-year span. However, many simply found themselves swimming in an overabundance of time. History-writers saw the past, present, and future of all existence lensing into one another, undergoing liquefaction: namely, destroying the identifiable features of human time. To the medieval author trying to make sense of this chaos, a present moment like this could only be found in the midst of the apocalypse.



Pattern C [below] displays a present moment “paused” in *the* moment of Revelation, rooted in place on the timeline like a bug pinned to a board. The perceived lack of time passing left the medieval population unable to attain their salvific life in God’s kingdom.

Pattern C generated panic on an animal, instinctive level.



The sources gathered for this chapter span traditional civic and ecclesiastical histories, personal wills, exchanged correspondence, poetry, patent and Court rolls, receipts of trade, sermons, and prose. I look to the lurid horror of Clyn’s *Annals of Ireland*, the haunting morbidity of John Gower’s poems, De’ Muissis’ gut-wrenching testimonies, and the overflowing, romantic grief of Petrarch’s letters, as well as the many individuals works people created during the plague years in order to document what they viewed as the end of the world. In the following sources, it’s easy to see why. Please consider the following

content warnings as we begin our examination: testimonies concerning mass death, suicidal ideation, and loss of loved ones.

Pattern A: conceptualizing the present moment as a countdown to apocalypse.

Apocalypse, to a medieval writer, held very different connotations than it holds today. Medieval historians wrote their narratives with the eventual end of time considered a cold fact. *When* apocalypse would happen remained unclear, and therefore historians' writing remained unstressed by the clock ticking down. Even with the end of time distantly on the mind, medieval narrators didn't conceptualize their present moment as anything particularly fragile; in an era of fairly constant sociopolitical casualties and natural disasters, the presupposition of a continuous "human history" soothed medieval narrators' worries. But the cascading horrors of 1348 turned this paradigm on its head. Plague caused a violent break between how people had been living and the moment they were in now. The history-writing from these years reflects this sensational trauma. To the authors who viewed the Great Death as lighting the fuse to apocalypse, plague didn't end the world: what it did was bring the end of time closer to the present, and fundamentally shift how historians positioned the present moment in a larger conception of historical time.

Though chiliasm⁴³ profoundly shaped how pre-plague medieval historians viewed time, it had never manifested as concretely as it did in 1348. While it was impossible to know when apocalypse would fall upon the world, by the end of 1346, it seemed to the eyes of a fervent and fearing Christian population that the fuse to apocalypse was set to be lit. Scholar Faye Marie Getz describes how the "huge mortalities, weird beats, earthquakes, fire, wars, terrors from the East, poisoned waters, fraudulent Jews, prideful women, and, above all, buckets and buckets of blood of the Book of Revelation, then as now, gave the faithful and

⁴³ Synonym: eschatology.

the worried boundless material for rumination.”⁴⁴ Biblical evidence easily conveyed the sobriety of what Gummer calls “God’s use of plague to chastise His enemies, punish His chosen people for their errors and— ominously— inaugurate the end of the world.”⁴⁵

Medieval historians were far from agreement on whether or not, Getz explains, “the onset of this terrible disease was a sign that the ‘day of the Lord,’ the heroic return of Christ to rule the earth for a thousand years, indeed was at hand.”⁴⁶ But they were certain of one thing: even if the plague *wasn’t* the moment of Revelation, cataclysm was rapidly approaching anyway.

The sense of a quickly approaching end of history brought with it both terror and awe, often in bursts of popular eschatological fervor, as noted by the entire slew of plague chroniclers.⁴⁷ A Bavarian chronicler of Neuberg avoids Boccaccio’s florid framing of this trend but echoes the sentiment that “men and women... wandered around as if mad” and let their cattle stray “because no one had any inclination to concern themselves about the future.”⁴⁸ De’ Muissis chimes in as well, remarking that “[the people of Florence] all behaved as though each day was to be their last, and far from making provision for the future by tilling their lands, tending their flocks, and adding to their previous labours, they tried in every way they could think of to squander the assets already in their possession.”⁴⁹ Resurfacing

⁴⁴ Getz, 267. For more, see Dominick Palazzotto, “The Black Death and Medicine: A Report and Analysis of the Tractates Written between 1348 and 1350” Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1973, 84-86.

⁴⁵ Gummer, 19. Many invoked the Ten Plagues called down upon the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, the ailments cast upon Job as a test of faith, the cataclysmic diseases described by the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, or the pestilence sent to cull the Israelites after King David failed to uphold God’s law. The flagship work buttressing medieval eschatology, however, remained the Book of Revelation. See Getz, 266: “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were pestilence, war, famine, and death, and it was this biblical framework, taken especially from the Book of Revelation, that provided the matrix for medieval Christian understanding” of the Great Death.

⁴⁶ Getz, 267

⁴⁷ Tuchman, 103.

⁴⁸ Neuberg Chronicle in Tuchman, 103; Gasquet, 27.

⁴⁹ De’ Muissis in Horrox, 33.

prophecies and eyewitness accounts of eschatological portents served as “proof” that the medieval world had held the right story surrounding apocalypse all along— a narrative along the lines of, *as God wills it, so it shall be*.⁵⁰ However, affirming the certainty that they were living through what the bible promised did not assuage historians’ fear. In the remaining narratives from the plague years, we witness a sense of ruptured faith surrounding the position of the present moment in the face of dawning apocalypse. Narrators displayed this conception of a quickly dwindling history in their writings accordingly.

As soon as plague hit, many historians concluded that the first steps towards the end of time had been taken: “This seems to presage a much greater calamity—” Edward III (1312-1377) writes in September 1349, “—not, I hope, total ruin,” while Archbishop William Zouche (1299-1352) begins his infamous letter to his diocese July of 1348, “Those fighting amidst the miseries of this world are troubled by the uncertainty of a future, now propitious, now adverse.”⁵¹ The hollow terror of these words would ripple through the writings of centuries to come. But it is the infamous works of John Clyn and Petrarch, two chroniclers writing respectively from Ireland and Italy during the plague years, that offer the most thorough look into the medieval historian’s mind as they strove to conceptualize the future, or anxiety thereof.

From Ireland, Clyn produced a full-bodied chronicle that spanned creation to early 1349. Clyn, like his peers, dated the year, month, and day of important events using the major feast days as identification of date.⁵² For example, in his entry for 1294, he notes:

On the feast of the blessed Margaret, virgin [Tuesday, 20 July], there was lightning, and the flashing destroyed grain and, as a result, there was the greatest scarcity and many died from hunger.⁵³

⁵⁰ Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy*, 5, qtd. in Williams, 48-49.

⁵¹ Letter by Edward III, September 1349, trans. C. Johnson in Horrox, 117; letter by William Zouche, July 1348, trans. James Raine in Horrox, 111.

⁵² Williams, 85, 116.

⁵³ John Clyn, *Annals of Ireland*, 1349 in Williams, 154.

His *Annals of Ireland* were not designed as a civic or political history. Realistically, Clyn aimed to produce an account not of some “great epoch-making event” but a general military history.⁵⁴ This sets his writing significantly apart from Crusade chronicles and displays the relative banality of catastrophe present in medieval writing before 1347. He writes about events that caused devastation and human suffering with the same patience as he would any other.⁵⁵ However, in many ways he inherits the chivalric tradition of crusade chroniclers, because his interest is in military actions and knighthood, and we must delve into Clyn’s *Annals* with this narrative arc in mind.⁵⁶ “If [like crusade chronicles] Clyn’s work can be said to have a hero,” historian Bernadette Williams proposes in her 2007 translation, who is the conqueror?⁵⁷ Who is conquered? Clyn’s chronicle leaves this unanswered, but his wealth of eyewitness history offers the modern historian an unequalled chance to delve into how big of a deal the Great Death was, to break up such a casual narrative so distinctly. Indeed, Williams suggests, “[Clyn’s] name would be unknown if he had not identified himself in that entry on the Black Death.”⁵⁸ Only with the haunting genesis of the Great Death does Clyn include himself as a cog in the history he documents.

Clyn, as historians did all over Europe, ensured his readers knew exactly how special, yet contrary, the times he witnessed were. “[1348] was unusual beyond custom, full of wonders and many unusual signs,” he muses, “even though [full] of death and mortality.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Williams, 74.

⁵⁵ Ex., Clyn in *ibid*, 224: “On Tuesday, namely 15 Kal. December [17 November], there was a very great flood of water, such as had not seen for forty years before, that completely overthrew and carried away bridges, mills, and farm buildings. Out of the whole of the abbey of the Friars Minors, only the high altar and steps was not touched or covered by the water. This year was excessively stormy and harmful to men and animals because, from the feast of Andrew [Monday 30 November] until the feast of Vincent [Friday 22 Jan 1339], ploughing ceased because of snow and ice that at that time was continuously abundant.”

⁵⁶ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles* (A&C Black, 2004), 99, 105, qtd. in *ibid*, 72.

⁵⁷ Williams, 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁹ Clyn in Williams, 249-250

1348 seemed the expected yet still shocking collision of vague past with tangible present, with all future cast into question as sweeping mortality shattered the medieval salvation cycle. Instead of circling through the “natural” cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, plague directed that “commonly man and wife with their children and family [went] one way, namely, crossing to death.”⁶⁰ The certainty of a salvific future collapsed along with the population. As Clyn documented how Dublin and Drogheda were “almost destroyed and wasted of inhabitants and men,” so the plague years also destroyed all idea of comparison to past disaster. For validation, it was essential for narrators to establish that this was a cataclysm unseen by any humanity before.⁶¹ “It was not heard of from the beginning of the world,” Clyn emphatically states, “for so many men to have died of plague, famine, and other infirmities in such a time.”⁶² However, it is Clyn’s unknowing epitaph (for he vanishes from the text mid-entry 1349) that moves us to fully confront that, more than just a break in historical tradition, this idea of the present moment standing at the ledge of an uncertain future was a true shift of paradigm. By 1349, Clyn has witnessed the felling of his fellow churchmen by pestilence and documented the stinking mass graves outside of Dublin and Drogheda. He believes, truly, that he’s witnessing the end of mankind:

Now I, Friar John Clyn of the order of Minors and convent of Kilkenny, have written in this book these noteworthy deeds that happened in my time, that [I know] by faithful eye witness or by worthy reliable report. And lest these notable records should be lost with time and recede from memory of future people, [I] seeing these many evils and the whole world as it were in a bad situation, [...] have brought together in writing, just as I have truthfully heard and examined. And lest the writing should perish with the writer and the work fail together with the worker, I am leaving parchment for the work to continue if, by chance, in the future a man should remain surviving, and anyone of the race of Adam should be able to escape this plague and [live] to continue this work [I] commenced.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid, 250.

⁶¹ Ibid, 246.

⁶² Ibid, 248

⁶³ Ibid, 252.

One can only imagine the anxieties and self-doubts Clyn and chroniclers like him experienced, staring into an abyss of a future while the world passed on around them: if any and all readers would perish along with them in this time of scourge, then for whom were they writing? Did recording history matter at all at this point, when apocalypse approached? Clyn never receives the chance to answer these questions. As the question of whether mankind has a future, so evident in the earlier *Annals*, swells under the weight of his fear, it vanishes for good as a new hand finally, literally blots Clyn's life from the record in the record of 1349: "Here it seems the author died."⁶⁴ This ultimate entry reads as last testament to the existential tensions haunting medieval history-writers as they documented the end of the world.

Whereas Clyn structures his chronicle of the Great Death in a military context, Petrarch documents his own experience of the mortality in a series of assorted letters.⁶⁵ Though I encounter his work again as I pursue full exploration of changing models of historical time, I found one of the most poignant testimonies to this first paradigm shift in Petrarch's poem "Ad Seipsum" ("To Himself"). Petrarch published this work after witnessing the deaths of most of his friends and acquaintances. The bleakness of the year is evident in his opening words:

[1] O what has come over me? Where are the violent fates pushing me back to?
 [2] I see passing by, in headlong flight, time which makes the world a fleeting place. [3] I observe about me dying throngs of both young and old, and nowhere is there a refuge. [4] No haven beckons in any part of the globe, nor can any hope of longed for salvation be seen. [5] Wherever I turn my frightened eyes, their gaze is troubled by continual funerals: the churches groan encumbered with biers, and, without last respects, the corpses of the noble and the commoner lie in confusion alongside each other. [6] The last hour of life comes to mind.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid, 252.

⁶⁵ Francesco Petrarca, acclaimed Renaissance scholar and poet often considered the founder of Humanism (20 July 1304-19 July 1374).

⁶⁶ Petrarch, "Ad Seipsum" in *Epistola Metrica I, 14:1-55*, trans. Jonathan Usher.

Immediately, several details from this passage spring to the forefront of our focus. Petrarch, lost in his grief, declares the world a “fleeting place” [2] in which there can be no haven [3]: all that is left for this world, Petrarch writes, is its “last hour” [6]. He declares apocalypse the only direction towards which the timeline hurtles before continuing:

The merciless Fates rush to sever the threads of all life at once, if they can: seeing so many ashen faces of the wretched common people, and so many seeking gloomy Tartarus, I fear that from on high they may have been granted what they wish.⁶⁷

His terror, voiced as a final lament for a passing world, reflects Clyn’s unknowing eulogy as he wonders if there might be a future for the mortal race. For the medieval history-writer, the future was typically unclear and only predicted by biblical or common prophecy; however, Petrarch’s letter conveys the same massive reorganization of this concept as Clyn’s *Annals*. The future, for Petrarch, is uncertain: it’s foggy, fearful; as mankind perishes in crowds, it is looming far, far too close to the present moment for comfort.

In a haunting echo of Clyn and Petrarch’s declarations of ending time, contemporary wills emulate, less prosaic but just as seriously, this implication that the medieval future was no longer certain. Wills existed simultaneously as personal documents meant to pass on property and civic documents meant to verify the passing of wealth under the jurisdiction of the state.⁶⁸ As populations dropped, a radical trend appeared in wills: dedicating tangible goods to the simple, vague expectation of future possession. The deanery of Doncaster provides one such example: Thomas Allott of Wombwell in his will, filed September 14, 1349, requests that “his goods shall be divided among such of his children [...] that will remain alive after this present mortal pestilence.”⁶⁹ The significance of this shift cannot be underestimated. Passing on property was a hugely important interaction in a society where

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ In this case, local courts convened monthly or per season by reigning lords and other authorities.

⁶⁹ Deanery of Doncaster in Gasquet, 63.

wealth and social authority came hand in hand. To so radically restructure the expectation of future possession displays how profoundly the Great Death destabilized conceptions of a certain future in historical narrative, for wills provided an important piece of historical writing as effectively as Clyn's *Annals* or Petrarch's letters.

Even after the easing of the pestilence, this nebulous certainty in a future permeated history-writing. English chronicler Thomas Walsingham (1340-1422) documents that, "with so few hands remaining to restore the work of centuries, people felt [...] that 'the world could never again regain its former prosperity.'"⁷⁰ As political authorities launched programs to reestablish order to a world fundamentally and forcefully rewritten over by epidemic, the anxieties surrounding a proximate careening future would continue to plague history writers for centuries to come. However, this was by no means the only profound paradigm shift occurring in medieval history-writing during the Great Death. The uncertainty of a future only exacerbated Pattern B, a timeline with the present moment positioned simultaneously with past and future in a larger conception of historical time.

Pattern B: conceptualizing the present moment as the post-human future.

The above section highlights how the Great Death's characterization as harbinger of the apocalypse displays the great extent to which many historians questioned the nature of the present moment: *if something as bad as this isn't the apocalypse*, they suggest, panicked, in their chronicles, *what is it?* There was so much uncertainty about present and future that no one knew what to do with time in their writing anymore. Not knowing the timeframe of plague—the countdown to apocalypse—paralyzed many history-writers with anxiety. By positioning the present moment *after* the feared destruction of time, history-writers could at least give themselves an answer: that what scholar James Berger calls the "conclusive

⁷⁰ Tuchman, 103.

catastrophe” had already occurred even though “they were not aware of exactly when it transpired.”⁷¹ In this radical model of historical narrative, past, present, and future become a fluid, violent thing.

For many plague chroniclers, the fear of indiscriminate pestilence consuming the world without conclusion in sight occupied their focus. “What will be the end, or whence this has had its beginning, God alone knows,” prays Louis Heyligen (1304-1361) in his *Sanctus*.⁷² In a 1349 letter in which he requests changes in policy surrounding giving the last rites, Bishop of Cambridge Thomas de Lisle (1298-1361) reminds Pope Clement VI (1291-1352) that the plague is obliterating “all places now, or will be.”⁷³ English notary Galfrid le Baker (d. 1360) echoes this effortless conflation of present and future in his chronicle, describing the present pestilence as “terrible to all future ages,” while Gilles Li Muisis simply terminates the divisions between the two in his register as he demarcates the plague years at Tournai with an almost-desperate, “and time passed on.”⁷⁴ To many, the fuse leading to apocalypse had reached its end: distinction between present and future became irrelevant in this time of transition between the age of man and the reign of God. “What was a body just a short time ago is now a corpse, and what was ashes returns to ashes,” poet John Gower (1330-1408) closes his *Vox Clamantis*: in the grasp of the Great Death, the significance of past, present, and future in history-writing paled in the face of this one-track narrative of human existence.⁷⁵

As the epidemic failed to abate, the ceaseless death inspired history-writers to fall further into this temporal crisis, questioning the existence of past, present, and future in an

⁷¹ James Berger, *After the End: Representation of Post-Apocalypse* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xiii, qtd. in Gray and Oliver, 1.

⁷² Louis Heyligen, *Sanctus* (1348), trans. J-J de Smet in Horrox, 44.

⁷³ Thomas de Lisle in Gasquet, 54.

⁷⁴ Galfrid le Baker, *Chronicon Angliae* in Gasquet, 31; Gilles Li Muisis in Gasquet, 23.

⁷⁵ John Gower, “The Voice of One Crying,” trans. John W. Conlee in Horrox, 351.

apocalyptic time. Gower and De' Muissis offer us two such examples in their firsthand accounts of the Great Death. A contemporary of writers Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland, Gower witnessed the Great Death as a young man living in Kent, a region of England absolutely gutted by disease.⁷⁶ Gower's poetry deals primarily with the moral implications of human suffering, especially as brought about by God. He specifically addresses the interaction between the two as seen during the plague years in his master work, *Confessio Amantis*, exclaiming, "What shall happen in the future God only knows, for at present men see the world on every side in many ways so different, that it stands almost all reversed as from times past!"⁷⁷ Nothing like this horror had ever been seen before, he confirms, yet the present remained invariably connected to a past, no matter how distinct. The power of plague to rewrite historical temporal order overcame this definitional division. This same trend appears in De' Muissis' *Historia de morbo* as he details the plague's entrance into Piacenza. "Oh, hard death," he laments,

impious death, bitter death, who divides parents, divorces spouses, parts children, separates brothers and sisters. We bewail our wretched plight. The past has devoured us, the present is gnawing at our entrails, the future threatens yet greater dangers!⁷⁸

For De' Muissis, there *is* no past beyond the beginning of the epidemic— indeed, the only past he deems "real" enough to document is simply a continuation of the present terrors. The fact that De' Muissis' "past" doesn't lead directly to the present moment then to the future is a startling rejection of the medieval temporal order that previously maintained narrative stability in historical writing. He, Gower, and other plague writers are not the only narrators whose works reveal the emergence of a new tradition of conceiving the positioning

⁷⁶ 119 heads of household perished, as did about 50% of the urban population. For more, see Robert E. Page, *House of Pages* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), 35.

⁷⁷ Gower trans. Gummer in Gummer, 379.

⁷⁸ De' Muissis in Horrox, 19-20.

of the present in historical time; Petrarch's anguished poem "Life flies, and never stays an hour" offers a fantastic lens through which to examine this change.

On 19 May 1348, Petrarch received a letter from an Avignonesi friend informing him that his lifelong muse, Laura (de Noves), died from plague. Petrarch, devastated by her death, went on to write the two hundred seventy-second poem of his *Canzoniere* as a lament of the personal suffering brought onto him by the Great Death:

[1] Life hurries on, frantic refugee, and Death, with great forced marches, follows fast; and all the present leagues with all the past and all the future to make war on me. [2] Anticipation joins to memory to search my soul with daggers; and at last, did not damnation set me so aghast, I'd put an end to thinking, and be free. [3] The few glad moments that my heart has known return to me; then I foresee in dread the winds upgathering against my ways, [4] storm in the harbor, and the pilot prone, the mast and rigging down; and dark and dead the lovely lights whereon I used to gaze.⁷⁹

Within a single stanza, Petrarch's conceptions of past and future have blended together in a single, nightmarish present. There's no suggestion of a temporal space, distinct and in between, in which an individual can survive: there is life just out of reach ahead, death chasing behind, and unchanging war occupying the middle. Unrelenting, he pictures himself [3] not as a sailor or a pilot but as a passenger tossed along on the waves, directionless and untethered. There is no orientation point for Petrarch here—no escape in a *how* or *why*—just as the people of poor Parma suffered as their philosophers, priests, and political leaders failed to explain the plague's causality.⁸⁰ Without a distinct direction, Petrarch suggests, one can only watch and wait for future calamity [3] to hit. Once again, the audience finds itself caught in liminal historical space: life flees ahead of the present; death stands in the way of humanity ever catching up. There is no suggestion of moving on to be found by the reader, here. Again,

⁷⁹ Petrarch, "La vita fugge e non s'arresta un' ora," trans. Morris Bishop in *The Rhymes of Francesco Petrarca*, comp. Thomas G. Bergin (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1954), 47.

⁸⁰ See Petrarch, letter to brother (1348): "Consult your historians, they are silent; question your doctors, they are dumb; seek an answer from your philosophers, they shrug their shoulders and frown, and with their fingers to their lips bid you be silent."

there is only past and future horrifyingly conflated, simultaneously rhetorically impossible to reach and endlessly made present. Petrarch finalizes this nightmarish conceptualization in his final stanza, placing himself back in the still, silent harbor [4]. There is no temporal movement left at all, in the end; Petrarch offers his reader only dead space, and death. Here, the audience rests.

This short poem offers a significant opportunity for questions concerning the foundation of this thesis. Does the temporal rhetoric used above display a *real* belief that past and future don't matter— maybe, don't exist— anymore, here in Petrarch's plague year? Would this rhetoric have been used if it weren't for Laura's death and the personal wound it inflicted upon Petrarch's psyche? Would Petrarch's other writings support this claim? Would it be possible to assert this claim as a *universal* plague experience? To drive further into these queries, this survey proceeds to explore a model of pre-salvific time, or a conceptualization of the present moment "paused" in the moment of apocalypse.

Pattern C: conceptualizing the present moment in the moment of apocalypse.

On 31 December 1352, Bishop Edyndon of St. Swithon's priory in Winchester writes to the prior and convent that "he has heard how the temporalities have suffered severely 'in these days.'"⁸¹ Though Edyndon's use of *temporalities* in his letter refers to the priory's properties and revenues, the colloquial version of the term holds just as true: a deep panic relating to the sense of a ruptured timeline pervades the record-keeping from the plague years. This third section examines how medieval history-writers conceptualized a "paused" present moment as they strove to adapt their larger conception of historical time to the devastation witnessed around them. Where the first section of this chapter centers around the present moment lighting the fuse to an apocalyptic future, this section places the present

⁸¹ Gasquet, 74.

moment smack in the middle of the apocalypse with the future embraced as a salvific age.

Where the second section relies on the idea of a post-apocalyptic present conflated with past and future but still moving, this model grounds itself in the idea of the present moment frozen in place like a bug (perhaps a rat flea?) pinned to a board.

Once again, Petrarch's writings in response to the Great Death offer us a lens into this terrifying temporal model. His *Ad Seipsum* ("To Himself"), a letter later transcribed by Boccaccio, shares similarities to Boccaccio's *Decameron* as well as Petrarch's own *Penitential Psalms* and *Familiars VIII*, 4 and 7 (both datable to 1349). In this letter, Petrarch obsesses over the plague's uncertain causality in a vein common to plague writing during this time. As with many survivors of the pestilence, his guilt and bewilderment at his own survival manifests as a fascination with human mortality and vulnerability, and a sense of societal fragility permeates his prose.⁸² "[1] Thus, like the mariner caught in a dangerous storm, before whose eyes cruel Neptune has sucked down the other ships in the convoy, who hears the fragile keel cracking in the belly of his ship and the splintering of the oars as they are dashed against the reefs, and sees the rudder carried away amongst the terrifying waves, I hesitate uncertain as to what to do, though certain of the peril," Petrarch muses,

[2] no differently, where unnoticed a deadly fire has taken hold of ancient timbers and greedy flame licks resin-rich floorboards, the household, aroused by the commotion, suddenly gets out of bed, and the father, before anyone else, rushes up to the top of the roof, gazing about him, and grasping his trembling son seeks to save him first from the dangerous fire, and works out in his mind how to escape with this burden through the opposing flames. [3] Often in fear clasping to myself my helpless soul I too wonder whether there is an escape-route to carry it out from the conflagration and I am minded to extinguish the bodily flames with the water of tears. [4] But the world holds me back. [5] Headstrong desire draws me

⁸² Horrox, 244. See Horrox, 236: "In the cultural arena it is now more widely recognized that people under pressure are likely to articulate their anxieties in ways which are already familiar to them, and that cultural continuities spanning the plague cannot therefore be taken as evidence for the insignificance of those anxieties, or of the upheaval which triggered them. Terror is not any less real because it fails to find novel ways of expressing itself— indeed, the reverse is more likely to be true."

and I am bound ever more tightly by deadly knots. [6] That is the state I am in. [7] Dense shadows have covered me with fear.⁸³

In his poem, Petrarch is stuck in a moment and he can't get out of it: his terror and disorientation have cut him off from any sense of directional escape. This letter despairs in the *lack* of temporality rather than in the inundation of it. Petrarch describes himself literally “caught” [1], “held back” [4], “bound” [5] from making any movement at all. Petrarch, loquacious as ever, has not lost the ability to document time; instead, he records in full color the sense that the present moment itself has become isolated from any sort of larger conception of historical time. In his moment of horror, he *is* the bug pinned to the board, the captain caught in a maelstrom, the terrified father watching the world burn around him; Petrarch's present is immobilized by sheer panic, nothing more. This trend, standing in contrast to “normal” continuous narrative, contributed to the deep uncertainty about the relationship between present and future inherent to history-writing from this period.⁸⁴

It's undeniable that the mass absence of humanity generated a significant break in how cohesive narrative was maintained. In 1348, while writing his master work *Nuova Cronica*, the great Florentine historian Giovanni Villani left off in the middle of an unfinished sentence: “And many lands and cities were made desolate. And this plague lasted till—.”⁸⁵ He died from plague before he could enter into the record when the epidemic would end.⁸⁶ This literal absence of a narrative resolution wouldn't have surprised scholar Hayden White: “how could there be,” he questions his reader, “since there is no central subject about which a story could be told?”⁸⁷ In this moment of seemingly-universal mortality, historical narrative froze before reading its conclusion.

⁸³ Petrarch, *Ad Sepisum*.

⁸⁴ White, 11.

⁸⁵ Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance* (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), 239-40.

⁸⁶ Tuchman, 104-107.

⁸⁷ White, 9.

Visible as well in the bureaucratic world of Court rolls, patent rolls, registers, and tax documents,⁸⁸ the medieval population abandoned thinking about past and future and focused exclusively on the present moment.⁸⁹ As addressed in Chapter 1, with medieval *historia* encompassing any form of “narrative object,” these registers provided history-writers with as much valid historical content as any universal chronicle. In these sources, the history of the plague years remains absent, with entries either left blank or with “the mortality” the only reason given (as witnessed in the Kent Court roll of accounts).⁹⁰ As local histories in their own right, the records of religious institutions constitute an invaluable source of information on this correlation. In September 1349, the Great Death consumed Cumberland and Westmorland in western England, but the register of the bishop of Carlisle “records nothing for these years, nor does anyone else; it is clear only from later accounts that the pestilence did, indeed, pass through.”⁹¹ The trend of the present moment made absent in historical narrative manifests astoundingly clearly in the testimony of Prebendary Hingeston-Randolph (n.d.) as he describes the state of the Exeter episcopal registers. He records that the *Registrum Commune*, “which is wonderfully full before and after the fatal year [1349],

records scarcely anything during the year itself. [2] The ordinary work of the diocese seems to have been all suspended, with a single exception. [3] The register of institutions— a separate volume— is a record of incessant and most distressing work. [4] Its very outward aspect for this period tells a tale of woe. [5] The entries are made hurriedly and roughly, in striking contrast with the neatness and regularity of the rest of the Register. [6] They are no longer grouped, as before, in years, but in months, and the changes in each month exceed the changes

⁸⁸ In this arena, many of our best-preserved sources are English, overwhelmingly because the English prioritized regularly updating state documents after the publication of the Domesday census a century and a half before. However, see Gasquet, 66: “The Court rolls for this period are often, if not generally, found to be missing. They are either lost, or the disorganized state of the country consequent upon the great mortality did not permit of the court being held.”

⁸⁹ William Dene in Gasquet, 44: “The whole people for the greater part ever became more wicked [...] not thinking of death, nor of the past plague, nor of their own salvation.”

⁹⁰ Gasquet, 56.

⁹¹ Gummer, 246.

of a whole ordinary year, when there was no pestilence. [7] The scribe leaves off the customary ‘vacant per mortem,’ as if he dreaded to write the fatal word.⁹²

From the description of “suspended” [2] time to data entered “in striking contrast with the neatness and regularity” [5] of “ordinary years, when there was no pestilence” [6], Hingeston-Randolph’s writing demonstrates a profound detachment from previous conceptions of linear time undifferentiated by worldly events. This trend frames the present moment as a broken-clock moment in the larger historical countdown to salvation. More than just exemplifying this radical conception of time, however, the fact that the scribe leaves off the “vacant per mortem” [7]— a rationale expected in any coherent register— prompts evaluation of to what extent plague spurred the *deliberate* gapping of narrative time rather than the more accidental erasure of time in history-writing.

“What is involved,” White prompts, “in the refusal to narrate?”⁹³ For historians both secular and ecclesiastical, documenting the heavy, cloying horrors of plague was simply too overwhelming. In the records and registers of central government, *business as usual* seemed to be the motto from the plague years, but a chilling refusal to admit the scale of the catastrophe permeated the genre: “the tax assessments, set in 1334, were not altered for about a century.”⁹⁴ De’ Muissis’ explicitly retreats from his *Historia de morbo*: “It is too distressing,” he says, “to recite any more,

or to lay bare the wounds inflicted by so great a disaster. [...] Everywhere one turns there is death and bitterness to be described. The hand of the Almighty strikes repeatedly, to greater and greater effect. The terrible judgment gains in power as time goes by.⁹⁵

Within these testimonies, we see the stunning introduction of what White calls a “nonnarrative representation of historical reality”—literally, a form of historical recording

⁹² *Registrum Commune*: lists of offices held, posts filled, and positions assigned by local clergy. Prebendary Hingeston-Randolph in Gasquet, 37.

⁹³ White, 15

⁹⁴ Horrox, 237.

⁹⁵ De’ Muissis in *ibid*, 22-23.

written in which the “normal narratological expectations of the reader [...] remain unfulfilled.”⁹⁶ Overwhelmingly in history-writing from the plague years, written time seems to pause, or skip like a scratched record, at the same time narration does. These histories, in effect, reveal more by what they declare absent than in what they actually document present.⁹⁷ As institutions struggled to explain why posts remained unfilled by the end of the plague years, they frequently fell back on the phrase “by lapse,” omitting time in historical narrative.⁹⁸ From “the customs of the manor there is nothing,” the accounts for the Lordship of Drakelow in Worcestershire declare, “because all these tenants died in the time of the plague.”⁹⁹ We witness this phenomenon in a 1349 account from the manor court of Great Waltham, in which the anonymous recorder documents that so many died from plague that, commonly, no one from an entire family stood alive to inherit property:

They were admitted to the castle hall as soon as they arrived, where they waited with apprehension for John Benington, the constable of their lord—Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Essex and Hereford. As Benington entered the room, he too will have immediately appreciated that much had changed at Great Waltham: not only were there more women than usual but many young men too, taking the place of several familiar faces that were missing. One by one they stood up to declare that so-and-so had died and that their tenement was vacant. Each time Benington asked if anyone wished to enter the tenement. Several stepped forward: a widow, son, cousin or friend, all prepared to pay the entry fine and take on the land; but there were almost as many silences, a general shaking of heads and then the scratch of a pen as the manor clerk noted that the land was to remain in the earl’s hands, unlet.¹⁰⁰

In this record of those waiting to literally add their narratives to the continuous history, the absence of these voices in court meant that their histories would remain unrecorded: here, history-writing gaps wide. White suggests that, in forms of compiling medieval records, the presence of

⁹⁶ White, 4, 17

⁹⁷ Williams, 51.

⁹⁸ Gasquet, 57.

⁹⁹ Accounts for the Lordship of Drakelow in *ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Gummer, 149-150.

blank years in the annalist's account permits us to perceive [...] the extent to which narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.¹⁰¹

Indeed, as the narrators of plague histories drop out and depiction of the present moment stalls, the emptiness where a cohesive story should be leaves the reader discombobulated and anxious. Barbara Tuchman's description of the Great Death's obliteration of urban identity makes the reader feel a similar anxiety: "When the last survivors [of a region devastated by plague], too few to carry on, moved away," she explains in her 1978 book *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, "a deserted village sank back into the wilderness and disappeared from the map altogether, leaving only a grass-covered ghostly outline to show where mortals once had lived."¹⁰² In many ways, the Great Death left documentation of the present moment in written histories this same ghostly outline, with outside sources the only way to prove history once existed in an active, coherent form.

¹⁰¹ White, 11.

¹⁰² Tuchman, 99.

Chapter 3: A History of People or Plague?

History-writers' inability to interpret the 1348 outbreak using older structures of historical narrative forced them to develop new narrative models. These models were neither inherited nor uniform—they were instead a desperate grasp at making narrative sense of the plague by any means possible. But the huge human and material casualties of the Great Death complicated this effort. Plague mangled narrators' inherited conceptions of author, audience, actor, and subject in models of historical narrative. The mucking up of these roles contributed greatly to the existential anxiety permeating narratives from the Great Death.

In a stable narrative structure, the roles of author, audience, actor, and subject were clearly delineated. The authors of medieval narratives were professional historians, scribes, court recorders, clergymen, and literate laymen. The audiences were other historians, legal courts, congregants, and urban populations. The actor, as established in the first chapter of this thesis, was God: God's supreme will generated all the change, movement, and activity in the universe. Medieval history-writing documented the events of material existence within this context. Ergo, the normal subject of historical narrative was human history. These roles were established, inherited norms, but they would not survive the 1348 outbreak in their original forms. The Great Death destabilized, warped, or challenged each. There is not necessarily a shared theme in the ways the plague morphed each of these roles. The significance lies in how the plague pushed these roles away from previous norms and how the resulting stress shaped medieval historical narrative. This phenomenon is analyzed in depth below.

In large part, the Great Death destabilized the role of "author" in medieval historical narrative by literally killing off the history-writers, or dissuading them from writing, until there were few chroniclers actually recording at all. Throughout the writings from the 1348 outbreak, a pattern emerges of disappeared narrators. Some died mid-work, such as the case

of Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani. John Clyn's *exeunt* from his own chronicle—"Here it seems the author died," written in a new hand¹⁰³—also explicitly features this phenomenon, and a similar display occurs in the Court roll of the manor of Chedzoy, Somerset. The long entries on this roll, notes nineteenth-century historian Francis Aiden Gasquet, "are not all in the same hand. The hand which had so long kept the rolls of these Manor Courts ceases to write [in 1348]." What happened to the author to make them vanish from a post held for so long? There is no certain explanation, but, as Gasquet remarks, "it is not difficult to conjecture why another at this very time takes up the writing of the Chedzoy manor": in Somerset, as much as 50% of the population died in the outbreak.¹⁰⁴ Plague, like any disease, took its toll on its historians as well as the general populace, yet in contrast to other epidemics the Great Death seemed to particularly gut chroniclers' will to record. In many cases, the ghastliness of the Great Death stopped authors from writing at all, stripping them of words in the sheer horror of what they witnessed. "What shall I say more?" De' Muissis mourns, quitting the writing of his *Historia de morbo* in despair, "I am overwhelmed, I can't go on!"¹⁰⁵ A trend is clear from this period: disregarding the method, plague overwhelmingly removed authors from the historical record, and, as the Great Death erased more and more the author's presence in the history-writing process, inherited models of narrating history no longer fit what recorders were witnessing.

At the same time, while pestilence killed or silenced history-writers, contemporary narratives depicted plague as a producer of literal written narrative. French physician Simon de Covino (c. 1325-1367) writes in his 1350 poem, *De iudicio Solis*:

[1] The pestilence stamped itself upon the entire population. [2] Faces became pale and the doom which threatened the people was marked upon their foreheads. [3] It was only necessary to look into the countenances of men and women to read there

¹⁰³ Clyn in Williams, 252.

¹⁰⁴ Court roll of manor of Chedzoy in Gasquet, 69.

¹⁰⁵ De' Muissis in *ibid*, 8.

recorded the blow which was about to fall; [4] a death was written unmistakably on the face of the victims.¹⁰⁶

De Covino's poem, depicting plague as an author of written history, exemplifies a theme repeated again and again in writing from the 1348 outbreak. Plague, to de Covino, is a malicious chronicler wielding a pen, and the bodies of the victims the parchment on which current events are recorded [3]. He remarks on the obviousness of this relationship, declaring that just a single look at the plague victims would reveal their fate, already codified into historical fact [3]. To describe the manifestation of plague, de Covino also invokes the writing of the biblical mark of Cain [2]. In the Vulgate used at the time, this mark was translated as the Latin *signum* ("sign," "symbol," "signal") from the original Hebrew אֵת ("letter"). God printed this narrative character on Cain to identify him as an actor of note in the larger story of Genesis bracketed by Creation and the apocalyptic Flood.¹⁰⁷ De Covino's invocation of this arc, therefore, has implications on an individual and narrative scale. By inscribing the mark—Cain's letter—, plague identifies the afflicted people as actors in a narrative, trapped between creation and cataclysm, and takes on an authorial role emblematic of God's.

But the changes to structures of historical narrative did not stop with this mutation of the role of author. By destroying the medieval population, plague would go on to destabilize—and supplant—the role of audience in historical narrative as well. Quite literally, plague obliterated the potential readers of medieval history-writing work, thinning the population of Europe by a third between 1348 to 1351. In many ways, the only readers left were the dead. Clyn's haunting last entry in his *Annals* solidifies the terror this realization

¹⁰⁶ Simon de Covino, *De iudicio Solis* in Gasquet, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Gen 4:15 NRSV: "Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him." In the Latin Vulgate, the word "mark" is translated from the Hebrew אֵת ("letter") into the Latin *signum* ("sign," "symbol," "signal").

brought medieval narrators. Clyn describes himself writing, uncertain of any audience except the dead, “expecting death when it should come.”¹⁰⁸ Yet Clyn, an adherent to the vernacular chronicling tradition that buttressed thirteenth and fourteenth century historical narrative, found himself fearing more than just the dead. Because history-writing in 1349 still depended upon eyewitness to authenticate events and make history real, the absence of potential witnesses corroded the integrity of historical narrative. As more and more people died from plague, fewer and fewer people could testify to the events they saw and history-writers fretted that history itself would vanish as well. Historical “truth” wobbled. As historians lost the assurance that the history they documented was accurate, their narrative structures veered from stable inherited models into the new and surreal.

In medieval narratives, humanity passively experienced rather than directly shaped history: humans were the subjects of history-writing, not the driving force behind it. Whereas before the plague God was the only narrative actor—the force behind why events occurred—, contemporary historians quickly depicted plague as the reason events in the human experience happened as well. Plague emerged as a kind of mastermind. Historians such as De Covino and Conrad of Megenberg (1309-1374) personified and anthropomorphized plague in their work to the extent that the disease became a puppeteer, playing the bodies of its victims. De Covino outlines how plague “laid its contagious hands on priests,”¹⁰⁹ while Conrad notes in his 1349 *Das Buch der Natur* that plague behaved like a player “in a game of chess, rising up from one place, in which it had raged, [then] passing by an intermediate one without contaminating it to rage in a third, and perchance afterwards going back to the intermediate place” to rage there.¹¹⁰ Plague acting as a direct propellant of current events rejected the fundamental idea that God alone had that power.

¹⁰⁸ Clyn in Williams, 252.

¹⁰⁹ De Corvino in Aberth, 123.

¹¹⁰ Conrad of Megenberg, *Das Buch der Natur* in Aberth, 85.

In addition to foundationally destabilizing the roles of author, audience, and actor in models of historical narrative, plague went on to warp the role of subject as well. In plague histories, there *was* a central subject, but the subject was no longer humanity, the norm for medieval writing— instead, the subject was plague itself. In many ways, the attribution of contagion to physical narration during the Great Death solidified this shift. As an anonymous doctor of Montpellier notes in a 1349 treatise, many physicians believed that plague was spread “simply by the breath or the conversation of the sick.”¹¹¹ This rhetoric repeats in plague testimonies. “Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips!” De’ Muissis mourns in his account of the Great Death’s entrance into Piacenza via sailors on trade ships, while an anonymous Italian writer observes that “as by mere communication with the sick the plague infected mortally the healthy.”¹¹² A deep fear of uninterrupted narration permeates the work of contemporary historians; some, such as physician Jean de Venette (1307-1370), even endorsed the theory that the disease was contracted by the very imagination of communication.¹¹³ Historian Michele da Piazza (d. 14th c.) recorded the dark humor with which contemporaries treated this phenomenon in his

Cronaca:

The Messinese were so loathed and feared that no man would speak with them [...] but hastily fled at the sight of them, holding his breath. And all the Catanians turned this into a sour joke, so that if anyone made to speak to someone that person would reply, in the vernacular, “Don’t talk to me if you’re from Messina.”¹¹⁴

As people stopped speaking en masse because so many of them died, plague became quite literally the only information exchanged in casual communication. Contagion melded with narrative to the point that, when French flagellants marched through Flanders in 1349

¹¹¹ Anonymous doctor of Montpellier, treatise, 1349, trans. L-A-Joseph Michon in Horrox 182.

¹¹² De’ Mussi in Gasquet, 9.

¹¹³ Jean de Venette, *Chronicle*, 1359-1360, trans. Horrox in Horrox, 55.

¹¹⁴ Michele da Piazza, *Cronaca*, trans. Rosarius Gregorio in *ibid*, 39.

and 1350, in their prayers to the Virgin Mary they begged God to literally cross out (“croissiez”) his punishment, imagining plague a written script that could be erased by the divine will.¹¹⁵ With seemingly no alternative narrative options and all potential human subject material dead, the Great Death became the only subject left for historians to record.

Because plague was the only material available to record, historians found themselves relying on the same images, the same rhetoric, and the same stories. Plague infected history-writing as effectively as it had the population centers of medieval Europe, and renditions of this catastrophic historical event gradually coalesced into a single narrative. Gasquet best elaborates upon this genre-spanning universality:

It is impossible to overlook the sameness of the terms in which writers the most diverse in character, and in places far distant from one another, describe what passes before their eyes. [...] The same ideas, the very same words, suggest themselves involuntarily to one and all. [...] It is only when we come to examine the whole body of evidence that there is borne in upon the mind a realization of the nature of a calamity which, spreading everywhere, was everywhere the same in its horrors, becoming thus nothing less than a world-wide tragedy, and it is seen that even the phrases of the rhetorician can do no more than rise to the terrible reality of fact.¹¹⁶

This displays how, as historians failed to find any new language to describe what they saw, the tradition of history-writing stalled. With the roles of author, audience, actor, and subject destabilized by the disease, the narrative historians recorded from this period was not a history of people but instead a history of plague. In this moment of universal death, plague left no breath for what catastrophe scholars Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver refer to as “cultural logics of the past.”¹¹⁷ For years after the 1348 outbreak, history-writing remained choppy and often absent without explanation. It would take decades to stabilize.

Over half a century later, modern disaster scholars confront similar themes as they evaluate in what ways twentieth and twenty-first century catastrophes destabilize narrative

¹¹⁵ Aberth, 139

¹¹⁶ Gasquet, 18-19

¹¹⁷ Gray and Oliver, 9.

models. The question of what defines a catastrophe occupies many. While nineteenth and twentieth century historians considered the numbers of the Great Death indicative of its impact, scholar Alan Mintz (1947-2017) proposes that a destructive event should instead be evaluated by its “power to shatter existing paradigms of meaning.”¹¹⁸ Mintz refers to the example of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, explaining that it “was in the resulting ‘cognitive disorientation,’ in the interpretation of the experience as marking the end of the relationship between God and Israel, that its catastrophic quality lay.”¹¹⁹ In accounts from the Great Death, this disorientation emerges as an acute and universal source of anxiety for plague chroniclers. The idea that the Great Death marked the end of an older, stable paradigm was a key aspect of plague’s impact on narrative models.

Overwhelmingly, the field concludes, putting one’s personal experience of a disaster in words is the first step to returning order. European ethnologist Regina Bendix (b. 1958) explores this phenomenon in her 1990 study of catastrophic narratives and historical memory. Bendix believes that “the rapidity with which order is restored out of chaos [...] is linked to our capability of recasting the experience in narrative form”— namely, that narrating historical experience in terms of what happened before, during, and after the disaster offered a stable narrative structure.¹²⁰ Though she writes primarily on modern disasters such as the Loma Prieta quake, Bendix’s reflections fit flawlessly into the analysis of historical narrative from the Great Death. In her essay “Reflections on Earthquake Narratives,” Bendix declares that “personal narratives are the primary means at an individual’s disposal to regain order out of chaos” and that “words strung together, eventually finding narrative cohesion, are the first

¹¹⁸ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse University Press, 1984), x, 19-21 in Gray and Oliver, 7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ William James, 1912:221, 223-244 in Regina Bendix, “Reflections on Earthquake Narratives” in *Western Folklore*, vol. 49, no. 4 (October 1990), 333. For more on the “traditionality” of personal narratives, see T. Stahl (1977).

symbolic evidence of our escape from death.”¹²¹ Grey and Oliver echo Bendix, suggesting that the writing of memory functioned “as a means of restoring what was in danger of being lost for good: in particular, a sense both of agency and of continuity with the past.”¹²² History-writers’ beginning to write again never “fixed” the anxieties generated by these shifts in conceptions of historical narrative. Instead, through mutation, mangling, and destabilization, medieval writers’ patch-job narrative models simply kept the traditions of history-writing alive.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 333, 336.

¹²² Gray and Oliver, 3.

Aftermath

By 1353, bubonic plague had faded from western Europe. It left cities with populations once in the tens of thousands ghost towns, streets glutted with corpses. The political, economic, and social repercussions of the plague were massive and immediate: gigantic labor shortages reordered class hierarchies across Europe, restructured economic systems, and prompted heavy backlash from governing bodies.¹²³ The Church, internal infrastructure weakened by mass casualties of the clergy, struggled to regain authority after its failure to explain the plague. Deep insecurity surrounding individual success and an obsession with human fragility consumed the populace as people struggled to reconcile their way of life from before the Great Death with the reality of life after.¹²⁴ Those who survived felt off kilter in a moment suddenly absent of sudden, common, and unstoppable mass death.

Despite this “profound sense of cultural disruption,” survivors of the Great Death carried on. The 1348 epidemic was the most deadly outbreak of the Second Pandemic, a worldwide pandemic that recurred every two to twenty years until well into the eighteenth century,¹²⁵ and so the survival of humanity through the 1348 epidemic put the plague into perspective: “[pestilence] might engender deep insecurity and could bring appalling personal tragedy,” Horrox explains, “but no one any longer expected the world to end.”¹²⁶ As one of the characters from Albert Camus’s 1947 novel *The Plague* remarks: “All those folks are saying: It was plague. We’ve had the plague here. You’d almost think they expected to be

¹²³ See English Statute of Laborers, 1351.

¹²⁴ This contributed largely to the theme of *danse macabre* that dominated European art traditions in later centuries.

¹²⁵ The term “Second Pandemic” refers to the plague of 1348 and following outbreaks through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The First Pandemic refers to the sixth-century epidemic in the Byzantine Empire. The Third Pandemic refers to the twentieth-century outbreaks of bubonic plague in India and southern Asia.

¹²⁶ Horrox, 13.

given medals for it. But what does that mean— plague? Just life, no more than that.”¹²⁷ In a society where outbreaks occurred regularly as an awful fact of the medieval and early modern world, plague became something people could eventually articulate and manipulate once again within older, stable narrative structures.

This change was not immediate, and written and visual work produced after the Great Death displays the evolution of this model of historical narrative. Just as after the 1348 outbreak legal authorities attempted and largely failed to wrestle the surviving populace back into sociopolitical norms, creators struggled to reconcile their accounts of plague with structures of historical narrative inherited before the Great Death. Many imbued their work with the sense that humanity had entered an extraordinarily fragile present, one that could be ripped away as casually as any material wealth. The artists of the Second Pandemic obsessed over the bodily transience and the idea of the corruption of the body “not now juxtaposed against the immortality of the soul, but against images of the pride of life.” The epitaph from the tomb of Henry Chichele (d. 1441) exemplifies the concept that an individual’s present state of being could be intrinsically a concurrent experience of life and death:

I was a pauper born, then to Primate raised; now I am cut down and ready to be food for worms; behold my grave. Whoever you may be who passes by, I ask you to remember: you will be like me after you die, all horrible, dust, worms, vile flesh.¹²⁸

His epitaph follows the tradition of the thirteenth-century legend “The Three Living and Three Dead,” which resurged in western European art after 1348. In the tale, three noblemen encounter three animated corpses, each in a different state of bodily decay. When the men panic, the cadavers (one newly dead, one partially decomposed, and one skeletal) impart a message of transience to encourage the men to improve their behavior, memorialized in the 1376 epitaph of Edward, Prince of Wales: “As thou art, so once was I; as I am, so shalt

¹²⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 276-77 in Getz, 283.

¹²⁸ Epitaph from the tomb of Henry Chichele, d. 1441

thou be.”¹²⁹ This legend inherently casts the corpses as “conscious of their terribly altered state,” existing as warped parallels of the living beings.¹³⁰ Experience of death synonymizes with the expectation of it, while the only historical cue the audience receives is an awareness of plague that saturates the present and crowds both narrative past and future.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Epitaph of Edward, Prince of Wales in Gummer, 356.

¹³⁰ Horrox, 244-5.

¹³¹ Marshall, 486-7.

Below: Anonymous. Detail of a miniature of the Three Living (a pope, an emperor, and a king) and the Three Dead (wearing matching crowns), at the beginning of the Office of the Dead, from a Book of Hours. 1480-1490. [Harley MS 2917](#), f. 119r.



If that rhetoric sounds uncomfortably familiar to that of Petrarch's grief-soaked poems, it's not the only theme paralleling history-writing from the 1348 outbreak: this fascination with simultaneous life and death suggests a deeper anxiety surrounding the positioning of the present in the larger context of historical time. This era's interest in the indistinguishability of the present offers testimony to the anxiety historians felt, attempting to interpret the experience within inherited models of historical narrative.

Images of Gregory the Great also burgeoned in popularity during this time period. Pope Gregory I (540-604) took the papal seat in the midst of the First Pandemic. During his tenure, a major outbreak of pestilence afflicted Rome in 590. As described by historians such as Italian chronicler Voragine (c. 1230-1299), Gregory received a vision of the archangel Michael "wiping a bloody sword and replacing it back into his sheath: a sign that the plague was at its end,"¹³² and so he assembled a procession to end the pestilence. Medieval historians viewed Gregory as a salvific figure in cases of plague, and in their fifteenth century *Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry*, the Limbourg brothers produced a fascinating rendition of Gregory's procession. In this image, Gregory leads a procession towards a beautiful basilica while, next to him, a monk dies from plague in agony. The dying and fearful in the crowd suggest a toxic proximate past, away from which Gregory strides; future salvation is represented by the archangel Michael, for whom Gregory aims. The two temporal narratives collide in Gregory's act of procession, people moving as quickly as they can away from a present moment unmoored from human events.

¹³² "One day the Tiber overflowed its banks and rose so high that its waters poured over the city walls and caused the collapse of many houses...the whole atmosphere was polluted with the stench of [the dead sea serpents'] rotting bodies. A terrible pestilence ensued, called the bubonic plague, and people claimed that they could actually see arrows falling from heaven and striking victims down." Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 92 in Jessica Ortega, "Pestilence and prayer saints and the art of the plague in Italy from 1370-1600," Honors in the major thesis, University of Central Florida, 2012, 52. Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2366&context=honorstheses1990-2015>

Below: Limbourg brothers. "The Procession of Saint Gregory." *Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry* fol. 71v. 1412-1416.



In the centuries after the Great Death, artists also embraced the figure of St. Sebastian as a figure associated explicitly with pestilence and its impact upon the body.¹³³ Though associated with warding off disease as early as the eighth century, St. Sebastian quickly evolved into the patron saint of bubonic plague. Sebastian, a commander in the Praetorian Guard, lived in Rome in the third century. A secret Christian, he was caught and commanded to recant his faith. Upon refusing, he was then condemned to death and martyred twice: first by arrows, then, once he recovered, by club. Medieval artists followed a long narrative tradition of associating arrows with pestilence, and so depictions of the arrow-pierced Sebastian populate art from the Second Pandemic. The deep existential anxiety characteristic of this period manifested in the body of the transient St. Sebastian. Hendrick Ter Brugghen's gorgeous *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* (1625) is one of the most famous renditions of the martyr caught in this in-between moment.

Like Gregory's procession and the legend of the "Three Living and Three Dead," the figure of St. Sebastian's significance lies in how it intrinsically provides a transitional space in which past and future narratives engage, supported by older narrative models. Sebastian's body functions as a stand-in for the survivors of the Second Pandemic: martyred and yet alive, capable of action and intention, nearly felled by his bodily past yet straining towards the promise of future salvation. The implications of his narrative do not center entirely around his physical state of being. Instead, his passion offers creators a medium in which to localize and address the tensions of narrating plague in the aftermath of the Great Death.

¹³³ "Then it was said to a certain man by revelation that the pestilence itself would not cease before an altar of St. Sebastian the martyr was placed in the church... And it was done, and after the remains of St. Sebastian the martyr had been carried from the city of Rome, presently the altar was set up in the aforesaid church and the pestilence itself ceased." Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* in Aberth, 125.

Below: Hendrick ter Brugghen. *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*. 1625, oil paint on canvas. Allen Art Museum, Oberlin, OH.



This period of tension between shifting narrative models imbued historical accounts with deep anxiety. To avoid having to explicitly decide what time they were in the way they did during the Great Death, many historians partially or entirely scrubbed plague from their chronicles of the fourteenth century in what Horrox names a “vacuum of comment.”¹³⁴ Jean Froissart chose to wholly skip the Great Death in his *Chronicles* (c. 1400), focusing instead on political events and military conflicts. Fourteenth century history-writers who did include the Great Death in their accounts refer only fleetingly to the plague, and certainly with none of the same reeling terror as contemporaries. For example, in 1475, another hand takes up Clyn’s *Annals* to document the four echo epidemics that ripped through Ireland between 1362 and 1391. The entry reads as dry as a textbook memorization passage:

The first plague gathered great strength in Ireland anno domini 1349. Indeed the second pestilence similarly gathered great strength thirteen years later, namely anno domini 1362. The third plague also grew eleven years afterwards, namely anno domini 1373. The fourth plague on the other hand came into existence in Ireland nine years after this, namely anno domini 1382. The fifth plague grew in like manner in parts of that country for nine years after the said years, namely anno domini 1391.¹³⁵

The contrast between the entries of 1348 and 1475 could not be more vivid. Horrox expands on the conclusions of this shift in general narrative coverage, offering evidence that the “brevity of chronicle entries after the [1348] outbreak

may well say more about the fading attraction of that form of historical writing than about any contemporary lack of interest in the subject. But non-chronicle sources are usually at least as undemonstrative, suggesting, at the very least, that their writers no longer felt that there was anything new to say about the plague and its effects. For them, as for poets, and playwrights, the plague had become a familiar explanation, not something which needed explanation itself.¹³⁶

Though the Great Death still cast long shadows, societal familiarity with plague outbreaks began to deconstruct the world-shaping role of plague in written narrative. Gummer asserts that, “far from providing the premise for the whole drama, as it did in

¹³⁴ Tuchman, 109.

¹³⁵ Clyn in Williams, 252-254.

¹³⁶ Horrox, 13.

Boccaccio's *Decameron*," plague became an evocative historical backdrop.¹³⁷ When "writers wished to evoke the [transience] of human life, or the vulnerability of human plans," he explains, "they turned to the plague to provide their context, confident that this would arouse all the right responses in their audience."¹³⁸ Gummer brings up the examples of Geoffrey Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale," Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," and the fifteenth-century debate poem, "A disputation betwixt the body and worms."¹³⁹ Chaucer, Gummer specifies, sets up the Pardoner's sermon on greed as the root of all evil in a countryside terrorized by plague¹⁴⁰; the anonymous author of the macabre "Disputation" sets the conflict in a country where the pestilence rampages, while an outbreak of plague kept Romeo and Juliet from their escape plan.¹⁴¹ The designation of plague as a literary cue rather than a literary subject allowed authors to localize it within older narrative structures, and therefore greatly stabilize history-writing.

¹³⁷ Gummer, 381.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Jenny Rebecca Rytting, "A Disputacioun Betwyx þe Body and Wormes: A Translation" in *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 31, iss. 1 (2000), 217-232. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0c04p0xq>, accessed 7 April 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387).

¹⁴¹ Horrox, 13.

Conclusions

*“So great a plague has never been heard of from the beginning of the world to the present day, or been recorded in books. For this plague vented its spite so thoroughly that fully a third of the human race was killed.”*¹⁴²

In the introduction to this thesis, I asked, “Can what historians learn from the story of the Great Death be applied to other catastrophes and their narratives?” The answer is, unequivocally, *yes*. Examining and evaluating the criteria that define “catastrophe” is a task that will occupy the fields of narrative and disaster studies for years to come, yet whatever definition scholars settle upon will still generate critical thinking about the Great Death. If modern catastrophes and the Great Death share this label of “catastrophe,” this rich bed of historical information and implication will spur critical thought; if modern catastrophes and the Great Death fall under separate categories, then that too is an opportunity to study how variations of interpreted disaster grow variations of narrative disruption. Historians in the future will inquire even more of this intersection of narrative, catastrophe, and historical writing: this work serves as a stepping stone between the biohistorians and narrative scholars of the past and the studies that are to come. However, I caution future scholars against the mistakes of early twentieth century historians, eager to falsely equivocate the Great Death and other epidemics. Just as an eminent nineteenth-century French physician declared that “the Black Death stands apart from all those which preceded or followed it [and] ought to be classed among the great and new popular maladies,” so too the changes plague enacted upon models of historical narrative can and should be considered paradigm-shaping in their own right.¹⁴³ It is impossible to discuss the biohistory of the Great Death without also taking into account the narrative destruction and narrative formation that accompanied it. Doing so will draw incorrect historical parallels and customize historical conclusions.

¹⁴² John of Fordun (d.1384), *Scotichronicon*.

¹⁴³ Charles Anglada, *Étude sur les Maladies Éteintes* (London, Madrid, Paris: 1869), 416 in Gasquet, 10.

Ultimately, the Great Death inflicted a horrific trauma upon the people of medieval Europe, yet historians' drive to resolve the anxiety plague generated within historical writing gave rise to a sense of renewal on the horizon. Despite their trials, medieval historians fought through the panic induced by competing models of historical narrative to reestablish a sense of order. Contemporaries perceived the narrative significance of this catastrophe as well: "this pestilence forms," writes the author of the *History of Shrewsbury*, "a remarkable era in the history of our language."¹⁴⁴ Yet even the darkness of the plague years brought with it brightness: because people remained so interested in the subject, translating plague tracts stimulated the formation of national language. By the end of the fifteenth century, writings in the vernacular, made abundant by Europe's Renaissance, inundated the population of survivors. Historical narrative, once infected by plague, flourished again.

¹⁴⁴ Gasquet, 81.

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