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La Grande Mortalità: Florence and the Black Death

Rachel Podd

Trinity University, rpodd@trinity.edu

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Abstract: The epidemic which devastated Medieval Europe, known as the Black Death, struck particularly hard among urban populations, including the Italian city of Florence. A major center of art, religion, and politics, the city that existed after the plague abated in 1350 was far from the city of 1347. Through careful analysis of primary sources, chief among them *Il Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio and the *Chronicle* of the Villani Brothers, the scholar can deduce several major trends caused by *la grande mortalità*. Deeper divisions developed between the rich and the poor, even as status symbols became less indicative of class. Death ritual was profoundly altered, plague saints moved to the forefront of religious thought, and a compulsive focus on the sacrament of Mass developed. These primary sources allow the modern reader to better understand circumstances not experienced before or since.

“Go, mortals, sweat, pant, toil, range the lands and the seas to pile up riches you cannot keep; glory that will not last. The life we lead is a sleep; whatever we do, dreams. Only death breaks the sleep and wakes us from dreaming. I wish I could have woken before this.”

- Francesco Petrarca, Summer 1349

“La Grande Mortalità: Florence and the Black Death”

The Bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, which is carried by fleas. The plague bacillus incubated in the marmot population of the central Asian steppes and had been content to remain there for centuries, but after the Silk Road connected the wealth of the eastern nations with the markets of the west, a large scale outbreak simply became a matter of time. These fleas normally attached to rats, however, once the fleas carrying the disease found the vulnerable rodent populations of Western Europe, their newly-

acquired hosts died in great numbers, and the fleas sought out human sources of nourishment¹. It appeared first in Caffa (now known as Feodosiia), and from there moved by galley to Genoa, Venice, and towards Germany. It reached England in late 1348, and began a slow but deadly march northwards, up to Ireland and Scotland.

While periodic outbreaks of endemic illness during the classical and the Middle Ages were not irregular, the epidemic of 1348 to 1350 was extraordinary in its ferocity and scope. It is in fact incredibly difficult to overstate the effects of the plague; the Foster scale, which measures the severity of a disaster by population loss, emotional stress and physical destruction, places the Black Death of the mid-14th century second in recorded history; only World War II, with a death toll of over fifty million, is rated higher². While estimates of total plague mortality vary, a European death rate of around thirty percent is generally accepted and, following that number, it is assumed that approximately twenty million people died due to the pestilence.

Italy, then a loosely-bound collection of city-states, suffered heavy losses. It has been calculated that Genoa and Pisa both lost between thirty and forty percent of their populations³. Florence, a city that Pope Boniface VIII had called “the fifth element” after air, fire, earth, and water, was an economic powerhouse and possessed an incredibly dense population; indeed, Giovanni Villani boasted that “between five thousand and six thousand babies are born here each year”⁴. The combined population of the city and the *contando*, the area of rich farmland outside

¹ Hatty, James, "Coping with Disaster: Florence after the Black Death", *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture* 7 (1992): 155.

² Lerner, Robert E.. "The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities." *The Black Death*. Ed. Daniel Williams. (Birmingham: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1982), 76.

³ Hatty, James, "Coping with Disaster: Florence after the Black Death," *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture* 7 (1992): 115.

⁴ Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. (New York: Harper Perennial. 2006), 46.

the city, exceeded 400,000 by 1330⁵. However, the 1340s was a decade of crises even before the arrival of the plague; there was an epidemic in 1340, a war with the rival city state of Pisa in 1341, a groundswell of civil unrest in 1343 that culminated in the public murder of the chief of police and his son, flooding in 1345, a financial crisis in 1346, and famine in 1347. However, nothing struck to the core of the city quite like the plague. Florence, one of the jewels of the Italian peninsula, lost between forty-five and a shocking seventy-five percent of the population; estimates of population loss vary by account. The *contando* alone lost between fifty and sixty-six percent⁶.

While it is true that the plague raged everywhere, in city and in countryside, this paper will focus on Florence's experiences with the plague. This particular city is remarkable not only for the severity of its experience, but also for the variety of primary sources which have survived, chief among them Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Decameron* and the chronicles of the Villani brothers. These sources allow us to formulate a cohesive and cogent picture of the societal breakdown that occurred as a result of the pestilence.

One of the most influential sources describing the first major wave of the pestilence in Florence is the Giovanni Boccaccio's introduction to his *Il Decameron*. Boccaccio began composing *Il Decameron* in either 1350 or 1351, almost immediately after the pestilence ended. The story described ten rich Florentines, seven women and three men, amusing themselves in a country villa after leaving the plague-stricken city. Boccaccio's introduction, in contrast to the narrative of the Florentine elite, was highly individual, and emphasized that he was reporting purely on what he saw during the days of sickness and death. From the first sentence, he

⁵ Najemy, John M. *A History of Florence*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 97.

⁶ *Ibid.* 97.

personalized the work, and therefore differentiated it from the more general monastic chronicles: “let me say then, that thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had already passed after the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when into the distinguished city of Florence, more noble than any other Italian city, there came the deadly pestilence”⁷.

Boccaccio’s *Il Decameron* did not focus on the cause for the plague, but rather emphasized the breakdown of social order, the horrendous price, that followed the pestilence. Whereas many monastic chronicles stressed God punishing the people for their inequity, Boccaccio simply noted that no method of salvation worked, whether physical or spiritual: “no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail...the humble supplications, rendered not once but many times to God by pious people”⁸ failed to affect change. Faith was no more a safeguard than any of the other methods employed by the Florentine citizens. Boccaccio noted that some abstained from rich food and drink in an effort to stay healthy, others gave in to gluttony of all sorts, a third type attempted temperance in living, and those with the ability to do so fled the city, but “not all of these who adopted these diverse opinions died, nor did they all escape with their lives”⁹.

The ink that Gabriele Boccaccio did not spill on characterizing the plague as divine punishment was thoroughly used by another, Gabriele de Musi, a writer in Piacenza, which lies to the north of Florence. He considered the plague to be divinely sent as punishment for man’s inequity. For him the plague was moral in nature; unlike Boccaccio, he believed it to be the judgment of a wrathful God. De Musi laid out his purpose in writing in blistering prose, stating,

⁷ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 3.

⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁹ Ibid. 6.

“May this stand as a perpetual reminder to everyone...how almighty God...looked down from heaven and saw the entire human race wallowing in a mire of manifold wickedness”¹⁰. The tract was structured as a dialogue between the suffering mortal and the immortal Lord, who in response to man’s sin exhorted:

“Let the planets poison the air and corrupt the whole earth; let there be universal grief and lamentation. Let the sharp arrows of sudden death have dominion throughout the world. Let no one be spared, either for their sex or their age; let the innocent perish with the guilty and no one escape”¹¹”

De Musi’s rhetoric here was decidedly Old Testament, and called to mind God’s words to Noah in Genesis, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them”¹².

Indeed, de Musi characterized the time in which the Piacenzan citizens found themselves as a new time of Old Testament plagues. In Cathay, he said, “serpents and toads fell in a thick rain, entered dwellings and devoured numberless people, injecting them with poison and gnawing them with their teeth”¹³. The implicit allusion here was to the ten plagues of Egypt, of which frogs and pestilence are two; indeed in Exodus the Lord says that the frogs “will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people”¹⁴. The plague of boils could find parallel in the buboes which form in the armpits, necks, and groins of the sick. Furthermore, serpents figure heavily in both sources. Not only is

¹⁰ De’ Musis, Gabriele, “Excerpt from *Historia de Morbo*” in *The Black Death*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Horrox. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14.

¹¹ Ibid. 15.

¹² Genesis 6.5. (New International Version)

¹³ De’ Musis, Gabriele, “Excerpt from *Historia de Morbo*” in *The Black Death*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Horrox. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 25.

¹⁴ Exodus 8:1-4.

the serpent the embodiment of sin in the book of Genesis, but within the narrative of the ten plagues of Egypt, the staff of Moses turns into a snake as a proof of God's power in contrast to the Egyptian gods and the decadence of the Pharaoh's court. No doubt de Musi found a convincing parallel in the debauchery of his city, of people "pursuing numberless vices, drowning in a sea of depravity because of a limitless capacity for evil, bereft of all goodness, not fearing the judgments of God"¹⁵.

For de Musi, the solution to the plague was an easy one. Because the punishment is "just reward" for the sins of man, the afflicted must become penitent; "let the proud be humbled. Let misers...blush for shame. Let the envious become zealous in almsgiving...let adolescents and youths abandon their present delight in following fashion"¹⁶. Unfortunately, de Musi's thoughts on the penitential orders which sprung up during the plague, chief among them the flagellants, remain tantalizingly absent. However, given his vitriol for the sins of his fellow men, it stands to reason that he would have found some satisfaction in the extreme forms of penance that many of his countrymen took up.

In contrast, Boccaccio's main area of interest in his introduction was the breakdown in ecclesiastic ceremony and death ritual. Usher observes that Boccaccio heavily emphasized the ritual aspect rather than the grief of survivors and the emotions of the dying¹⁷. Furthermore, Boccaccio's emphasis on death as spectacle was not a knee-jerk reaction to the plague, but a long standing tradition which the plague called into question¹⁸. Boccaccio first described the normal rituals for an elite dead Florentine; "it was the custom...for the women, relatives, and neighbors

¹⁵ De' Musis, Gabriele, "Excerpt from *Historia de Morbo*" in *The Black Death*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Horrox. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁷ Usher, Jonathon, "Ars Moriendi in the Decameron," *The Modern Language Review* 81.3 (1986): 621

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 621-622.

to gather together in the house of dead person”¹⁹. The good death, to a fourteenth century Florentine, was in many ways similar to modern ideals: one wanted to die peacefully, at home, surrounded by friends and loved ones. However, as the plague dead increased, “not only did people die without having a number of women around them, but there were many who passed away without even having a single witness present”²⁰. The Italian noun for witness is *testimone*, and the word carries the weight that its’ English equivalent does today; it is a solemn duty, in some ways a sacred one.

The deathbed vigil which was customary prior to the arrival of the pestilence also allowed for a dying man to make his wishes known; when a person lies upon their death bed, their wishes carry more weight than at any other time²¹. Boccaccio’s inclusion of the detail of the disregard for the wills of the dead indicated his dissatisfaction with the loss of this custom. According to the social mores of the time, death was a social occasion, a spectacle, and the dying man or woman played the central role, with family, clerics, and sometimes strangers acting on the periphery, and Boccaccio found the fact that many plague victims were suffering and dying utterly alone incredibly distressing²². His emphasis on what was regular prior to the plague only served to stress the utter difference of the circumstances in which he found himself. Boccaccio’s words in response to this societal breakdown were not vitriolic, but rather the sad observation of a man who could not understand or condone the altered world in which he found himself, a world in which people “died not like men but more like wild animals”²³.

¹⁹ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 7.

²¹ Usher, Jonathon, “*Ars Moriendi* in the *Decameron*,” *The Modern Language Review* 81.3 (1986): 622.

²² *Ibid.* 622.

²³ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 9.

Usually the length between falling ill and dying allowed for the *testimone* and the clerics to gather, but victims of plague usually died between three and four days from the onset of symptoms. This prevented the elaborate rituals from taking place, even if the friends and family were willing to risk infection, which was highly unlikely²⁴. It is important to note that Boccaccio's horror at the lack of audience was not purely born out of a desire to make death social; rather, the presence of trusted companions at death was a safeguard for salvation. When one passed, the companions would make sure that the body was treated appropriately according to religious norms and that there would be no impediment to the departed's entrance into heaven.

According to religious doctrine at the time, when an individual was on their death bed, a priest should offer them extreme unction. The ill individual was first anointed with water as a reminder of baptism and their status as a child of God. Then, prayers were said, and the priest prayed over the chrism, or sacred oil, before anointing the dying individual. The Lord's Prayer was recited, and then the sacrament of communion was performed. This act, according to Vatican law, was the last sacrament of life, and was oftentimes called the *viaticum*, which aided the dying person through the passage into eternal life²⁵. Through these last rites, the soul of the sufferer was made clean, and the passage to heaven made more likely. However, if a man died alone, without a priest present, as Boccaccio assured his reader was a normal occurrence, there could have been no extreme unction, no last confession, and it stands to follow, no salvation.

After the moment of death had passed, the sad mockery of normal ritual and the threats to the salvation of the deceased continued. Prior to the arrival of the plague, the dead man would be

²⁴ Usher, Jonathon, "Ars Moriendi in the Decameron," *The Modern Language Review* 81.3 (1986): 622.

²⁵ "The Effects of the Celebration of This Sacrament [Last Rites]," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Accessed 20th September, 2011, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4N.HTM>.

carried “upon the shoulders of his equals...to the church chosen by him before death with the funeral pomp of candles and chants”²⁶. However, during the Black Death “the people that died were cared for as we care for goats”²⁷. Almost all forms of public mourning ceased: “the dead were honored with no tears or candles or funeral mourners” and “a bier [did not] carry only one corpse; sometimes it was used for two or three at a time”²⁸.

The lack of mourners comprised a palpable threat in Boccaccio’s time. If one died with sins unconfessed, as often happened during the pestilence, the mourners that prayed for the repose of the deceased’s soul could lessen the latter’s time in purgatory. In fact, the elite would often establish chantries for this express purpose. However, the lack of *testimone* during the passage into glory made this rare. Furthermore, if the body of that person was then unaccompanied by mourners, then the soul, blighted by sins the dead man had no opportunity to confess, was doomed to perdition, for those individuals could not pray for the deceased to pass into heaven, thereby lengthening its’ time in purgatory, if it was fortunate enough to go there rather than hell.

The threat to salvation did not only extend to the recently deceased, but to those who bore the body. The corpse was taken to the burial site “by gravediggers from the lower classes that were called *becchini*”²⁹. Prior to the plague, there existed in Florence a charitable fraternity known as the *misericordia* (Italian for “mercy”), comprised of men who would carry the bodies of the poor and destitute as an act of goodwill. Boccaccio’s vitriol towards the *becchnini* in *Il Decameron* emphasized that paid gravediggers were a new and unpleasant convention in

²⁶ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 6.

Florence³⁰ and that they were in no way equal to the family and friends of the deceased³¹. The opinion of contemporary Florentine society on *becchini* can be discerned by the etymology; it comes from the verb *beccare*, which means “to peck at”, and characterizes these individuals that accompanied the deceased as nothing more than vultures, picking at carrion³².

Comprised of the poor and disenfranchised, “marginal social groups, poor rustics, beggars and the urban jobless”³³ who could find little or no employment of times of prosperity, and who perhaps had nothing to lose, the *becchini* took the place of the family and friends of the dead and charged exorbitant fees for the privilege. Unlike the members of the *misericordia*, the *becchini* made money, often good money, by performing their services. This action, performing burial for profit, was in direct violation of the canon law laid down by Gratian, in which it was concluded that, because burial was a spiritual function, making a profit from performing it amounted to simony, and was therefore a sin³⁴. It followed, therefore, that the *becchini* were putting their immortal souls in jeopardy through their actions, especially since they were daily coming into contact with the plague dead, and increasing their chance of infection and a death without last rites exponentially. However, they lacked the physical mobility of the social elite, and many could not resist the gold that flowed from the pockets of both the lower and the upper classes. A corpse in close proximity increased the surviving family members’ risk of infection,

³⁰ Ibid. 41.

³¹ Usher, Jonathon, “*Ars Moriendi* in the Decameron,” *The Modern Language Review* 81.3 (1986): 622.

³² “Beccare” *Concise Oxford Paravia Italian Dictionary* (Pearson Paravia Bruno Mondadori spa e Oxford University Press, 2009).

³³ Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Ed. Samuel J. Cohn, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 41.

³⁴ Thurston, H. (1908). Christian Burial. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved December 12, 2011 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03071a.htm>

but removing it themselves was exceedingly dangerous, and so they would pay handsomely to have it carted away by the *becchini*.

While the dead individual was oftentimes carried by strangers rather than family, it was not the only indignity suffered by the deceased. The *becchini* “would pick up the bier and hurry it off, not to the church the dead man had chosen before his death but, in most cases, to the church closest by”³⁵. The treatment of the body did not improve once it arrived at the nearest church. There “the churchmen would place the body as fast as they could in whatever unoccupied grave they could find”³⁶. Many of the dead, however, were not even given that meager comfort; as the plague wore on, and deaths continued, “so many corpses would arrive in front of a church every day and at every hour that the amount of holy ground was certainly insufficient for the ancient custom of giving each body its individual place; when all the graves were full, huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries of the churches and into them the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds”³⁷. Another Florentine writer, Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, stated the bodies were deposited unceremoniously in a pit and covered and dirt, and the process repeated as long as necessary; the graves were made “just as one makes lasagna with layers of pasta and cheese”³⁸. These plague dead were not only stripped of their chosen final resting place, of the comforting rituals of death, but also of a burial on consecrated ground and a name. In death they were anonymous, and would arise on judgment day surrounded by strangers, and it was this final insult that Boccaccio found unforgivable. The sheer volume of burials, the

³⁵ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 7-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

³⁸ Di Coppo Stefani, Marchionne. *Cronica Fiorentina*. (Citta di Costella: Lapi, 1903), 88.

anonymity of them, called into question the Catholic Church's focus on ritual; if these rituals were not followed, could resurrection on judgment day really be expected³⁹?

Just as death ritual became inverted, so, too, did societal order. It quickly became apparent that those in positions of authority could do little to nothing to stop its spread, not least among them the doctors. Boccaccio stated, "nor a doctor's advice nor the strength of medicine could do anything to cure this illness"⁴⁰. The city of Florence attempted to contain the spread through administrative means, creating a magistracy that took over certain political powers for the duration of the sickness⁴¹. They created laws that ensured that "quantities of filth were removed from the city... [and] many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health"⁴². In early April, the magistrate enacted a law that banned the entrance of those coming from areas affected by plague, including Pisa and Genoa, and made the sale of clothing belonging to the sick illegal; they also severely restricted mobility within the city⁴³. The last guideline served to increase the severity of the plague rather than lessen it, which further disenfranchised the population of the city. People ceased to follow any rules, since death seemed imminent; Boccaccio supplied that "the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human,

³⁹ Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Ed. Samuel J. Cohn, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 61

⁴⁰ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 4.

⁴¹ Henderson, John. "The Black Death in Florence: medical and communal responses." In *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*. Ed. Steven Bassett. (New York: Leceister University Press, 1992), 142.

⁴² Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 3-4.

⁴³ Henderson, John. "The Black Death in Florence: medical and communal responses." In *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*. Ed. Steven Bassett. (New York: Leceister University Press, 1992), 144.

had fallen and almost completely disappeared for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick”⁴⁴ and those that survived could do nothing to stop the plague.

The medical community in the fourteenth century still subscribed to the theories of Hippocrates and Galen, the latter of who believed that illness was the result of miasma. While the doctors seemed to be blinded by their almost unwavering faith in corrupt air, the common people realized that there was something dangerous about coming into contact with the sick and the things that belonged to them⁴⁵. Indeed, Boccaccio mentioned that “almost without exception, [the healthy] took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings”⁴⁶. Many witnesses to the plague noted that contact with the sick engendered further sickness. Boccaccio related an incident in which two pigs, after chewing on the clothes of a dead man, convulsed and died⁴⁷. Though he did not know that plague bacilli were the cause, he and many like him understood the effect of close contact with the sick and their possessions.

The doctors and many of the educated class, in contrast, often attributed illnesses, including the plague, to more ephemeral causes: the wrath of God was the favorite, followed by astronomic coincidences, usually between Mars and Saturn⁴⁸. Giovanni Villani subscribed to this

⁴⁴ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 5-6.

⁴⁵ Henderson, John. "The Black Death in Florence: medical and communal responses." In *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*. Ed. Steven Bassett. (New York: Leceister University Press, 1992), 137.

⁴⁶ Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 5

⁴⁸ Henderson, John. "The Black Death in Florence: medical and communal responses." In *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*. Ed. Steven Bassett. (New York: Leceister University Press, 1992), 137.

school of thought; in his *Chronice* he noted that “the plague...was foretold by the masters in astrology last March...the sign of Virgo and its master...Mercury...signif[y] death”⁴⁹.

Once plague actually struck, the doctors and surgeons of medieval Florence could offer no real help. Tommaso del Garbo (1305-1370), a Professor of Medicine in Perugia and a contemporary of Boccaccio, listed the following as effective in avoiding the plague in his book *Consilio Contro alla Peste*: “notaries, confessors, relations and doctors who visit the plague victims on entering their houses should open the windows...and wash their hands with vinegar and rose water and also their faces...it is also a good idea before entering the room to place in your mouth several cloves and eat two slices of bread soaked in the best wine and then drink the rest of the wine”⁵⁰, which only served to further emphasize the medical community’s preoccupation with the concept of polluted air. The ill were often bled in an attempt to balance their humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile), but this only served to weaken them further and increase their susceptibility to the pestilence.

In short, the pestilence brought those who had before been on high down into the squalor in which the masses lived. De Mussi described it thusly: “you who enjoyed the world and upon whom pleasure and prosperity smiled, who mingled joys with follies, the same tomb receives you and you are handed over as food for worms”⁵¹. The poor received some benefit from the suddenly empty city; the rapid decrease in population freed up what resources were to be had, and the poor took advantage of it: “everyone felt he was doomed to die and, as a result, abandoned his property, so that most of the houses became common property, and any stranger

⁴⁹ Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. (New York: Harper Perennial. 2006), 19.

⁵⁰ Del Garbo, Tommaso, and Pietro Ferrato. *Consiglio Contro a Pistolenza*. (Bologna: G. Romagnoli, 1866), 44.

⁵¹ De’ Musis, Gabriele, “Excerpt from *Historia de Morbo*” in *The Black Death*, ed. and trans. Rosemary Horrox. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 19.

who came upon them used them as if he were their rightful owner”⁵². The reversal of the rightful order was disorienting to the survivors, and since prosperity was God-given, the people who were taking advantage of the death of the wealthy in order to enrich themselves were incurring sin.

Boccaccio similarly condemned those that survived for their lack of Christian charity towards the less fortunate, for “the plight of the lower class and, perhaps, a large part of the middle class was even more pathetic”⁵³. Because they lacked the funds to flee the city for country estates, unlike the characters of *Il Decameron*, the people that did not belong to the social elite remained in the city as the plague spread. Due to the cordoning off of areas where the sick lived, they could not even flee to another part of Florence; as a result, “every day they fell sick by the thousands; and not having servants or attendants of any kind, they almost always died.”⁵⁴. Without servants, “there remained no support except the charity of friends (and these were few)”⁵⁵. Boccaccio had sympathy for their plight, but what he found damnable was the utter lack of compassion displayed by the healthy towards the ill. The first words of *Il Decameron* are “human it is to have compassion for the unhappy”⁵⁶; the placement emphasized how important this concept was to the author. When the discussion of the plague began, Boccaccio illustrated how inhuman the Florentines became: “among those who remained alive that almost all of them took a very cruel attitude in the matter; this is, they completely avoided the sick and their possessions”⁵⁷. Any bond of mutual pride in one’s state as a Florentine, which comprised much

⁵² Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter E. Bondanella. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,1977), 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

of a city-dweller's identity, was dissolved by the plague. Furthermore, "brother abandoned brother, uncle abandoned nephew, sister left brother, and very often wife abandoned husband, and – even worse, almost unbelievable, fathers and mothers neglected to tend and care for their children, as if they were not their own"⁵⁸. The sickness's effects on human decency extended not only to relationships between neighbors and friends, but dissolved even the most sacred bond, that between parent and child, and Boccaccio considered such to be utterly unchristian in nature. However, these sinners did suffer for their lack of compassion; "since they had given, when they were healthy, the bad example of avoiding the sick, they, in turn, were abandoned and left to languish away without care"⁵⁹, which conformed to the Christian morality system.

Boccaccio's condemnation continued along gender lines. He mentioned that "a practice that was almost unheard of before spread through the city: when a woman fell sick, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble she might be, she did not mind having a manservant...and she had no shame whatsoever in revealing any part of her body to him"⁶⁰. He went on to say that this practice continued even after the plague, and that "this practice was perhaps in the days that followed the pestilence, the cause of looser morals in the women who survived"⁶¹. This promiscuity too, was a threat to salvation, but a purely feminine one. Chastity was one of the main tenants of salvation for women, and by showing their body to the men attending them, they were falling into the archetype of Eve, who used sensuality to tempt Adam into sin, dooming them both. Boccaccio's implicit comparison between the apple of original sin and the pestilence both demonstrated how man has failed to live up to divine expectation.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 6.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 7.

⁶¹ Ibid. 7.

The last line that Giovanni Villani ever wrote, as a man in his sixties, a man who had experienced both scarcity and abundance was thus: “And many lands and cities were made desolate. And this plague lasted until _____”⁶². He left the underline there, inked upon the parchment on that spring day, with the intent to fill in the date at which his world returned to some semblance of normalcy. He never got the chance; the pestilence claimed him in the heat of the summer, as it did so many others in 1349. His body, unlike those of the vast majority of plague dead, received a fitting burial place, in the Church of the Most Sacred Annunciation.

The chronicler’s pen was then picked up by his brother, Matteo Villani. He continued Giovanni’s work, and shed light on the effects on the city of Florence after the pestilence abated. Matteo estimated that the pestilence killed 60 percent of the city’s population⁶³. Indeed, the tax rolls of 1352, three years after the worst of the plague had passed, note 9,955 households, or a population falling between 40,000 and 45,000, a far cry from the 1330’s⁶⁴. Matteo’s survival was most fortuitous to the modern reader, for he offers a glimpse into the more far-reaching effects of the great mortality.

As a surviving member of the upper class, of the arbiters of taste in the pre-plague world, Matteo Villani’s main concern was returning the city to its’ former glory. However, the plague had wrought profound changes inside and around the city, and these deviations from the norm disturbed and frustrated him; much like Boccaccio, Matteo Villani found himself in a world which he no longer completely understood. Also like Boccaccio, he found that he was quite unhappy with the changes.

⁶² Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. (New York: Harper Perennial. 2006), 285.

⁶³ Najemy, John M. *A History of Florence*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.,2006), 94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 97.

The Villani family was of mercantile stock, and both Giovanni and Matteo had lived quite comfortably before the plague. The elite of Florence had enjoyed relative stability since the partisan conflicts of the 1310s, and had managed to consolidate the vast majority of Florence's power in the hands of a few dozen families⁶⁵. The elite sowed discord among the guilds in an attempt to keep them weak and in many cases, succeeded. For the Villani brothers, as for all upper class Florentines, life was intrinsically bound up in coin, in property, and in titles. There was a clear divide between the rich and the poor, between nobility and peasantry, and the divide defined how one passed the sum of one's years on earth. However, the pestilence cared not a bit for that divide, as many a chronicler noted, and after its' two year sojourn in the city, the divide itself was in many ways annihilated.

One of the most visible effects was in wages. Matteo complained, as the city picked up the pieces, that "serving girls...want at least 12 florins per year and the more arrogant among them 18 or 24 florins, and...minor artisans working with their hands want three times...the usual pay, and laborers on the land all want oxen and...seed, and want to work the best lands and abandon all others"⁶⁶. The dramatic decrease in population allowed the members of the lower classes to ask for more pay for the same services, and as a well-to-do Florentine, Matteo heavily begrudged the increase. Similarly, the new working class expected more rights than they had before. Taxes on income rose as well, but it did not match the pace of rising wages. According to tax rolls and financial records, unmarried masons in Florence, without dependents, earned twice what they did before the plague, and over the next 20 years they made three or four times their

⁶⁵ Ibid. 127.

⁶⁶ Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. (New York: Harper Perennial. 2006), 284.

cost of living⁶⁷. As a result, the lower and middle class could afford more luxury goods, and the goods that craftsmen produced cost more to purchase; the plague meant higher prices for food (indeed, the inflation persisted until the end of the fourteenth century⁶⁸), higher prices for clothing and luxury goods, and an almost astronomical increase in the price of services, while the capital of old money families like the Villani remained the same. The money of the rich suddenly could buy much less, and that fact did not sit well with Matteo.

Similarly, the extreme loss of human life left many spaces in society open which those who survived could fill. Matteo griped, “the common people, by reason of the abundance and superfluity that they found, would no longer work at their accustomed trades; they wanted the dearest and most delicate foods...while children and common women clad themselves in all the fair and costly garments of the illustrious who had died”⁶⁹. The effect here was a frightening one. Not only were people behaving inhumanely, with an absence of compassion for the dead and their belongings, but they purposefully blurred the lines of distinction between rich and poor. For an upper class Florentine, it would have been an extremely distressing inversion of the norm. The things which marked a man or a woman as upper class, their clothing and jewelry, the social circle in which they took part, could no longer be trusted as a true indication of their status. Furthermore, it cheapened the value of these signifiers that were possessed by those still in the upper class. How valuable could imported brocade be if the street urchins were wearing it, too? Simply put, the plague allowed for many to move up the social ladder, which severely distressed those still at the top, which saw the distance between them and their servants steadily decreasing.

⁶⁷ Najemy, John M. *A History of Florence*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.,2006) , 158.

⁶⁸ Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Ed. Samuel J. Cohn, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 47

⁶⁹ Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. (New York: Harper Perennial. 2006), 285.

Though Matteo Villani did not know it, he was also bearing witness to a profound shift in religious sensibilities; at a time when the world seemed, and indeed was, irrevocably changed, it was only logical that the tastes and actions of the population of Florence changed with it. In many ways, the 1350s and beyond were what Norman Cantor calls, “the privatization of Christianity”⁷⁰. After all, the three day procession Giovanni Villani mentioned in his *Chronicle* did nothing to alter the arrival of the plague, and so in the world it made, many people altered their spiritual behavior. Those families with the means to do so founded chantries or increased their endowments to religious houses⁷¹. The nobility built chapels in their homes in order to engage in religious reflection at any time. Perhaps the most visible change was the altered relationship between people and the rite of Communion. As a reaffirmation of the Christian faith, the consumption of the wafer was the internalization of the “the bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ”⁷². In short, the Communion wafer helped the individual assure their ascent into heaven. In the world immediately following the Black Death, it quickly became the fashion to take communion as often as possible⁷³. If one could die at any moment, as so many had, it was best to hedge one’s bets.

Similarly, religious art altered its focus. The style became more hierarchical, and focused on the distinction between the suffering mortals and God, who was emphasized as the divine judge. The viewer of the art, and the human figure within the piece, was distanced from Christ

⁷⁰ Cantor, Norman F.. *The Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World it Made*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.. 2001) 204

⁷¹ Najemy, John M. *A History of Florence*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.,2006), 232.

⁷² St. Ignatius of Antioch. “Letter to the Ephesians”. *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 1. Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm>>.

⁷³ Cantor, Norman F.. *The Wake of the Plague: the Black Death and the World it Made*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.. 2001) 205.

and his mercy by inequity. However, the religious focus on the Virgin Mary as an intercessor for the suffering of humanity increased, and her figure loomed larger in church-sponsored works and in private thought; as a human that had been intimately involved with the divine, that had observed Christ's sufferings, she was viewed as a bridge between the unknowable and knowable⁷⁴.

The main effect was a marked rise in devotion towards plague saints, chief among them Saint Sebastian. Saint Sebastian was a figure from the late Roman Empire; a Christian, he had been tied to a tree and shot through with arrows after refusing to convert. The arrow itself was a symbol of sudden death, and had been identified with plague and pestilence since Homer's *Iliad*. However, Sebastian survived being pierced, only to die later at the hands of the Romans. He later became a figure of intense devotion in times of illness. Prior to the arrival of the plague, most artistic representations of Sebastian included the actions of the soldiers and the saint's figure on the same level. However, after the 1350s, the soldiers were elided and the focus shifted onto the sufferings of Sebastian⁷⁵. The shift was logical; the viewers of these images had seen at least one out of every three die, had observed the plague pits and the profound suffering of the masses. Certainly they found hope in the image of this early Christian, pierced over and over by the arrows of pestilence, and the knowledge that he had survived. The wounded but still living body of the saint offered an optimistic way of thinking about suffering.

As surely as one day followed another, the pestilence eventually ended. Matteo Villani missed his brother, but continued to chronicle the history of Florence. Boccaccio wrote a letter to

⁷⁴ Marshall, Louis. "Manipulating the sacred: Image and plague in Renaissance Italy ." *Renaissance Quarterly*. 47. no. 3 (1994): 487.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 490.

his friend Petrarch, mourning the plague dead, but expressing some hope for the future. Slowly grass grew over the upturned earth that covered the innumerable bodies of Florentines, rich and poor, young and old. But the plague did not stay away long. It returned again, and again, claiming the life of Matteo Villani in 1361; his son Filippo then took up the chronicler's pen for another year before falling into silence. Even today the Bubonic plague remains active, incubating in the bellies of fleas, and occasionally making the species jump to infect humans. However, la grande mortalità changed nothing so much as it did Florence in 1348.

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