

Carolyn Kroupa

Dr. Kummel

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Pandemics: Agents of Change

The Black Death had a profound impact on Europe. The Black Death caused mass numbers of death, altering European's way of life ranging from religion, medicine, literature, and even women's rights. Researching the lives of women during this time, it is clear that women were affected in specific ways due to their sex and the gender roles. The period of time during the first wave of the bubonic plague left a historical mark on the Middle Ages. The pandemic transformed life during the outbreak as well as the years to follow.

The first outbreak in Europe occurred between 1347-1352. The Black Death originated in the East and spread to other parts of the world via the Silk Road and overseas trade according to Joshua J. Mark, a Medieval writer and researcher. The Black Death was a combination of bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic plague with a death rate of 60-90 percent as reported by the Science Museum in London ("Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic"). Those infected with *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, the cause of the bubonic plague, usually died within two to seven days with symptoms of buboes in the groin, neck, and armpits ("Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic"). Buboes are enlarged lymph nodes that are painful and can secrete pus and blood (Shiel). Other symptoms of the bubonic plague included fever and vomiting blood. The bubonic plague was highly infectious and spread from fleas biting rats and humans ("Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic"). This allowed for the disease to spread easily in crowded and dirty European cities. According to research collected from the Science Museum in London, "In

Europe alone it wiped out an estimated one to two thirds of the population,” resulting in millions of deaths. There was little medical advice that doctors could offer. “Leave quickly, go far and come back slowly,” was the basic sentiment when the plague entered a town (“Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic”). There were some safety measures implemented to slow the spread including medical inspections, isolation of the sick in plague hospitals, and restricting ships coming to port. Ships arriving to port had to isolate and all occupants had to quarantine on the ships to guarantee they were not carrying the disease before debarking. This period of isolation lasted around 40 days which is when the word “quarantine” was first used as a deviation from the Italian word for 40 (“Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic”). Despite these safety measures, the Black Death still persisted and killed millions, leaving the survivors to pick up the pieces of a forever changed society.

The Church had a large presence in Medieval life. People looked to the Church for guidance, and this remained especially true during the plague. However, the Church faced some pressure from disheartened believers as the Church could not fully protect people from the disease. Religious leaders died at similar rates to the rest of the population which left some towns without anyone to lead church congregations, forcing churches to shut down (Mark). In places where churches could still function, they performed services such as selling charms and amulets for protection, held mass services and processions, and encouraged prayers and fasting (Mark). There was a downside to this because sometimes these actions increased the spread of the plague.

Another unique element of the Black Death connected to religion was the assumptions of who or what caused the plague. There was no scientific or medical knowledge yet of the source of the plague, so people implemented religious reasoning. According to Joshua J. Mark, he

wrote, “Since no one knew the cause of the plague, it was attributed to the supernatural (such as supposed Jewish sorcery) and, specifically, to God’s fury over human sin,” (Mark). Antisemitism was a factor in addition to Christian’s fear of God. People also believed that victims of the plague were sinners being punished by God. Religious beliefs and the institution of the Church played important roles in how people viewed and rationalized the plague.

The Black Death also impacted the medical field in significant ways. As previously mentioned, there were new safety measures put in place such as medical inspections from doctors to examine potential cases of the plague, isolation of the infected in plague hospitals, restricting the quantity of ships coming to port, and quarantining ships once they arrived to port (“Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic”). Medical knowledge during the Middle Ages was based on writings from philosophers such as Galen, Hippocrates, Aristotle, and others (Mark). With this approach, medieval medicine was often based on the books rather than adapting to the real-life case at hand. Once doctors discovered that individual plague patients responded differently to the same treatments, doctors realized there was not a one-size-fits-all cure to the Black Death. This ushered in new ways of approaching medicine including looking at the human body in sickness and in health (Mark). Doctors also began to examine and dissect the human body with more practical, hands-on methods (Mark). Another change to the medical field brought on by the Black Death was that hospitals were no longer just being used to house the sick. Hospitals also started to be used as treatment centers “with a much higher degree of cleanliness and attention to patient care,” (Mark). Sick people that sought treatment could now go to hospitals and receive patient care. The plague brought about many new questions and challenges that forced the medical field to grow and medical knowledge to expand. The crisis of the rampant Black Death prompted changes that helped to further develop and advance medical practices.

The effects of the Black Death also appeared in literature. Geoffrey Chaucer, an English writer alive during the Black Death and its aftermath, wrote a story in his famous work *The Canterbury Tales* that alludes to the Black Death and provides insight into the psyche of someone living during the time of the plague. The “Pardoner’s Tale” centers around three men in a search to find and kill Death (Boenig). In their search, they come across an old man who is waiting for Death, and he instructs the three young men of where to find Death. Instead of finding Death, the men come across gold coins. The three young men then turn on one another and plot to kill each other in the hopes of keeping all the money to themselves without having to share it three ways. In the end, all three end up dead because of the tricks they played on one another. The overarching theme of this tale is that greed is foolish and has grave consequences. The tale is also a window into the mindset of someone that lived through the Black Death. Chaucer describes the character of Death by saying, “He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence,” referring to the epidemic of the bubonic plague (Boenig, line 679). The three young men also play interesting characters in the story as it seems unusual that they would be out drinking and having a good time while a highly contagious disease is prevalent. Author of “The Plague and Chaucer’s Pardoner,” Peter G. Beidler, writes that people alive during this time had various responses in dealing with the plague. Beidler writes, “Some survivors shut themselves off in houses where no one had yet died, eating and drinking moderately, listening to fine music, never discussing the plague,” (Beidler, p. 258). He continues, “Others went about their life as usual, carrying with them flowers and sweet-smelling herbs to protect themselves from the poisoned air,” (Beidler, p. 258). Still, others fled the city completely. Another common response is what is described in the “Pardoner’s Tale” which was to go out and excessively drink at taverns, disregarding the dangers of the plague. Historians have noted that in areas heavily affected with

death from the plague, the morality of survivors worsened (Beidler, p. 258). This can explain the reckless and greedy behavior of the three men in the tale.

Another element of the tale that can be explained by the Black Death is the gold that the men find. It was common for dying plague victims to leave their valuables and have no one there to claim them. The reason that no one would take claim of these valuable items was because the items would have been infectious to touch (Beidler, p. 259). Chaucer is making a point in this story to point out the flawed morals of the men because they have no shame in taking the gold that is not theirs to begin with. It also shows flawed judgement to take the infected items.

Another detail Chaucer includes in this story is the old man in search for death. With the plague as a backdrop to this tale, it can be inferred that this old man was a lone survivor of a town that had been destroyed by the plague. Despite being spared by the plague, he was left with little will to live. Through this character of the old man, Chaucer is showing how the plague affected survivors' morale. Survivors were left in a decimated town with a dwindling population making it hard to rebuild. Chaucer is also illustrating in this old man character how the plague often killed more young and healthy people than elderly people. The "Pardoner's Tale" paints a picture of Medieval society during the time of the Black Death through details such as the description of Death, the three main character's actions, the gold left behind, and the elderly man character. Chaucer's writing is just one example of many of how the Black Death appeared in literature of the time.

Lastly, the Black Death also uniquely impacted the lives of women. During the 14th century, women did not work outside of the home. However, the Black Death killed so many men that there was a shortage of workers which resulted in a suffering European economy (Parramore). In a response to the lack of workers, "employers began to hire women, especially

teenage girls, to fill in the gaps,” (Parramore). Women often accepted annual contracts for security of employment according to Jane Humphries, Professor of Economic History at the University of Oxford. However, annual contracts were often less profitable and offered less leisure time, but they were the most available option to women at the time. Seasonal jobs, such as harvesting, haymaking, cloth production, and other agricultural work, usually proved to be more desirable for young and healthy women (Humphries). Just as there were beginning to be more job opportunities outside of the home for women, England passed two regulations that limited these opportunities. The Ordinance of Labourers 1349 and the Statute of Labourers 1351 banned wage increases and put restrictions on moving in search of work (Humphries). These regulations limited women’s ability to hold seasonal jobs outside of the city. This was a detriment to women because these were the jobs that proved to be more lucrative. The two new English regulations forced women into annual contract jobs which were more restrictive and did not pay as well (Humphries).

The physiology of the bubonic plague also had a differential effect on men and women. Research published by Sharon N. DeWitte in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* shows that the Black Death was sex-selective in its mortality effect. More men died of the Black Death than women (DeWitte). This can mostly be attributed to women having a longer life expectancy than men. The fact that more men died from the Black Death relates back to how the workforce opened up when mass amounts of men died, leaving women to fill in their places. The fact that more men, on average, died from the Black Death than women did is what began to break down barriers for women working outside of the home.

The Black Death is considered to be the first pandemic in history. It reshaped 14th century European society in long-lasting ways. Fast-forward to 2020, and we are living through another

pandemic. There are parallels to be made in how medieval society and modern society have dealt with, and are dealing with, the life altering effects of an infectious disease. Religion, medicine, literature, and the lives of women are all areas in which the changes in society can be directly reflected and analyzed. No aspect of life goes untouched by the effects of a pandemic. It remains to be seen which changes made in today's world will be as transformative as these changes made in medieval society.

Acknowledgements

For this research paper, I was inspired to learn more about the Black Death given the current climate of 2020. We are living through the coronavirus pandemic, so I was intrigued to learn more about what is considered to be the world's very first pandemic, the bubonic plague. I started my research by turning to the internet to find out more about the Black Death in general terms. I read about the spread of the Black Death, the symptoms, death rate, and the nature of the bacteria that caused the plague. Sources and articles written by Joshua J. Mark, Dr. William C. Shiel, and the Science Museum's article "Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic" were helpful in learning more about the disease. I also consulted Chaucer's work *The Canterbury Tales* to find references to the Black Death from a writer alive during this time period. Dr. Krummel was especially helpful in directing me to "The Pardoner's Tale" where the Black Death is most explicitly referenced. I also found a journal article titled "The Plague and Chaucer's Pardoner" written by Peter G. Beidler that functioned as a literature review. This helped me to understand the nuances of the tale and how it related to the Black Death. Lastly, I wanted to learn more about the lives of women during the Black Death. I found two internet sources, one written by Lynn Stuart Parramore and the other written by Jane Humphries, that discussed women in the workforce. These sources helped me to understand how the Black Death impacted women's ability to get jobs outside of the home. I also consulted a journal article from a health perspective about how women were affected by the plague. I cited an article titled "Sex Differentials in Frailty in Medieval England" by Sharon N. Dewitte in my essay to discuss how more men than women were killed by the plague. All of these sources, ranging from website articles, scholarly journal articles, and Chaucer's own writing, helped me to piece together my essay exploring the

effects and changes brought on by the Black Death. I would also like to mention and thank Dr. Krummel again for her support and assistance along the way.

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