

How can contemporary written sources such as the works of Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarch inform our understanding of reactions to the Black Death's arrival in Europe?

One of the most significant epidemics of the medieval period, and perhaps all of European history is the Black Death of 1347-1350, estimated to have killed over one third of the European population. Spreading across Europe on flea infested rats through established trade routes, leading to the eventual devastation of communities as illustrated by Francesco Petrarch, 'and to what end, if the human race is almost extinguished, if, as I surmise, the end of the world is at hand?'¹ Surviving contemporary source material from writers such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer aid scholarly discussions on the fourteenth century with historical and literary accounts providing both implicit and explicit reactions to the arrival of the Black Death. Although the overarching discussion of the essay concerns the contemporary reactions present in surviving source material, there are numerous research questions that will benefit any conclusions made and help direct the reader. Perhaps one of the most significant research considerations when reading and analysing primary source material is whether the information presented is a deliberate historical narrative or part of the writer's unwitting testimony. In addition to exploring the nature of historical narrative, the importance of textual community will also be significant to critically engage with contemporary source material and therefore compare and contrast the accounts given to explore the similarities in reactions to the arrival of plague.

The Black Death has been the topic of scholarly debate for a significant period of time, resulting therefore in large bodies of scholarship detailing varying aspects of the plague epidemic. The majority of scholarship on the Black Death revolves around economic and social approaches, with historians such as Philip Ziegler and Denys Hay focusing on the wider impact on European economy and demographic; work that will prove to be beneficial but perhaps as supplementary information to legitimise contemporary reactions as they appear in works of fourteenth-century literature.² Nonetheless, historians such as John Hatcher have dedicated significant research using localised records to recreate the voices of those not explicitly present in surviving source material, developing therefore on the work of social and economic historians with further consideration of individuals as opposed to statistics.³ The popularity of 'intimate history' as Hatcher describes it, will be integral to

¹ "From Petrarch to Socrates" in *The Voice of the Middle Ages: In Personal Letters 1100-1500*, ed. Catherine Moriarty (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989) p324.

² Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010).

Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, ed. Denys Hay (London: Longman, 1989).

³ John Hatcher, *The Black Death: An Intimate History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008).

researching reactions to the Black Death, providing something of a methodology that can be applied to the works of Boccaccio, Geoffrey le Baker and Petrarch.⁴ Similarly, Ian Mortimer has dedicated research to understanding history within its contemporary context, and his novel *The Time Traveller's Guide To Medieval England* articulates this. Mortimer's work will benefit the essay and research aims greatly, 'The key to learning something about the past might be a ruin or an archive but the means whereby we may understand it is – and always will be – ourselves' and will prove integral to the methodology and outcome.⁵ The ability to interpret and analyse contemporary written material in a manner that brings to the surface the voices of the population who suffered, allows also for direct comparison between primary sources to explore themes such as textual community.

Alongside researching the contemporary reactions to the arrival of the Black Death, there is an inherent need to explore and define literature, a concept highlighted by Roger Webster in *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Webster states that 'literary theory does not offer any easy or watertight solutions as to what literature is, or what its study should be, but this does not have to be a negative feature.'⁶ A significant consideration to be made within the overall discussion should be the categorisation and subdivision of source material in order to effectively compare and contrast the information provided, and illustrate how material may differ as a result of intended purpose or written style. An idea raised by Webster is the difference between 'literary theory' and 'literary criticism', seeming to conclude that the work of theorists provides criteria for identifying literature, as well as providing awareness of the methods applicable to critically analyse literature.⁷ The theoretical approach to reading and commenting on works of literature will help to structure research, as well as making sure the dissertation critically engages with source material. In continuation of the idea of 'intimate history', literary theory as an academic approach will aid the dissection of contemporary accounts to discover the writer's unwitting testimony rather than the deliberate historical narrative.

In addition to researching contemporary reactions to the arrival of Black Death, an important consideration within the discussion is the scholarly acknowledgment that both Petrarch and Boccaccio are key figures in the emergence of the humanist movement. As highlighted by Margaret King in *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, Boccaccio and Petrarch are involved in the rebirth of antiquity, with both writers being

⁴ Hatcher, *The Black Death: An Intimate History*.

⁵ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller's Guide To Medieval England* (London: Vintage Books, 2009) p5.

⁶ Roger Webster, *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Edward Arnold of Hodder and Stoughton, 1990) p5.

⁷ Webster, *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p9.

heavily influenced by classical scholars such as Homer and Cicero.⁸ Whilst considering the portrayal of contemporary reactions to the plague, it would prove somewhat beneficial to the overall discussion to compare the works of Boccaccio and Petrarch with their classical influences to consider the accuracy of their historical narrative. King states that the early renaissance was 'fundamental to the cultural movements that emerge and flower from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, in the visual and performing arts, literature, historical writing, political thought, science, religion, and philosophy.'⁹ There are however obvious limitations to relying heavily upon the information attainable in Boccaccio and Petrarch, in addition to the large body of scholarship concerning the significance of the historical narrative provided as they are arguably two of the most significant figures of early humanism.

It goes without saying that contemporary source material, regardless of its format, provides useful information in spite of whether the evidence is exaggerated or not. The essay will rely heavily upon the writings of some of the fourteenth century's most significant writers, in particular Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, and multiple works belonging to Francesco Petrarch.¹⁰ Francesco Petrarch provides clear examples of contemporary reactions to the Black Death in his works of poetry as well as his letters, through which the emergence of humanism is present, and can be considered throughout the research and essay, 'that dreadful year 1348, which not merely robbed us of our friends, but robbed the whole world of its peoples.'¹¹ Although Boccaccio and Petrarch both give undoubtedly valuable accounts of the arrival of the Black Death, it is difficult to take their accounts as a complete historical narrative of the plague epidemic in Italy, and cannot therefore be indicative of all contemporary reactions. This limitation can be applied to all of the primary sources used in this essay; all providing arguably accurate contemporary views on the Black Death, but cannot be used exclusively without the consideration of other available source material. In addition to using sources written for entertainment, chronicles will also provide significant information concerning the

⁸ *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*, trans and ed. Margaret L. King (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014).

⁹ *Renaissance Humanism*, trans and ed. Margaret L. King, p1.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp3-328.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

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Petrarch: Selections from Canzoniere and Other Works, ed and trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ "From Petrarch to Socrates" in *The Voice of the Middle Ages: In Personal Letters 1100-1500*, ed. Catherine Moriarty (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989) pp322-4.

reaction to the arrival of the Black Death in Europe. Some of the contemporary chronicles that will prove useful to the essay are Geoffrey le Baker's *Chronicon Angliae temporibus Edwardi II et Edwardi III*, and Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*.¹² Without the ever increasing number of surviving contemporary source material, being able to piece together the lives of the people who lived during the period of plague would be difficult and perhaps impossible.

Modern approaches towards the Black Death are typically covered by economic and social historians, in particular Philip Ziegler's *The Black Death* and Rosemary Horrox's *The Black Death* both utilise contemporary sources to reach an overarching conclusion of the damage and impact the plague had on European society and its economy.¹³ A key historian to understanding the significance of the Black Death to the large proportion of the European population whose voice remains undocumented is John Hatcher, whose work demonstrates the extent to which contemporary sources can be utilised for both explicit and implicit information. As highlighted in the preface of *The Black Death: An Intimate History*, 'The intimate history of the Black Death, as witnessed by those who experienced it, was never recorded.'¹⁴ An important scholar among historians of the fourteenth century is Ole J Benedictow, a Norwegian historian whose work on plague within Scandinavia during the period proves highly important to understanding reactions to the arrival of the epidemic. Unlike many secondary sources, Benedictow does not necessarily approach the Black Death from social or cultural perspectives, instead providing an arguably comprehensive overview of plague spread across Europe. There are academics who consider Benedictow to be somewhat controversial in that he disregards previous attempts at calculating plague mortality rates, 'the data is sufficiently widespread and numerous to make it likely that the Black Death swept away around 60 per cent of Europe's population.'¹⁵ The essay will therefore rely upon secondary sources to further both the research and the methodology of the discussion, without overshadowing the importance of the information available through contemporary source material.

Where relevant it may prove useful to the discussion to provide maps of Europe illustrating the spread of the Black Death alongside the information provided by contemporary source

¹² *The Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*, trans. David Priest (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018). Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana* in *The Black Death*, ed and trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) pp65-6.

¹³ Ziegler, *The Black Death*.

The Black Death, ed and trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ John Hatcher, *The Black Death: An Intimate History*, pxi.

¹⁵ Ole J Benedictow, "The Black Death: The Greatest Catastrophe Ever." *History Today*, vol.55, no.3, (2005) pp42–50.

materials. Despite contemporary sources giving accounts of the plague spreading across Europe, it is through the collation of this information by secondary scholars that allows for a broad overview of the journey of the Black Death, in addition to furthering the understanding of trading routes and networks. Although the essay is heavily reliant on contemporary textual sources, in order to fully illuminate the impact of the Black Death on fourteenth century Europe, there may be instances throughout the essay in which contemporary visual material may benefit the discussion. As one of the main considerations of the essay is to discover the significance of the purpose of contemporary sources, there should therefore be some acknowledgement of the intended contemporary audience and perhaps of visual culture in a somewhat largely illiterate period.

The introduction to the research will bring to light the overarching themes of the discussion by establishing definitions and methodologies impacting any possible conclusions to be made. Following continued research, the discussion will benefit greatly from the consideration of both the benefits and limitations of secondary and primary source material, in addition to the historiographical context through which scholarly debate surrounds. It should be noted that any written work produced within a historical context, can be acknowledged as a work of literature in agreement with the definition developed within the capacity of the discussion. The methodologies and sources discussed within the introductory section of the dissertation will need to raise the areas of scholarly discussion in order to structure the ongoing research, alongside guiding the reader through the discussion leading to eventual conclusions on the reaction to the Black Death's arrival across Europe.

When considering the main discussion of the research, the three main areas that will form the chapters of the research revolve around the key questions that present themselves through the reading and comparison of contemporary source material. The first chapter of the essay will discuss whether contemporary works of literature prove to be either deliberate works of historical narrative, or works of unwitting testimony. The second chapter of the discussion will be the importance of textual community between the contemporary sources within the research, and how the relationships between sources could arguably affect the reliability and shed light on the similarities in accounts of reactions to the plague's arrival, with a significant example of textual community being the friendship between Boccaccio and Petrarch.¹⁶ The third chapter of the essay will consider the impact that the

¹⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

The Triumphs of Petrarch, trans. Rev. Henry Boyd (London: Forgotten Books, 2015).

"From Petrarch to Socrates" in *The Voice of the Middle Ages: In Personal Letters 1100-1500*, ed. Catherine Moriarty (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989).

gradual development of Humanism had on fourteenth century literature concerning the arrival and spread of the Black Death across Europe.¹⁷ It should be noted that those contemporary sources most relevant to both the Black Death and Humanism are likely to have been written in Italy such as the *Decameron* and Petrarch's innumerable works of literature.¹⁸ 'Aldo Bernardo observed that little is known of the reaction of humanists other than Petrarch and Boccaccio to the plague, and pointed out that it is only very recently that literary historians have begun to take seriously the moral implications of the presence of plague.'¹⁹

The conclusive section of the dissertation will draw together the areas covered in each chapter, in order to establish an answer to both the overarching research title and the branching research questions. Therefore considering whether contemporary written sources can provide evidence both explicit and implicit, regardless of its deliberate historical narrative or unwitting testimony, to inform academic understanding of European reactions to the arrival of the Black Death in 1347. Contemporary writers such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey le Baker are crucial to understanding deliberate historical narrative though an academic awareness of audience, purpose, textual community and the actual content, through which the information attainable can be utilised for approaches such as 'intimate history'.²⁰ The dissertation will ultimately follow the path of literary theory and how contemporary sources can be raked for hidden information, and it will therefore be decipherable that people across Europe reacted in both similar and differing manners to the arrival of plague.

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¹⁹ Nancy Siraisi, 'Introduction' in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Williman (New York: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982) p19.

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