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Teaching the Black Death during COVID-19

Rachel Podd

Fordham University, rpodd@fordham.edu

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Teaching the Black Death during COVID-19, 1st Edition

Rachel Podd
rpodd@fordham.edu

1. Project Overview

As part of the 2020 symposium cosponsored by the Renaissance Society of America and Fordham University, I developed a variety of pedagogical materials intended to help secondary and college/university educators guide their students through a unit comparing historical and present disease outbreaks, namely the Black Death as experienced by 14th century Europeans and students' own experiences of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Intended as a course module, the materials included are designed to be flexible and adaptable to either in-person or remote learning, flipped or traditional setups, and fully synchronous or hybrid classrooms. Over the course of five class sessions, students will engage with both primary and secondary materials, including readings from Boccaccio, manuscript illuminations, and modern photo essays as they study the multiplicity of ways that outbreaks of disease alter society. Each class session will focus on a “confrontation” occurring during such an outbreak – man and nature, knowable and unknowable, “insider” and “other”, tradition and transformation, powerful and powerless – to guide students towards thinking critically and creatively about the social, emotional, and economic effects of pandemics. Ultimately, learners should be able to speak cogently and authoritatively about societal reactions to pandemic disease, comparing and contrasting the response of fourteenth century Europeans to today, and identify and explain reasons for such continuities and changes.

This pedagogical unit features eight components, described further in section 2, below:

2. Project Components

- A. **RSA Slide Presentation:** A copy of the slides used in the presentation at the 2020 RSA/Fordham University Pandemics and Pedagogy Symposium, covering project goals, unit components and class components.
- B. **Orientation Lecture and Unit Overview:** Intended to serve as an orientation for instructors not well-versed in medieval history, this twenty-minute video recording outlines the major themes of the unit, including the social, economic and religious responses to the relevant pandemics of COVID-19 and the Black Death of the fourteenth century.
- C. **College/University Instructor Unit Syllabus:** This unit syllabus includes module goals, necessary platforms, and introductory notes intended to fully orient the instructor and prepare them to effectively teach the unit. It further contains class topics, suggested supplementary readings for upper level courses, and instructor tasks for before, during and after class.
- D. **College/University Student Syllabus:** A slimmed-down version of the instructor's syllabus, the college/university student syllabus includes only information relevant to the

students themselves, including assigned readings, discussion questions, and tasks for before, during, and after class.

- E. **Secondary School Instructor Syllabus:** Intended for secondary students, modelled to fulfill aspects of NYS Social Studies Framework's Unit 9.4 (Rise of Transregional Trade Networks), readings are selected to be appropriate for this grade level and the NYS Educational Framework. The syllabus includes a rubric noting which aspects of the NYS framework the given class material satisfies. As an instructor syllabus, it also contains useful framing notes, guidelines and materials to help orient an instructor new to the subject matter.
- F. **Secondary School Student Syllabus:** A stripped-down version of the secondary instructor's syllabus, containing only information appropriate to the grade level and work requirements of the student.
- G. **Activity Sheets 1, 2, and 3:** Three assignment sheets providing the necessary directions and images for secondary students to perform synchronously or asynchronously. The activities themselves involve spatial reasoning, determining cause and effect relationships, and drawing comparisons between different temporal and geographic milieus. Activity One employs mapping to guide learners toward discerning the relationship between trade networks and pandemics, while Activity Two, Images of "Other", asks learners to evaluate medieval imagery in order to study ideas of "otherness" and social responses to pandemics. Finally, Activity Three, Landlords and Laborers, asks students to role play as medieval peasants and aristocrats in order to evaluate the effect of the Black Death on power relations and economics.
- H. **Activity 2 PowerPoint:** This slide presentation includes larger digital versions of the images used in Activity Two – Medieval Images of "Other", as well as clarifying text.