

L245-IH1
Black Death in History & Literature

MICA - Fall 2010
Course Syllabus

W 9-11:45 AM
Brown 320

Instructor: Michael Sizer

Office: B413

Office Hours: M 12:30-1:30; Th 12-1

Phone (office): 410-225-4276

Phone (home): 202-667-5409

email: msizer@mica.edu

O happy posterity, who will not experience
such abysmal suffering and will look on our
testimony as a fable.

-- Petrarch, 1348

I know that rich and poor,
fools and sages, priests and laymen,
nobles, peasants, princes, misers,
small and large, fair and ugly,
ladies with upturned collars,
and any class whatever, wearing
costly hats or simple bonnets,
Death seizes without exception.

-- François Villon, 1461



Danse Macabre: 16th-century English woodcut

Course Description & Goals

In 1348, the disease that would be called the Black Death swept west from Central Asia to Europe, where it quickly annihilated up to 1/3 of Europe's population in about one year. This was neither the first nor the last occurrence of this dread disease in World history. The effects of the plague on the social fabric of the societies with which it came into contact were considerable, but so were the psychic effects, and the intellectual and artistic worlds felt compelled to attempt to understand what the plague was, as well as its grander philosophical and moral implications. This course will study some of the major intellectual and artistic responses to this plague of 1348, as well as the social, political and economic effects of the disease.

Epidemic disease has played a major role in shaping human history, and historians in recent decades have developed several remarkable theories incorporating humanity into the ecological global context in which we operate. The course will thus also study the role of disease in human

history all over the world, using the fourteenth-century Black Death as its major case study, extending the observations made about human responses to the plague towards analysis of other moments of epidemic disease in history, including contemporary “plagues” such as AIDS and Swine Flu.

Course Format, Grading and Assignments

This course will emphasize **class and small group discussion**. Your participation will be evaluated not only based on the quality of your comments in open discussion, but also on alertness, energy, and preparedness. Various organized activities will also provide an opportunity to participate in class ways other than in large- or small-group discussion. **Class participation is crucial to this course, constituting 30% of your grade.**

The **readings** are vital, as they will form the basis of our discussions and activities. The amount of readings varies, but at times is quite heavy. It is important not only that you do the readings thoroughly, but that you **bring them with you to class**, either printed out or on your computer screen (see below for comments on bringing laptops to class), to use as a basis for discussion. **Failure to do so will result in a grade of ‘F’ for your class participation for that day.**

The main written component of this course aside from the 2 papers described below will be **3 short (1-2 pages) reaction papers**, based off of reading assignments. These are informal papers, and you have some leeway in what you write about. (Generally, it is a good idea to focus on 1 or 2 of the readings in an assignment rather than all of them, and being as specific as possible - using quotes from the chosen reading - is also a good idea). You have some flexibility in when you choose to do these assignments: there are 6 weeks in which you can choose to do a reaction paper (indicated on the Course Schedule below), although **you must have done 1 of these papers by Sept. 16**. You may **choose to do an extra paper and have the lowest grade dropped**. **Each paper is worth 5% of your final grade, so the overall value of all of them will be 15%**. NOTE: In our class meetings throughout the semester, I will be asking students to share their writing with the rest of us.

There will also be 2 formal papers in this class. The first is a **short (3-5 pages) analysis paper on Boccaccio and Marguerite de Navarre due in Week 7**. More details will be provided later in the semester. This paper **will be worth 15% of your grade**.

The **most important aspect of your involvement in the class**, as well as your grade, will be your **major project and paper**. You must **submit a short, informal topic proposal to me by Week 5** at the latest. The topics available for the final project will be:

A) study the **history of an epidemic or major infectious disease** (AIDS, small pox, syphilis, cholera, typhoid, influenza, bird flu, swine flu, ebola, etc.) and **the cultural and social response to it** (this can be a specific outbreak or a more general history), or

B) study a **plague or disease text or artistic response** not covered here, or

C) study a more specific **aspect of the 1348 Black Death in more detail** than is covered in class.

More particulars of the paper and presentation will be explained in a separate handout, but here are the basics:

- The **short presentation (10-12 minutes each)**, will provide an outline of your conclusions, employing visual components and with a focus on engaging your classmates. This must include a **creative, artistic component**, in which you must **devise an imagined cultural response** to your disease. The presentation can be done alone or with another person if he/she has a similar topic as you, although papers must be written separately.
- The paper will be a **formal research paper (7-10 pages)**, with footnotes and bibliography, as well as original research (handouts directing you on proper procedures will be handed out during the semester).

The paper will be graded according to originality and clarity of argument, use of evidence, quality of research, and writing (including footnote and bibliography format). The presentations will take place in weeks 13, 14 and 15; the paper will be due in the last class. The presentation and paper will be evaluated according to creativity, teamwork (where applicable), clarity of presentation, engagement with the material, originality, and effectiveness of expression in the written form. **There will be two grades for the final project: 1 for presentation, and 1 for the final paper, each worth 20% of your final course grade.**

Late Assignment Policy

Computer submissions of paper assignments are not allowed. The short assignments will be marked down a grade for each day late (A to A-, B- to C+, etc.) The final paper will not be accepted after the last day of class - **NO EXCEPTIONS!**

Attendance Policy

There are only 15 meetings in the semester and so we have to make the most of them. Any unexcused absence beyond 1 will result in a decrease of two grades from class participation (A to B+, B- to C, etc.). 2 late arrivals (> 10 minutes) equals 1 absence.

Classroom Laptop/Cellphone Policy

Because students in previous classes have abused the privilege of having laptops in class, I am going to set limits on their use in our class. **If there are no online or Blackboard readings, an open laptop is not permitted in class, unless you receive special permission from me to take notes on it or for some other purpose.** If there are online or Blackboard readings, you can have the computer open. However, if you are observed using the computer for anything not related to classroom activity, **you will get an F for the day and your laptop privileges will be revoked.** Cellphones must be stowed away and turned off for the duration of the class.

ADA Compliance Statement:

Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact the Learning Resource Center at 410-225-2416, in Bunting 458, to establish eligibility and coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://www.mica.edu/learningresourcecenter/>.

Health and Safety Compliance:

The Office works to provide EHS support for all members of the MICA community. The primary goal of the Office is to be proactive in establishing a culture of safety in which each member of the community shares ownership responsibility that allows each person to be involved in maintaining a healthy work and studying environment. EHS uses several methods to achieve this objective.

First, the EHS office looks at the totality of the EHS requirements by combining campus needs with state and federal requirements and clearly communicating the shared policies and procedures. Second, EHS identifies training needs and develops guidelines for the use of equipment, material and procedures. Third, we ensure compliance with policies through evaluations, inspections, and committees.

It is the responsibility of faculty and students to understand health and safety policies relevant to their individual activities and to review MICA's Emergency Action Plan, as well as to participate in training, drills, etc. It is also each faculty member's responsibility to coordinate with the EHS Office to ensure that all risks associated with their class activities are identified and to assure that their respective classroom procedures mirror the EHS and Academic Department guidelines. Each of the Academic Department's also publish EHS procedures and policies such as a dress code, the use of personal protective equipment, fire safety, training, and how to properly dispose of chemical waste. Each of these policies and procedures must be followed by all students and faculty. Most importantly, it is the responsibility of the faculty to review, test, and assess each student's awareness of basic safety procedures, such as evacuation routes, use of chemicals, fire prevention, and all other guidelines posted by the Environmental Health and Safety Office, (e.g., smoking policy, independent studio policies, pet policy, disposing of hazardous and chemical waste, etc).

To become a member of the Faculty EHS Committee or for any questions relating to EHS, please contact Denelle Bowser, EHS Manager, at dbowser@mica.edu or by calling 410.462.7593. You can also visit the department online at www.mica.edu/ehs

H1N1 Pandemic Information: From the Office of Environmental Health and Safety (EHS)

What to do if I get sick?

If you are sick consider the following:

- Limit contact with other people as much as possible. **DO NOT GO TO CLASS!** Seek medical attention at Mount Royal Medial Assoc. (410) 225-8855 but please call ahead
- Students who are sick should self-isolate for at least 24 hours after any fever is gone.
- Make sure to get plenty of rest and drink clear fluids to keep from being dehydrated
- Avoid normal activities including work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings

Reporting Procedures:

- Contact the Office of Student Affairs at 410-225-2422 who will assist with plans for self-isolation, arranging for meals, and any other necessary support
- Contact any faculty whose class you anticipate missing and inform them of your illness. Work with them to make arrangements for catching up on any missed work. If you have difficulty reaching your faculty or if your illness lingers to the point where you will miss two or more of any one class contact the Office of Student Affairs.

Readings

- John Aberth, *The Black Death: the Great Mortality of 1348-1350. A Brief History with Documents.* (Boston & NY: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2005).
- Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (The excellent Penguin Classics edition is in the bookstore, but other editions are acceptable).
- Supplementary texts on Blackboard class site, online, or handed out in class.

Course Schedule (Topics and Assignments) - Subject to change if necessary.

Assignments are listed the day they are due, not the day they are assigned.

Week 1 - 9/2: Introduction to course

***Week 2 - 9/9: Ecological & Humankind: the Basics of Disease and History**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- William McNeill, "Microparasitism, Macroparasitism, and the Urban Transmutation" from *The Human Condition: an Ecological and Historical View*, pp. 3-37.
- Jared Diamond, "The Lethal Gift of Livestock" from *Guns, Germs & Steel*, pp. 195-214.

***Week 3 - 9/16: The Black Death Arrives**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- Aberth, *Black Death*, Part One: Introduction; Part Two, Section 1: Geographical Origins; Section 2: Symptoms & Transmission (except Boccaccio excerpt); Section 3: Medical Responses, pp. 1-30; 33-66.
- Students will be asked to concentrate on specific sections of the Aberth reading which they will be expected to introduce and start discussion in class as part of class participation grade.

Week 4 - 9/23: Boccaccio's & Other Descriptions of the Plague's Social Effects

Assignments:

- Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Preface and Introduction.
- Aberth, *Black Death*, Part Two, Section 4: Social and Economic Impact (except Boccaccio excerpt), pp. 67-74; 80-93.

Week 5 - 9/30: Boccaccio!

Assignments:

- Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Day 3, Stories 1, 8-10; Day 4 Introduction and Story 1; Day 5 ALL.

*** FINAL PAPER TOPIC DUE TO ME TODAY AT THE LATEST ***

Week 6 - 10/7: Boccaccio!

Assignments:

- Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Day 7, Story 9; Day 8, Story 1; Day 10, Stories 4-5, 10; Conclusion.

Week 7 - 10/14: Boccaccio and Marguerite de Navarre's Female Response: the Heptameron

Assignments:

- Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptameron* (stories TBA)

*** 1ST PAPER, ON BOCCACCIO AND M. de NAVARRE, DUE IN CLASS ***

***Week 8 - 10/21: The Artistic Cult of Death: Villon and the Danse Macabre**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- Aberth, *Black Death*, Part 2 Section 7: The Artistic Response, pp. 160-178.
- François Villon, Misc. Ballades from the *Testament* (“Snows of Yesteryear,” “Ballad of Fat Margot,” “Ballad of the Hanged,” “Epitaph,” “Ballad of Good Doctrine,” a few of the “Poems in Slang.”)
- Cesare Ripa, 1-page excerpt from *Iconologia* (1611)

***Week 9 - 10/28: Religious Response: Devotion, Mysticism and Fanaticism**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- Aberth, *Black Death*, Part 2 Section 5: Religious Mentalities; and Part 2 Section 6: The Psyche of Hysteria (The Flagellants), pp. 99-138.
- Marguerite Porete, “Mirror of Simple Souls” (excerpt); Trial of Margery Kempe (excerpt).
- Robert Lerner, “The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities”.

***Week 10 - 11/4: Revolt and Discord**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- Aberth, *Black Death*, Part 2 Section 6: The Psyche of Hysteria (Jewish Pogroms), pp. 139-159.
- *The Statute of Laborers*, 1351: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/seth/statute-labourers.html>
- Read the Sources on the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381: http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/voices/voices_reading_revolt.shtml

***Week 11 - 11/11: Later Plague Accounts and Stories**

Assignments (REACTION PAPER OPTION):

- Texts from 1665 London Plague (approx. 20 pp.)
- Edgar Allan Poe, “Masque of the Red Death”:
<http://poestories.com/text.php?file=masque>
- Albert Camus, short excerpt from *The Plague* (approx. 7 pp.)

Week 12 - 11/18: Victorian Culture, Disease, and the Body

Assignments:

- Excerpt from Pamela K. Gilbert, “Disease, the Social Body, and Fitness” from *The citizen’s body: desire, health, and the social in Victorian England*, pp. 47-61.
- Michel Foucault, excerpt on “Pantopticism” from *Discipline and Punish* (6 pp.)

***** NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING!!! *****

Week 13 - 12/2: Issues in Disease Today

***** PRESENTATIONS BEGIN TODAY *****

Assignments:

- Madeline Dexler, “The Once and Future Pandemic” from *Secret Agents: the Menace of Emerging Infections* (42 pp.) On the Flu.
- Susan Sontag, excerpt from “AIDS and its Metaphors” (8 pp.)
- George Whitmore, “Epilogue” from *Someone Was Here: Profiles in the AIDS Epidemic* (5 pp.)

Week 14 - 12/9: PRESENTATIONS!

Week 15 - 12/16: Final Class! PRESENTATIONS!

***** FINAL PAPER DUE TODAY IN CLASS *****