



*Danse Macabre des Hommes - Un Pape et un Roi - Paris, 1486*  
BNF [ark:/12148/btv1b2200008n](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:bnf:12148/btv1b2200008n)

### Teaching the Black Death in Times of COVID: Student Syllabus

#### **Module Goals:**

By the end of this module, learners should be able to:

1. Compare and contrast the societal responses of late medieval Europe and America in the present day to pandemic outbreaks.
2. Explain why and how social boundaries and behavior change during outbreaks of disease.
3. Evaluate the economic consequences of pandemics and compare/contrast the consequences of the two outbreaks studied.
4. Describe how outbreaks of disease alter social norms and rituals and evaluate the impacts of these changes.

#### **Texts:**

Whenever possible, I have endeavored to select source material that is freely available and not subject to paywalls. For primary source material regarding the plague, however, the following text is indispensable and well worth the purchase cost:

- Rosemary Horrox ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester Medieval Sources Series).  
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.

All readings marked “Horrox” come from this text.

#### Class One: Confrontation between Human and Nature

#### **Before Class Tasks:**

1. Watch a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture giving an overview of the spread of the Black Death: how does it spread? What are the symptoms? How many people did it kill?
2. Read and annotate the following primary sources:
  - a. Horrox, Document One: Gabriele de Musis, *The Arrival of the Plague* [13 pages]
  - b. "[Mapping the novel Coronavirus Pandemic](#)", last updated September 11, 2020
3. Read **one** of the following studies, taking notes and considering how it relates to the lecture and readings you have already watched and taken notes on:
  - a. Patrick J. Kiger, "[How the Black Death Spread along the Silk Road](#)", *History*, April 23, 2020
  - b. "[Mongolian Couple Died of Plague after Eating Raw Marmot](#)", *Live Science*, May 8 2019
  - c. Jason Beaubien, "[Why They're Called 'Wet Markets' - And What Health Risks They Might Pose](#)," *NPR*, January 31, 2020
  - d. The City University of New York, "[Study Shows NYC Covid-19 Outbreak had European and U.S. Origins](#)", *Medical Press*, June 3, 2020. 10.1126/science.abc1917]

### **In Class Tasks:**

1. Perform the following activity [~20 minutes]:
  - a. Compare and contrast [this map](#) of the spread of the Black Death to [this graphic](#) depicting the spread of coronavirus. Why did they spread the way they did? What has changed?
2. Engage in Class Discussion [~20 minutes]
  - a. How and why did medieval Europeans' increased connectivity to societies outside their own, including Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, increase their susceptibility to disease outbreaks? How has the increasing interconnectedness of our globe increased or decreased our susceptibility to disease?
  - b. How does the relationship between humans, animals, and insects lead to epidemics and pandemics? Compare and contrast the Black Death and COVID-19 through this lens specifically.

### Class Two: Confrontation between Knowable and Unknowable

#### **Before Class Tasks:**

1. Watch and take notes on the video lecture covering medieval cosmology, humoral and miasma theory, and ideas of disease causation.
2. Read and annotate one of the following pairs, as assigned to you by your instructor:
  - a. Pair One:
    - i. Horrox, Document Fifty-Six: Extract from Paris Medical Faculty, Report on the Causes of the Plague [7 pages]
    - ii. Katherine Schaeffer, "[Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe COVID-19 was made in a Lab](#)", Pew Research, April 8, 2020
  - b. Pair Two:
    - i. Horrox, Document Fifty-Nine: Bengt Knutsson, Extract from *A Little Book for the Pestilence* (beginning with "These things before" and ending with "I have proved myself") [~ 2 pages]

- ii. [“Coronavirus: Man Dies Taking Fish Tank Cleaner as Virus Drug”](#), BBC, March 24 2020

### During Class Tasks:

1. Engage and participate in class discussion (~30-40 minutes)
  - a. How did medieval people try to explain something that seemed unexplainable?
  - b. Did these explanations make sense to their understanding of the world around them?
  - c. What sorts of misinformation or misunderstandings have occurred as our society grapples with a new disease outbreak and developing treatment?
  - d. What similarities or differences do you observe?

### After Class Tasks:

1. Read Horrox, “Introduction to Part Two: Explanations and Responses” [18 pages] to sum up all the material covered in class and provide further context.

### Class Three: Confrontation between the “Insider” and the “Other”

### Before Class Tasks:

1. Watch the pre-recorded lecture on ideas of “other” in the Middle Ages.
2. Read and annotate one of the following pairs of readings, as assigned to you by your instructor:
  - e. Pair One:
    - i. Horrox, Document Seventy-One: “Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy” [8 pages]
    - ii. Neil G. Ruiz, et. al., [“Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak”](#), Pew Research Center, July 1 2020
  - f. Pair Two:
    - i. Horrox, Document Seventy-Four [~1 page] : “Accusations of Well-Poisoning against the Poor”;
    - ii. Dian Septiari, [“Rohingya Refugees Rejected Everywhere as Countries Grapple with COVID-19 Concerns.”](#) *The Jakarta Post*, April 26, 2020

### In Class Tasks:

1. Participate in class discussion:
  - a. Consider what identifying aspects make groups into “others” during pandemics, including the Black Death and Coronavirus
  - b. Examine why these aspects or characteristics make these individuals or groups susceptible to targeting
  - c. Analyze if the groups targeted have changed over time, and if so, why.
  - d. **NB:** If time remains or the unit can be expanded, consider how these lessons about the hardening of social boundaries during pandemics can be in dialogue with the treatment of marginalized groups during other periods of societal stress, including economic (the rhetoric of immigrants “taking our jobs”, for example), political (ex: the Red Scare), or religious (ex: antipathy between Catholics and Protestants during The Troubles of Northern Ireland)

**After Class Tasks:**

1. Read Hannah Marcus, "[What the Plague can Teach us about Coronavirus](#)," *New York Times*, March 1st, 2020. This article acts as a synthesis and ensures that that we are on the same page heading into the next class.

Class Four: Confrontation between Tradition and Transformation**Before Class Tasks:**

1. Watch the pre-recorded lecture on the rituals of death and dying in medieval Europe: confession, last rites, funeral mass, burial in consecrated ground, etc.
2. Read and annotate one of the following paired readings as assigned by your instructor:
  - a. Pair One:
    - i. Horrox, Document Two: Giovanni Boccaccio, Extract from the *Decameron* [7 pages]
    - ii. Isabele Cristo, "[Bringing Out the Dead in New York City](#)," *The New Republic*, April 10, 2020 [May be replaced or supplemented with Simon Bray, "Loved and Lost: Grief in the Time of Coronavirus," *The Guardian*, August 21 2020]
  - b. Pair Two:
    - i. Horrox, Document Eighty-Four: Burial Problems in Worcester [½ page]
    - ii. Christopher Robbins, "[Mass Burials on Hart Island Increase Fivefold as COVID-19 Death Toll Skyrockets](#)," *The Gothamist*, April 9, 2020.

**In Class Tasks:**

1. Engage with class discussion (~30-40 minutes)
  - a. How did the Black Death disrupt rituals of death, dying and commemoration?
  - b. How did medieval people respond to these changes?
  - c. What, if any, resonances do the answers to these questions have for us today, living and dying in the midst of a global pandemic?

Class Five: Confrontation between the Powerful and Powerless**Before Class Tasks:**

1. Watch the short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture covering the basics of the medieval European economy, including vassalage, feudalism, and the agricultural regime.
2. Read and annotate one of the following paired readings as assigned by your instructor:
  - a. Pair One:
    - i. Horrox, Document Seventy-Six: Giovanni Boccaccio on the Death of Friends [2 pages]
    - ii. Simon Bray, "[Loved and Lost: Grief in the Time of Coronavirus](#)," *The Guardian*, August 21 2020
  - b. Pair Two:
    - i. Horrox, Documents Ninety-Seven and Ninety-Eight: A Reduction in Labour Services & The Statute of Labourers, 18 June 1349 [3 pages]
    - ii. Rakesh Kochhar, "[Unemployment Rate is Higher than Officially Recorded. More so for Women and Certain Other Groups](#)" Pew Research Center, June 30, 2020

**In Class Tasks:**

1. Participate in class discussion [30-40 minutes]:
  - a. How does society change during epidemics and pandemics? How do such outbreaks alter the economy, demography, mental states, and social roles?
  - b. How did the workforce change during the Black Death, and how has it changed during COVID? Are these changes similar or different, and why?
  - c. What sorts of societal changes or transformation, accomplished either peacefully or through violent means, occurred as part of these pandemics? Why?

**After Class Tasks:**

1. Read Horrox, "Part Three: Consequences" [18 pages] to act as a wrap up and synthesis of the material covered in this unit.
2. Complete the final assignment, as described by your instructor.