Course Title: The Age of Plague: Medicine, Society & Epidemics, 1348 & Beyond  
Course Code: HIS 28  
Instructor: Paula Findlen

Monday, 7:00-8:50 pm Pacific Standard Time on Zoom  
February 1-March 8 (no class on Feb 15), Winter 2021

Course Summary:

In 2020, COVID-19 has led to global awareness that epidemic disease is hardly a thing of the past. How have societies risen to the challenge of earlier epidemic and pandemic diseases?

The arrival of plague in Eurasia in 1346-53 affected many late medieval and early modern societies. It transformed their understanding of disease, raised questions about the efficacy of medical knowledge, and inspired new notions of public health. This class explores the history, art, and literature of plague. We will read plague classics (Boccaccio and Defoe) with other sources from this era, and discuss how history, science, and archaeology together have shaped current interpretations of plague.
We will look closely at the age of plague as a case study to stimulate our understanding of modern epidemics and pandemics as well as the long afterlife of the “Black Death.” What are the myths and realities, the science and the culture, the short-term effects and long-term consequences of disease on society? How did disease reflect and alter perceptions of society and its values?

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

**Grade Options and Requirements:**
- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

**Course Goals**
Conversation and the exchange of ideas is the essence of a good seminar. I will offer a lecture (ca. 50 min, 10 min break, 15 min wrap-up, followed by discussion) to contextualize the weekly readings and stimulate discussion, giving you some additional information, background, and my own perspective.

**Recommended Books**
Short readings are online, either through syllabus links or on Canvas in the week’s folder. For those who wish to read more, this class is an opportunity to revisit the plague classics:

- Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Penguin edition recommended)

**Weekly Outline:**

**Week 1 (Feb 1): Arrival of Plague in the Medieval World**
While plague is an ancient word associated with pandemics in antiquity, including the Plague of Justinian, the people who experienced the Black Death of 1346-53 considered it new and unprecedented. Our short source readings (historical documents created in the period we are studying) help us understand the different ways in which people responded to the fourteenth-century plague. You might find a passage you consider especially interesting that could help you pose a question.

**Original source reading:** Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (1349-51), preface [you are also welcome to purchase a copy and read some of his famous novelle as well as the preface to get a sense of what stories he decided to recount in light of this pandemic]

- [https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/boccacio2.asp](https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/boccacio2.asp)
- Pistoia’s “Ordinances for Sanitation in a Time of Mortality” (1348)

- [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/pistoia.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/pistoia.html)
Marchione di Coppi Stefani, *The Florentine Chronicle* (1370s-80s)
http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html

Secondary readings (scholarly studies of the past written by contemporary historians working with sources) guide us in our interpretations of plague. I have offered a couple of essays I wrote during COVID-19 to contextualize our discussion of sources from fourteenth-century Italy. You are welcome to read one or both.

**Secondary reading**


https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/petrarchs-plague

**Week 2 (Feb 8): Understanding Plague: The Local and the Global**

This week we dig more deeply into the interpretive problems that researchers face in studying disease in the past. Everyone is encouraged to read Green’s overview of recent developments in studying medieval plague as a more global phenomenon. The other articles (DeWitte & Kowaleski; McCormack; Varlik) offer specific examples of how different kinds of evidence and different methodologies can alter what we think we know about the past. You might pick one (or more if you wish) to explore. What new insight does this approach offer? What is the evidence?

**Secondary reading**

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol1/iss1/4/

https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/frag/9772151.0006.001/--black-death-bodies?rgn=main;view=fulltext

https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/3208221/McCormick_RatsPlague.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol1/iss1/9/

**NO CLASS ON FEB 15 (Presidents’ Day Holiday)**

**Week 3 (Feb 23): Diagnosing Plague: Medical, Social, and Religious Responses**

In the fourteenth century plague was a mystery. As a result, people offered many explanations for why it occurred. Our source readings this week offer two different ways of diagnosing the cause of a pandemic— one with the tools of
medieval science and medicine, the other based on fear of religious minorities. How do the experts explain the unknown? What factors might compel some societies to look for causes based on faith more than science?

**Original source reading:**

“The Report of the Paris Medical Faculty October 1348”

“How do the experts explain the unknown? What factors might compel some societies to look for causes based on faith more than science?”

Our three secondary readings help to further contextualize and complicate the issues raised in the source readings. Pick one that especially interests you, though you are welcome to read them all. What is the role of medical knowledge in describing plague’s symptoms, according to Carmichael (who is a MD and PhD)? What is the role of faith in interpreting and responding to disease among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, according to Stearns? Under what circumstances does fear of disease provoke recourse to prejudice, according to Cohn?

**Secondary reading**

[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2630032/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2630032/)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229957204_New_Directions_in_the_Study_of_Religious_Responses_to_the_Black_Death](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229957204_New_Directions_in_the_Study_of_Religious_Responses_to_the_Black_Death)

Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., “Plague and Prejudice,” *History Today* 66/3 (March 2016)

**Week 4 (March 1): Plague Art: Representations of Disease**

Our source this week is an image frequently described as a fourteenth-century representation of plague victims. See why the scholars who present this image disagree with the standard interpretation of the evidence.

**Original source reading:**

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol1/iss1/13/](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol1/iss1/13/)

By contrast, Louise Marshall’s essay offers a detailed account of the active role of plague imagery during the Renaissance, raising interesting questions about how art becomes part of the response to pandemic.

**Secondary reading**

Week 5 (March 8): Plague and Public Health: The State Intervenes

The plague that arrived in the mid-fourteenth century became a recurrent fact of life in some parts of the world for several centuries. Technically the Great Plague of Marseille in 1720 is not the “last” plague in Western Europe, yet there was a general sense that plague was on the decline. Defoe wrote his famous plague novel shortly after this plague subsided, choosing to write instead about the last major plague outbreak in London in 1665-1666. How does he meticulously reconstruct this historical event to make it seem that his protagonist was there? What does he want his readers to understand about the experience of being shut inside a city during a pandemic? Who is there and what are they doing?

Original source reading: Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), selection
If you wish to read the entire book, you can purchase a copy or look at a complete version online:
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d783/6e710cf3ea0a80e2ade0f9ecbec58d1bc0a94.pdf

Our secondary readings deepen our understanding of how to read Defoe, in light of emerging public health measures and the role of the state in documenting and responding to plague outbreaks. Both are optional but available for interested readers who wish to know more about the issues that inspired Defoe’s plague novel.

Secondary reading


https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4205740/mod_resource/content/1/Rosenberg_What%20is%20an%20epidemic.pdf