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cinders of the peelings of the cockle weed, a mixed multitude, a black plague
like halfpence, like berries. . . .

Rumors of a terrible plague supposedly arising in China and spreading
through Tartary (Central Asia) to India and Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt,
and all of Asia Minor had reached Europe in 1346. They told of a death toll so
devastating that all of India was said to be depopulated, whole territories cov-
ered by dead bodies, other areas with no one left alive. As added up by Pope
Clement VI at Avignon, the total of reported dead reached 23,840,000. In the
absence of a concept of contagion, no serious alarm was felt in Europe until
the trading ships brought their black burden of pestilence into Messina while
other infected ships from the Levant carried it to Genoa and Venice.

By January 1348 it penetrated France via Marseille, and North Africa via
Tunis. Shipborne along coasts and navigable rivers, it spread westward from
Marseille through the ports of Languedoc to Spain and northward up the
Rhône to Avignon, where it arrived in March. It reached Narbonne, Montpel-
lier, Carcassonne, and Toulouse between February and May, and at the same
time in Italy spread to Rome and Florence and their hinterlands. Between
June and August it reached Bordeaux, Lyon, and Paris, spread to Burgundy
and Normandy, and crossed the Channel from Normandy into southern En-
gland. From Italy during the same summer it crossed the Alps into Switzerland
and reached eastward to Hungary.

In a given area the plague accomplished its will within four to six months
and then faded, except in the larger cities, where, rooting into the close-
quartered population, it abated during the winter, only to reappear in spring
and rage for another six months.

In 1349 it resumed in Paris, spread to Picardy, Flanders, and the Low
Countries, and from England to Scotland and Ireland as well as to Norway,
where a ghost ship with a cargo of wool and a dead crew drifted offshore until
it ran aground near Bergen. From there the plague passed into Sweden, Den-
mark, Prussia, Iceland, and as far as Greenland. Leaving a strange pocket of
immunity in Bohemia, and Russia unattacked until 1351, it had passed from
most of Europe by mid-1350. Although the mortality rate was erratic, ranging
from one fifth in some places to nine tenths or almost total elimination in oth-
er, the overall estimate of modern demographers has settled—for the area ex-
tending from India to Iceland—around the same figure expressed in 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 mortal-
ity from plague in Revelation, the favorite guide to human affairs of the Mid-
dle Ages.

A third of Europe would have meant about 20 million deaths. No one
knows in truth how many died. Contemporary reports were an awed impres-
sion, not an accurate count. In crowded Avignon, it was said, 400 died daily;
7,000 houses emptied by death were shut up; a single graveyard received
11,000 corpses in six weeks; half the city's inhabitants reportedly died, includ-
ing 9 cardinals or one third of the total; and 70 lesser prelates. Watching the
endlessly passing death carts, chroniclers 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.

When graveyards filled up, bodies at Avignon were thrown into the Rhône
until mass burial pits were dug for dumping the corpses. In London in such
pits corpses piled up in layers until they overflowed. Everywhere reports speak of the sick dying too fast for the living to bury. Corpses were dragged out of homes and left in front of doorways. Morning light revealed new piles of bodies. In Florence the dead were gathered up by the Compagnia della Misericordia—founded in 1244 to care for the sick—whose members wore red robes and hoods masking the face except for the eyes. When their efforts failed, the dead lay putrid in the streets for days at a time. When no coffins were to be had, the bodies were laid on boards, two or three at once, to be carried to graveyards or common pits. Families dumped their own relatives into the pits, or buried them so hastily and thinly “that dogs dragged them forth and devoured their bodies.”

Amid accumulating death and fear of contagion, people died without last rites and were buried without prayers, a prospect that terrified the last hours of the stricken. A bishop in England gave permission to laymen to make confession to each other as was done by the Apostles, “or if no man is present then even to a woman,” and if no priest could be found to administer extreme unction, “then faith must suffice.” Clement VI found it necessary to grant remissions of sin to all who died of the plague because so many were unattended by priests. “And no bells tolled,” wrote a chronicler of Siena, “and nobody wept no matter what his loss because almost everyone expected death. . . . And people said and believed, ‘This is the end of the world.’”

In Paris, where the plague lasted through 1349, the reported death rate was 800 a day, in Pisa 500, in Vienna 500 to 600. The total dead in Paris numbered 50,000 or half the population. Florence, weakened by the famine of 1347, lost three to four fifths of its citizens, and the British Isles, though smaller in size, about the same proportion. Cities, as centers of transportation, were more likely to be affected than villages, although once a village was infected, its death rate was equally high. At Givry, a prosperous village in Burgundy of 1,200 to 1,500 people, the parish register records 615 deaths in the space of fourteen weeks, compared to an average of thirty deaths a year in the previous decade. In three villages of Cambridgeshire, manorial records show a death rate of 47 percent, 57 percent, and in one case 70 percent. When the last survivors, too few to carry on, moved away, 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.

In enclosed places such as monasteries and prisons, the infection of one person usually meant that of all, as happened in the Franciscan convents of Carcassonne and Marseille, where every inmate without exception died. Of the 140 Dominicans at Montpellier only seven survived. Petrarch’s brother Gherardo, member of a Carthusian monastery, buried the prior and 34 fellow monks on one by one, sometimes three a day, until he was left alone with his dog and fled to look for a place that would take him in. Watching every comrade

2. Francesco Petrar (1304–1374), Italian writer whose sonnets to “my lady Laura” influenced a tradition of European love poetry for centuries.
refused to come and make the wills of the dying,” reported a Franciscan friar of Piazza in Sicily; what was worse, “even the priests did not come to hear their confessions.” A clerk of the Archbishop of Canterbury reported the same of English priests who “turned away from the care of their benefices from fear of death.” Cases of parents deserting children and children their parents were reported across Europe from Scotland to Russia. The calamity chilled the hearts of men, wrote Boccaccio in his famous account of the plague in Florence that serves as introduction to the Decameron. “One man shunned another...kinsfolk held aloof, brother was forsaken by brother, oftentimes husband by wife; nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children to their fate, untended, unvisited as if they had been strangers.” Exaggeration and literary pessimism were common in the 14th century, but the Pope’s physician, Guy de Chauliac, was a sober, careful observer who reported the same phenomenon: “A father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead.”

Yet not entirely. In Paris, according to the chronicler Jean de Venette, the nuns of the Hôtel Dieu or municipal hospital, “having no fear of death, tended the sick with all sweetness and humility.” New nuns repeatedly took the places of those who died, until the majority “many times renewed by death now rest in peace with Christ as we may piously believe.”

When the plague entered northern France in July 1348, it settled first in Normandy and, checked by winter, gave Picardy a deceptive intermission until the next summer. Either in mourning or warning, black flags were flown from church towers of the worst-stricken villages of Normandy. “And in that time,” wrote a monk of the abbey of Fournacron, “the mortality was so great among the people of Normandy that those of Picardy mocked them.” The same unfavorable reaction was reported of the Scots, separated by a winter’s immunity from the English. Delighted to hear of the disease that was scourging the “southrons,” they gathered forces for an invasion, “laughing at their enemies.” Before they could move, the savage mortality fell upon them too, scattering some in death and the rest in panic to spread the infection as they fled.

In Picardy in the summer of 1349 the pestilence penetrated the castle of Coucy to kill Enguerrand’s mother, Catherine, and her new husband. Whether her nine-year-old son escaped by chance or was perhaps living elsewhere with one of his guardians is unrecorded. In nearby Amiens, tannery workers, responding quickly to losses in the labor force, combined to bargain for higher wages. In another place villagers were seen dancing to drums and trumpets, and on being asked the reason, answered that, seeing their neighbors die day by day while their village remained immune, they believed they could keep the plague from entering “by the jollity that is in us. That is why we
danced.” Further north in Tournai on the border of Flanders, Gilles li Muisis, Abbot of St. Martin’s, kept one of the epidemic’s most vivid accounts. The passing bells rang all day and all night, he recorded, because sextons were anxious to obtain their fees while they could. Filled with the sound of mourning, the city became oppressed by fear, so that the authorities forbade the tolling of bells and the wearing of black and restricted funeral services to two mourners. The silencing of funeral bells and of criers’ announcements of deaths was ordained by most cities. Siena imposed a fine on the wearing of mourning clothes by all except widows.

Flight was the chief recourse of those who could afford it or arrange it. The rich fled to their country places like Boccaccio’s young patricians of Florence, who settled in a pastoral palace “removed on every side from the roads” with “wells of cool water and vaults of rare wines.” The urban poor died in their burrows, “and only the stench of their bodies informed neighbors of their death.” That the poor were more heavily afflicted than the rich was clearly remarked at the time, in the north as in the south. A Scottish chronicler, John of Fordun, stated flatly that the pest “attacked especially the meaner sort and common people—seldom the magnates.” Simon de Covino of Montpellier made the same observation. He ascribed it to the misery and want and hard lives that made the poor more susceptible, which was half the truth. Close contact and lack of sanitation was the unrecognized other half. It was noticed too that the young died in greater proportion than the old; Simon de Covino compared the disappearance of youth to the withering of flowers in the fields.

In the countryside peasants dropped dead on the roads, in the fields, in their houses. Survivors in growing helplessness fell into apathy, leaving ripe wheat uncultivated and livestock untended. Oxen and asses, sheep and goats, pigs and chickens ran wild and they too, according to local reports, succumbed to the pest. English sheep, bearers of the precious wool, died throughout the country. The chronicler Henry Knighton, canon of Leicester Abbey, reported 5,000 dead in one field alone, “their bodies so corrupted by the plague that neither beast nor bird would touch them,” and spreading an appalling stench. In the Austrian Alps wolves came down to prey upon sheep and then, “as if alarmed by some invisible warning, turned and fled back into the wilderness.” In remote Dalmatia hordes of wolves descended upon a plague-stricken city and attacked human survivors. For want of herdsmen, cattle strayed from place to place and died in hedgerows and ditches. Dogs and cats fell like the rest.

The death of labor held a fearful prospect because the 14th century lived close to the annual harvest both for food and for next year’s seed. “So few servants and laborers were left,” wrote Knighton, “that no one knew where to turn for help.” The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair. A Bavarian chronicler of Neuberg on the Danube recorded 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.” Fields went uncultivated, spring seed unsewn. Second growth with nature’s awful energy crept back over cleared land, dikes crumbled, salt water reinvaded and soured the lowlands. With so few hands remaining to restore the work of cen-

3. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), Italian writer best known for his collection of stories, The Decameron, in which seven young ladies and three young men flee from Florence to escape the Black Death and tell stories to while away the time.

4. Enguerrand de Coucy, a French nobleman, is the historical figure around whom Tuchman constructs her account of the fourteenth century.
Lawlessness and debauchery accompanied the plague as they had during the great plague of Athens of 430 B.C., in the time of Thucydides, men berating each other in the streets. 'In the midst of an unfulfilled sentence,' wrote the historian, 'those who had nothing immediately inherited and they resolved that Slavonic could not enjoy life, they reflected that while they lived, they were not able to return to their own country in their old age; they were not to live long, and they did not know what might happen to their sons. Neither repeated nor recorded was the memory that those who survived repeated nor their sorceries, nor their thefts.

The great plague of Athens of 430 B.C., when according to Herodotus, men and women and boys in the streets, without any difference of age or sex, who were in the course of life, left all their possessions unattended, nor even their coffee, and drank and ate of all the food which they had prepared for sale or for consumption. And when the plague had been raging for a year, the people of Athens were reduced to poverty and great distress, and the value of property was so low that it was not worth the trouble to collect it. The same was the case in Florence, where the plague had been raging for a year, and the value of property was so low that it was not worth the trouble to collect it. And the people of Florence were reduced to poverty and great distress, and the value of property was so low that it was not worth the trouble to collect it. And the people of Florence were reduced to poverty and great distress, and the value of property was so low that it was not worth the trouble to collect it. ...
ried the infection to Europe "and now as some suspect it cometh round the seacoast." Accurate observation in this case could not make the mental jump to ships and rats because no idea of animal- or insect-borne contagion existed.

The earthquake was blamed for releasing sulphurous and foul fumes from the earth’s interior, or as evidence of a titanic struggle of planets and oceans causing waters to rise and vaporize until fish died in masses and corrupted the air. All these explanations had in common a factor of poisoned air, of miasmas and thick, stinking mists traced to every kind of natural or imagined agency from stagnant lakes to malign conjunction of the planets, from the hand of the Evil One to the wrath of God. Medical thinking, trapped in the theory of astral influences, stressed air as the communicator of disease, ignoring sanitation or visible carriers. The existence of two carriers confused the trail, the more so because the flea could live and travel independently of the rat for as long a month, and if infected by the particularly virulent septicemic form of the bacillus, could infect humans without reinfesting itself from the rat. The simultaneous presence of the pulmonary form of the disease, which was indeed communicated through the air, blurred the problem further.

The mystery of the contagion was “the most terrible of all the terrors,” as an anonymous Flemish cleric in Avignon wrote to a correspondent in Bruges. Plagues had been known before, from the plague of Athens (believed to have been typhus) to the prolonged epidemic of the 6th century A.D., to the recurrence of sporadic outbreaks in the 12th and 13th centuries, but they had left no accumulated store of understanding. That the infection came from contact with the sick or with their clothes, clothes, or corpses was quickly observed but not comprehended. Gentile da Foligno, renowned physician of Perugia and doctor of medicine at the universities of Bologna and Padua, came close to respiratory infection when he surmised that poisonous material was “communicated by means of air breathed out and in.” Having no idea of microscopic carriers, he had to assume that the air was corrupted by planetary influences.

Plants, however, could not explain the ongoing contagion. The agonized search for an answer gave rise to such theories as transference by sight. People fell ill, wrote Guy de Chauliac, not only by remaining with the sick but “even by looking at them.” Three hundred years later Joshua Barnes, the 17th century biographer of Edward III, could write that the power of infection had entered into beams of light and “darted death from the eyes.”

Doctors struggling with the evidence could not break away from the terms of astrology, to which they believed all human physiology was subject. Medicine was the one aspect of medieval life, perhaps because of its links with the Arabs, not shaped by Christian doctrine. Clerics detested astrology, but could not dislodge its influence. Guy de Chauliac, physician to three popes in succession, practiced in obedience to the zodiac. While his Cirurgia was the major treatise on surgery of its time, while he understood the use of anaesthesia made from the juice of opium, mandrake, or hemlock, he nevertheless prescribed bleeding and purgatives by the planets and divided chronic from acute diseases on the basis of one being under the rule of the sun and the other of the moon.

In October 1348 Philip VI asked the medical faculty of the University of Paris for a report on the situation. With careful thesis, antithesis, and proofs, the doctors ascribed it to a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars in the 40th degree of Aquarius said to have occurred on March 20, 1345. They acknowledged, however, effects whose cause is hidden from even the most highly trained intellects.” The verdict of the masters of Paris became the official version. Borrowed, copied by scribes, carried abroad, translated from Latin into various vernaculars, it was everywhere accepted, even by the Arab physicians of Cordova and Granada, as the scientific if not the popular answer. Because of the terrible interest of the subject, the translations of the plague tracts stimulated use of national languages. In that one respect, life came from death.

To the people at large there could be but one explanation—the wrath of God. Plague might satisfy the learned doctors, but God was closer to the average man. A scourge so sweeping and unsparing without any visible cause could only be seen as Divine punishment upon mankind for its sins. It might just be God’s terminal disappointment in his creature. Matteo Villani compared the plague to the Flood in ultimate purpose and believed he was recording the extermination of mankind. Efforts to appease Divine wrath took many forms, as when the city of Rouen ordered that everything that could anger God, such as gambling, cursing, and drinking, must be stopped. More general were the penitent processions authorized at first by the Pope, some lasting as long as three days, some attended by as many as 2,000, which everywhere accompanied the plague and helped to spread it.

Barefoot in sackcloth, sprinkled with ashes, weeping, praying, tearing their hair, carrying candles and relics, sometimes with ropes around their necks or beating themselves with whips, the penitents wound through the streets, implored the mercy of the Virgin and saints at their shrines. In a vivid illustration for the Trés Riches Heures of the Duc de Berry, the Pope is shown in a penitent procession attended by four cardinals in scarlet from hat to hem. He raises both arms in supplication to the angel on top of the Castel Sant’ Angelo, while white-robed priests bearing banners and relics in golden cases turn to look as one of their number, stricken by the plague, falls to the ground, his face contorted with anxiety. In the rear, a gray-clad monk falls beside another victim already on the ground as the townspeople gaze in horror. (Nominally the illustration represents a 6th century plague in the time of Pope Gregory the Great, but as medieval artists made no distinction between past and present, the scene is shown as the artist would have seen it in the 14th century.) When it became evident that these processions were sources of infection, Clement VI had to prohibit them.

In Messina, where the plague first appeared, the people begged the Archbishop of neighboring Catania to lend them the relics of St. Agatha. When the Catanians refused to let the relics go, the Archbishop dipped them in holy water and took the water himself to Messina, where he carried it in a procession with prayers and litanies through the streets. The demonic, which shared the medieval cosmos with God, appeared as “demons in the shape of dogs” to ter-
fect the next house. In Lithuania the Maidens said to wave a red scarf through the door or window to let in the pest. One brave man, according to legend, deliberately waited at his open window with drawn sword and, at the fluttering of the scarf, chopped off the hand. He died of his deed, but his village was spared and the scarf long preserved as a relic in the local church.

Beyond demons and superstition the final hand was God's. The Pope acknowledged it in a Bull of September 1348, speaking of the "pestilence with which God is afflicting the Christian people." To the Emperor John Cantacuzene it was manifest that a malady of such horrors, stenches, and agonies, and especially one bringing the dismal despair that settled upon its victims before they died, was not a plague "natural" to mankind but "a chastisement from Heaven." To Piers Plowman "these pestilences were for pure sin."

The general acceptance of this view created an expanded sense of guilt for if the plague were punishment there had to be terrible sin to have occasioned it. What sins were on the 14th century conscience? Primarily greed, the sin of avarice, followed by usury, worldliness, adultery, blasphemy, falsehood, luxury, and idolatry. Giovanni Villani, attempting to account for the cascade of calamity that had fallen upon Florence, concluded that it was retribution for the sins of avarice and usury that oppressed the poor. Pity and anger about the condition of the poor, especially victimization of the peasantry in war, was often expressed by writers of the time and was certainly on the conscience of the century. Beneath it all was the daily condition of medieval life, in which hardly an act of thought, sexual, mercantile, or military, did not contravene the dictates of the Church. Mere failure to fast or attend mass was sin. The result was an underground lake of guilt in the soul that the plague now tapped.

The mortality was accepted as God's punishment may explain in part the vacuum of comment that followed the Black Death. An investigator has noticed that in the archives of Périgord references to the war are innumerable, to the plague few. Froissart mentions the great death but once, Chaucer gives it barely a glance. Divine anger so great that it contemplated the extermination of many did not bear close examination.

5. The main character (and title) of a fourteenth-century poem by the English poet William Langland (c. 1330–c. 1386).

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Tuchman begin with the account of the Genoese trading ships?
2. What ways does Tuchman find to group related facts together—in other words, what categories does she develop? Suggest other categories that Tuchman might have used in arranging her facts. What would she have gained or lost by using such categories?
3. Can you determine a basis for Tuchman's decision sometimes to quote a source, sometimes to recount it in her own words?
4. Write a brief account of a modern disaster, based on research from several sources.