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The Plague and European Intellectual
and Literary Development

by

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This thesis will attempt to describe how the second pandemic influenced various areas of life in Europe from roughly the middle of the fourteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century. No national barriers will be drawn because of the difficulty of confining the various influences to single nations. Particularly with the humanists it is impossible to pin them down to one area of influence: they traveled from one country to another and felt at home in many places.

First it will be explained briefly how the plague spread over wide parts of Europe as it is known to historians today. Then this essay will shortly explain how the plague was seen, described and treated in those days. A description of the plague's influence on the daily lives of the scholars, the clergy and the common man will be the next part of this essay. After that a discussion as to the influence on actual works of literature will be given. In the conclusion of this paper the vast general influences of the plague on the development of European life will be discussed.
CHAPTER I
THE PLAGUE AS SEEN BY HISTORIANS TODAY

The westward sweep of the Huns in the fourth and fifth centuries was followed by the plague which became later known as the first pandemic. In the thirteenth century the Mongols moved westward and were in turn followed by the plague causing the second pandemic.

The word 'plague' means stroke (plaga) in ancient literature and was used to describe any big epidemic which caused great mortality among men; however, after the outbreak of 1348 it came more and more to denote pneumonic or bubonic plague. There are in addition rarer types of plagues but which were not distinguished at that time. It seems that both types, the pneumonic and the bubonic, were prevalent during the second great pandemic. The pneumonic type is described as a disease where the infected spits blood and usually dies after three days; the bubonic plague is explained as a disease where swellings in the region of the groin appear which cause the infected to die usually after five days.¹ The term 'bubonic' comes from the

Greek βοὐβόων and means groin.²

R. Pollitzer³ has documented that, in the case of the 1348 outbreak, the disease was brought from the Orient during the crusades. Although it is believed that the plague originated somewhere in the areas within or near the Central Asiatic plateau, the first recorded outbreak was among the Philistines in 1320 B. C. It is described in the Bible (1 Samuel, v and vi) as the appearance of 'emerods in their secret parts.'

Scientists are still today in doubt as to the transmission of the pestilence, whether it occurred chiefly through interhuman infection or through rats. For certain is only that once the plague had established itself large numbers of rodents were infected and carried the disease.

Another source⁴ attributes the arrival of the plague in Europe to the flight of Christian traders from the Crimea coast. In 1346 hordes of Tartars, badly attacked by the plague, opened hostilities against these merchants. But from where it actually came is of no importance within the frame of this thesis; the fact is that in 1348 the

²Ibid., p. 7.


⁴Hirst, loc. cit., p. 12.
plague appeared in Constantinople, Genoa, Venice, and other European ports. From the northern Italian cities the pestilence made its way to Central and Northern Europe by land routes. One of them goes through the Ampezzo valley to Pusterthal, Innsbruck and Munich; another one runs along the Po to Bergamo, Lake Como and finally over the Splügen Pass to Constance. The northern Italian cities play an important role in the history of the plague only until about 1486, the year in which the Cape route to the east was discovered, an event which was the beginning of the end of the trade monopoly of Venice. Suddenly the ships of the Portuguese, Spaniards, English and Dutch were much more often exposed to the health hazards of the east.

Because the descriptions of the plague by contemporaries will be mentioned later it is interesting to look briefly at a modern scientific analysis of this disease. There are both infectious and non-infectious types of plague. Pneumonic plague is a total infection of the lungs; each time the patient coughs the bacilli are sprayed into the air and infect others. It is, like influenza, air-borne. Bubonic plague, as mentioned earlier, exhibits inflamed lymphatic glands mostly near the groin. Stains and blotches appear on

the body. These dark spots did not, however, give rise to the name 'Black Death.' That term came up only in the nineteenth century and means 'Terrible Death.' The septiceamic plague is characterized by an infected bloodstream. The patient can die within a few hours; buboes even do not have time to form; there are almost no physical signs visible to the naked eye. The bubonic and the septiceamic types are insect-borne, the bacilli being transmitted by flea-bite. All three types are infectious and almost all cases, except for a small portion of the bubonic ones, are fatal. In the advanced stages signs of the intoxication of the nervous system are common; that is one reason why so many drunk people were picked up during plague times and thrown into the mass-grave.

These various types of plague can be spread by about a hundred species of rodents and other small animals, thus not only by rats. The fleas of these rodents act as vectos and, when biting man, infect him. As a last word in the discussion about the modern scientific view of the plague it can be mentioned that even today the danger of the plague is far from over. As a matter of fact, men in the field speak of the third great pandemic which is today killing thousands in India, China, Indo-China, and Africa.

6 Hirst, loc. cit., p. 32.
7 Pollitzer, loc. cit., p. 19.
CHAPTER II

THE PLAGUE AS IT WAS SEEN DURING PLAGUE-TIMES

The cause of the plague was as late as the eighteenth century thought of as the wrath and punishment of God. When nations went to war they prayed that the opposing armies might be decimated by diseases. When the plague infected their army it was clear that they had lived in sin and were being punished for it. The first recorded account of the plague as punishment comes from the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and the Vulgate. After the initial victory of the Philistines over the Israelites they were reduced in numbers by the plague. In the inland city of Gath the Lord 'smote the men of the city, both small and great, and they had emerods in their secret parts' (I Samuel, v). According to the Septuagint (I Kings, v) 'the hand of the Lord was heavy upon Azotus, and he brought evil upon them, and it burst upon them in the ships, and mice sprang up in the midst of their country, and there was great and indiscriminate mortality in the city.'

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the charge that the Jews killed Christians by poisoning their wells
gave rise to wholesale slaughter of the Jews and a general rise in anti-Semitism. There are reports of pogroms in southern France as early as 1343; thus before the plague outbreak; but in 1348 rumors crossed the Pyrenees that the Jews were poisoning the wells. One version asserted that the Jews thought that the time of the destruction of the Christians had come because the Pope and the Emperor were enemies. These rumors spread rapidly from Italy to Scandinavia, from England to Hungary. In the fall of 1348 entire communities in Germany bound themselves by oaths to the complete extinction of the Jews. Wells were sealed and water, out of fear that the wells might be poisoned, was taken from rivers. This habit contributed even more to the spread of the plague because often the corpses of plague victims were thrown into the rivers. In Basel all the Jews were herded into a specially built wooden building and burnt. Other Jewish communities burned themselves rather than fall into the hands of the Christians. In many instances the Christians searched the houses in the Jewish communities and sometimes acquired considerable sums. In case there was any doubt as to the guilt of the Jews, it was noted that they usually confessed after only two to three hours of torture.

9Ibid., p. 189-190.
have been exterminated during those times if it were not for the help of Pope Clement VI who issued two Papal bulls declaring the Jews innocent and rallying some other princes to the protection of the minority. But not everyone belonging to the clergy and upper and educated classes did all they could to restrain the common people. The poor had previously accused the rich and ruling classes of spreading the plague. For the peasants this accusation seemed to have some foundation because the rich were not as often infected as the poor, but that was rather because of their well-nurtured bodies and the better sanitary conditions they lived in. Instead of inviting the wrath of the people upon themselves, they found it convenient to blame the Jews. An example of the magnitude of the persecution is given in the fourteenth century Strasbourg chronicle of Michael Kleinlawel:

And at that time, when death did rage
In Countries far and near,
Yea, and throughout all Christenage,
Of Those it seemed quite clear,
The Jews were guilty of this crime
As all around was said,
By poisoning wells at this same time,
As on the rack when laid,
Some (as were stated) to have done
Themselves confessed it true,
And, therefore, without mercy shown,
Were burnt in many a lieu.
And death in this dread form
To Strasbourg now drew nigh,
And of its people killed a swarm
Young, old and low and high.
Particularly in Forty-nine,
When sixteen thousand died,
The Citizens did much incline
To measures elsewhere tried.
Three masters stoutly did resist
All measures of this kind,
The Jews they wanted to assist
And loudly spake their mind.
The people to the minister trooped,
The masters soon must yield,
And on the Jews they quickly swooped,
Revenge to seek afield.
With bitter cries they soon were caught,
Wherever they might be,
And on one day were burnt to Naught
Two hundred or near by.\(^{10}\)


Historians have, of course, not found one incident where Jews were actually poisoning wells; the gigantic anti-Semitism, brought into the open by the plague, has

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 181.
been traced by scholars to a great financial crisis in
the fourteenth century.\footnote{Ibid., p. 186.} Because the Jews were refused
admission to the merchants guilds, they became more or
less restricted to financial enterprises; furthermore,
they were not bound by secular and canonical laws from
taking interest, as the Christians were. They became
quickly the privileged money-lenders of princes, lords,
peasants and the clergy. Interest rates were high, and
when it came to collecting overdue sums from the clergy
and monasteries the Jews were not as lenient as the
Christian tax collectors (who were more or less dependent
on the clergy).

Not all people were so short-sighted as to attribute
the plague solely to the Jews. Other scholars explained
it with the help of astrology. In the \textit{Faustbuch} Faust says:

\begin{quote}
Zu Eisleben ist ein Comet gesehen worden, der
wunder gross war. Da fragten etlichen seiner
guten Freund Faustum, wie das zuginge. Antwort
er ihnen und'sagt: 'Es geschicht oft, dass sich
der Mond am Himmel verwandelt, und die Sonne
unterhalb der Erden ist. Wann dann der Mond nahe
hinzukommt, ist die Sonne so dräftig und start,
dass sie dem Mond seinen Schein nimmt, dass er
aller rot wird. Wann nun der Mond wiedcrum in
\end{quote}
die Höhe steigt, verwandelt er sich in mancherlei Farben und springt ein Prodigium vom Höchsten daraus, wird alsdann ein Comet, und sind der Figur und Bedeutung, die Gott verhängt, mancherlei. Einmal bringt es Aufruhr, Krieg oder Sterben im Reich, als Pestilenz, jähen Tod und andere Seuchen. 12

These burnings and slaughters of the Jews en masse, the distribution of their wealth to common people and monasteries, the numerous promises of town councils never again to admit any Jews to the towns all were factors which were later to cause great social upheavals in Europe.

The descriptions of plague-infected people by eye-witneses during those times vary widely. On the one hand, vast exaggerations took place, especially if it was intended to portray the disease as a punishment for sin; on the other hand, chronicles state soberly without any further description that during one day ten thousand people died. The most extensive portrayal is perhaps Boccaccio's foreword in The Decameron. It is not quite clear whether he personally witnessed everything he describes, particularly since many of the facts he claims to have seen personally seem doubtful. The story,

in which he tells about two hogs which sniffed at the clothing of a plague victim and fell instantly dead, is a case in point. But on the whole his account is supported by the descriptions of others. In 1348, Boccaccio had to leave Florence because of the plague. Although residing in the countryside was no guarantee against infection, many people felt safer outside the big cities. In The Decameron, which Boccaccio wrote during this self-imposed exile, he tells of a group of young men and women who, fleeing the plague and abiding their time of return, pass the time by telling each other stories. The whole book is put into this frame of the plague. This simple device used to provide the author with a convenient excuse for launching into a series of narratives which soon were widely imitated in Europe and can be traced even to the highly complicated 'Rahmenerzählungen' of C. F. Meyer.

In the Introduction, where Boccaccio gives his raison d'être for the narratives, he also describes how the victims of plague developed signs of infection:

... but nay, in men and women alike there appeared at the beginning of the malady, certain

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14 Erwin Kalischer, "Conrad Ferdinand Meyer in seinem Verhältnis zur italienischen Renaissance," Palaestra, LXIV (1907), p. 3-211.
swellings, either on the groin or under the armpits, wherof some waxed of the bigness of a common apple, others like onto an egg, some more and some less, and these the vulgar named plague-boils. From these two parts the aforesaid death-bearing plague-boils proceeded, in brief space, to appear and come indifferently in every part of the body, wherefrom, after a while, the fashion of the contagion began to change into black or livid blotches, which sowed themselves in many first on every part of the person, in some large and sparse and in others small and thick-sown; and like as the plague-boils had been first and yet were a very certain token of coming death, even so were these for every one to whom they came.15

An indication of the high mortality and social upheaval is given when Boccaccio reports that 'of this abandonment of the sick by neighbors, kinsfolk and friends and of the scarcity of servants arose a usage before well nigh unhears, to wit, that no woman, how fair or lovesome or well-born soever she might be, once fallen sick, recked aught of having a man to tend her, whatever he might be, or young or old, and without any shame discovered to him every part of her body, no otherwise than she would have done to a woman, so but the necessity

15 Boccaccio, loc. cit., p. 2.
of her sickness required it; the which belike, in those who recovered, was the occasion of lesser modesty in time to come.\textsuperscript{16}

Boccaccio makes a jarring juxtaposition between the horrors of the plague-stricken cities and the gay contrasting frivolity of the young men and women in the romances.\textsuperscript{17} Grim reality stands opposite a bright tale. This contrast can also be seen in the general development of the figure of the fool. Few details about the so-called 'companies of fools' are preserved, but it is known that one was founded in Aarau under the patronage of the plague saint, St. Sebastian, for the explicit purpose of cheering the hearts of the people, in times of outbreaks of epidemics, by public masquerades and processions. The members of these companies of fools combating the fear of death were mostly clergymen; it was a kind of ecclesiastic fraternity.\textsuperscript{18}

Estimates of the total death toll vary widely. Some sources do not specify whether the whole of Europe is meant when they claim that from one-half to three-fourths of the entire population was killed or whether they refer just to specific regions. Sometimes counts were not made

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{17}Crawfurd, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{18}Nohl, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 123.
at all, only remarks that, for instance, in one day alone so many thousands died in a certain town. One-half of the total population of Europe seems to be a conservative estimate. Not only the big cities were ravaged; surprisingly, the plague traveled as fast as the means of the times would have allowed a person to travel. It appeared in remote villages a bit later but with the same certainty as it appeared in the cities, whether travel on a large scale was going on or not, whether the inhabitants barricaded themselves or not. No one trusted any strangers nor even his friends. When someone wanted to get into a town he was first searched by the guards and if any strange substances were found on him, such as medicine against the plague, then he was required to swallow a bit of it first in order to make sure it was not poison for the wells.19

The cure for plague cases, for the very few of the infected who escaped death to begin with, was made more difficult by the teachings of the so-called learned men and their theories. A more or less reasonable cure was the emphasis on:

venesection, purification of the air by means of fires, comforting the heart with treacle

and apples and things of savoury flavour, the prevention of putrefaction by the use of bitter things. Should the disease defy all these precautions, as curative measures, bleedings and evacuations are recommended, with electuaries and cordial syrups. Buboes should be ripened with poultices of figs and boiled onions, pounded and mixed with leaven and butter: then they should be treated and opened like ulcers. Carbuncles are to be leeched, scarified, and cauterized. 20

Paracelsus' first advice for cure was to apply a dried toad to the stomach. Other physicians also widely used this method, and they were the educated men of the age. Their remedies rely not so much upon scientific observation as on a philosophy of healing. Paracelsus, for one, thought that the physician with all his subjective insight could detect the 'signature' everything in nature bore. This 'signature' referred to a vital activity, the essence, of the thing. If a sick animal picks out and eats by instinct a healing herb, man is too sophisticated and artificial. It can be learned what a substance signifies in the same way as a man's character is revealed by his overt actions and behavior.

20Crawfurd, loc. cit., p. 121.
'A specific remedy, such as toad medicine, operates by exerting a kind of occult sympathetic action on the essential nature of such a lesion as a bubo. For Paracelsus, the toad was the most marvelous of all remedies for a plague bubo. A discussion of the mysterious relation between 'bufo' and 'bubo' in the Omnia Opera of Paracelsus (Geneva, 1656) ends by remarking that God himself is both Medicus and Medicina. 21

Those who did not believe in the ability of these most famous of doctors could take other, more direct means of evading the plague, a means which contributed to a general decline in morals. Boccaccio writes that 'others, inclining to the contrary opinion, maintained that to carouse and make merry and go about singing and frolicking and satisfy the appetite in everything possible and laugh and scoff at whatsoever befell was a very certain remedy for such an ill.' 22 The different social position of the woman began to emerge. Those who counseled moderation were not aided by the fact that a whole new type of literature sprang up advising people to live it up. One of the more moderate pieces of advice for plague prevention was that of the Meistersinger

21 Hirst, loc. cit., p. 3.
22 Nohl, loc. cit., p. 92.
Hans Folz, who wrote the following lines:

And in your mind this warning hold,
Have wine that is strong and clear and old,
Wash every morning with it clear
Hands, mouth and face and nose and ear,
Shoulders and body everywhere,
And drink a sup with morning far
To raise the heart and purge the blood
Thus many have the plague withstood.  

Nohl, loc. cit., p. 92.
CHAPTER III
DAILY LIFE DURING PLAGUE-TIMES AND ITS INFLUENCES
ON WORKS OF LITERATURE

From the many outbreaks of the plague after the pandemic in 1348, it can be gathered that the black death was, rather than a one-time special occurrence, a fact of daily life which had to be reckoned with. It raged particularly among the poor; the rich and the scholars could more easily flee, but neither were their lives spared. Erasmus almost got killed, not directly, but indirectly, by the plague. In a letter to Servatius, he writes:

When I went to Italy I saw the canons, wherever I travelled, wearing a great black gown with the scapular. I then, in order not to give offense by a variety of dress, began to wear a similar costume. Afterward a plague occurred at Bologna where those who attend on the sick wear a white linen scarf hanging from the shoulders, and have to avoid meeting people. Consequently one day, when I was going to see a learned friend, some rude fellows drew their swords with the intention of attacking me, and would have done so, if a lady had not warned
them that I was an ecclesiastic.  

In the same letter Erasmus assures Servatius that he never changed his place of residence, unless either forced by plague, or for the sake of study of health. Others were not so lucky. In the German area of influence alone numerous statesmen, scholars and artists died: 1138, Emperor Lothar; 1191, Frederick V, Duke of Swabia; 1349, Emperor Guenther; 1565, Konrad von Gessner; 1543, Holbein the Younger; 1635, Friedrich Spee; 1639, Opitz von Boberfeld; 1384, Gerhard Groote, Johann Müller of Königsberg, Sebastian Murr and Jodocus Gallus.

Fleeing from the plague had become an everyday occurrence, which brought people together who ordinarily would not have met, people who exchanged ideas and broadened their horizons. In London this exodus of the court and the upper class into the countryside when the plague broke out had the aspect of a society routine. In Rome the Pope and his court would flee at the first sign of an epidemic and let the other citizens take care of themselves as well as

they could. The only time this flight led to trouble was when Adrian VI let it be known from his safe haven in Spain that he thought of imposing new taxes.\textsuperscript{26}

Martin Luther on the other hand stayed behind in Wittenberg even after the whole university had been transferred to Jena on account of the plague which visited the town several times. In 1527 the mortality was particularly high. Luther, as the only fellow of the university who stayed, composed the hymn, "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott" and told those who wanted to get him to a safer place: 'Mein Platz ist hier.'\textsuperscript{27}

Other scholars did not show that high degree of integrity. Arnim reported what became known as the scholar's kiss:

A Greek manuscript had carried the infection of the plague to the celebrated Hemkengripper at Leyden, who in his malicious joy of refuting his learned adversary Zahnebrecker had neglected every precaution. The manuscript arrived on a ship infected by the plague and should have been passed through vinegar. Hemkengripper's servant recognized the disease as soon as her master was attacked. But the latter ordered her to keep silent. He sent a ceremonial letter of reconciliation to Zahnebrecker, who, in

\textsuperscript{26} Crawfurd, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{27} Nohl, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 135.
accordance with his frank character, immediately accepted. At a feast in honor of the reconciliation Hemkengripper embraced him, and infected him so effectually with his first kiss of reconciliation that both died nearly within an hour. Half the town followed them, first, as mourners to the grave and then as corpses to their own graves, and only few suspected that their whole misfortune was due to the hatred of two scholars.28

The mystic Heinrich Suso was a bit luckier. When he was sent by his monastery on an official trip to Alsatia, he was accompanied by a half-witted lay-brother who used to get drunk as soon as both of them reached a town for rest. He behaved so strangely that he was picked up under the suspicion that he might be one of those well poisoners. When examined, he, in order to save his own neck, told the townspeople that his master Heinrich Suso was instead the one whom they were looking for. Suso was caught by the rabble and almost immediately killed. In the last moment a local clergyman saved his life. Suso and his servant left the town quickly.29 There is no doubt that the

28 Ibid., p. 171.
29 Ibid., p. 188.
plague deeply stimulated the meditations of the mystics. In times during which the insecurity, the absolute dependence of a man's fate depends on a sweeping natural catastrophe against which he can do nothing, the preoccupation with things that had eternal value for humanity seems natural. Suso wrote, for instance, during plague-times, an essay on "How one should learn to die, and what is death like without preparation;" and Merker and Stammler point out that:


30 Ibid.
All these catastrophes were thought to be the announcement of the end of the world as was written in the scriptures. When in addition comets appeared which were to herald the new arrival of Christ, the movement of the mystics gained even more momentum.32

When the cleric Francesco Berni enjoyed plague-times and wrote satirical poems about it, he must have been standing alone:

The pestilence time is good—a fig for other times ... Firstly, it carries off the rabble, it destroys them, makes holes among the geese at Allhallowtide! In the churches there are none to press upon you. Besides, none keep any record of buying or borrowing. Yea, buy and make debts, for there will be no creditors to trouble you. And if a creditor should come, tell him that your head aches, that your arm pricks, he straight will you away, and will cross your path: rather is place yielded to you, and honor done you, especially if you are clothed in rags. You are lord of yourself and lord of others. You can watch the folk's strange antics and laugh at other's fear. Life has then new laws: every pleasure is allowed .... Above all, there need be no work done. It is a choice

life, serene and large: time passes very gaily from dinner time to supper.33

This poem must be looked upon as an exception because especially the lower clergy was affected by a high mortality rate due to the plague. It was mentioned earlier that the upper classes had a better chance to survive; however, as far as the clergy is concerned, this is not true. By the mere nature of their position in society which brought them into constant contact with those who suffered from the plague, they were easily infected. Their courage and helpfulness and complete disregard for their own protection let them often be the first to die. There are vast consequences which this depletion of the clergy caused, the recruitment of men of lesser quality who could not speak Latin being only one of them. The chronicles are full of reports of how particularly in France the clergy was affected, and it can be deduced that the same rate of mortality applies to Germany and other countries too. 'In the monastery of Marienberg in Vinstgau all the monks died with the exception of four. In the same manner nearly all the monks of the monastery of Dissentis

33Crawfurd, loc. cit., p. 156.
were carried off by the plague. At Meiningen, the whole convent of the monastery of the Barefooted Friars died out with the exception of three. Altogether, 124,434 monks of the Order of the Franciscans died. Describing the plague outbreak in the monastery of St. Gall, a monk wrote in an essay entitled 'Visitation of the Monastery of St. Fall by Our Most Merciful Lord God in the Year 1629': 'The evil, fully deserved by our sins, began to break out in town, to spread to the country and to rage implacable in all quarters. At first it carried off our spiritual brothers, the parish priests of St. George and St. Fiden, so that consequently it became necessary—as no other parish priests were available—that at least one should go from our monastery to provide the infected with the last Sacraments.'

Not all ecclesiastics behaved in a courageous manner and were infected; a lot of them ran away from the monasteries and formed armed robber-gangs, the archpriest Arnaud de Cervole being one of the most notorious. In Italy the monks became so infamous

34 Nohl, loc. cit., p. 39.
35 Ibid., p. 140.
36 Ibid., p. 163.
that people thought that the plague was sent by God because of corruption in the church. Donato Dineri reports:

The friars of the Order of Saint Augustine at St. Antonio stabbed their provincial head. A young lay brother from Camporeggi slew another brother of the monastery, the son of Carlo Montamini; yea, at Assisi the Minor Friars fought with knives so that fourteen of them were killed, and the Friars della Rocca di Siena did away with six of their Companions. 37

To whatever extreme the clergy behaved, it resulted in the depletion of man-power, diminishing trust of the people in them, enforced recruitment of often inferior monks, 38 and a general decline in the power of the church. Those youths who had been dragged into the monasteries against their will either spoke a corrupted Latin or none at all, giving the humanists ammunition in their battle for a reform of style. Without this general decline of the power of the established church hierarchy the humanists, being mostly dependent on church-supported universities, could not have become such a force in the intellectual movement of the times.

37 Ibid., p. 118.
38 Campbell, loc. cit., p. 134.
Thomas Wölf lamented this situation in his commentary on the fourth psalm. He had attributed 'these calamities these new diseases, these pests, these sudden deaths, these revolutions in empires that frighten us so' to the growing secularism of the age and to the increasing tendency to deprive the clergy of the property, immunities, and honor which were their ancient due.\(^{39}\) Connected with this decline of the power of the established church is the rise of the flagellant movement, which gave impetus to a whole new type of literature, especially pious hymns. Today flagellantism is considered a kind of sexual aberration; during plague-times, however, it was an earnest attempt to imitate the life and the sufferings of Christ. The movement is basically one of self-help by the people who had been deeply disappointed by the church and its empty formalism. Only laymen could join. People had turned to the church for help against the black death and got only the sale of indulgences and an idea of the immorality of the clergy; now they appealed directly to God without intervention of the clergy. Everyone who joined was obliged to move in a large crowd from town to town, beat himself with chains, and thus give a good

\(^{39}\)Thorndike, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 461.
example of pious living. The chieftains of this kind of fraternity took the liberty of holding services and granting absolution. Sometimes these crowds grew as large as eighty thousand people. The plague had even a better chance of spreading. During the marches which extended through all of Europe pious hymns were sung which were full of enthusiasm. The main song of the Cross-bearers was heard in all dialects throughout Germany:

Das alte Geisslerlied
Sve siner sele wille pleghen
De sal gelden unde weder geuen
So wert siner sele raed
     Des help uns leue herre good
Ne tredet here we botsen wille
Vle wi io de hetsen helle
Lucifer is en bose geselle
Sven her hauet
Mit peke he en lauet
Datz vle wi ef wir hauen sin
Des help uns maria koninghin
Das wir dines kindes hulde win
     Jesus crist de wart ge vanghen
An en cruce wart he ge hanghen
Dat cruce wart des blodes rod
Wer klaghen sin marter unde sin dod
Sunder war midt wilt tu mi lonen
Was wltu nu liden dor mich
So rope wir herre mit luden done
Unsen denst den nem to lone
Behode uns vor der helle nod
Des bidde wi dicht dor dinen dod
Sor god vor gete wi unse blot... 40

The attempt of the clergy to destroy the movement was aided by the appearance of more and more questionable characters in the flagellant fraternities.

The church was not idle when it came to using the plague as an instrument to draw the masses closer to the Catholic hierarchy. During the outbreaks in the sixteenth century the French communities were particularly busy reviving the Mystery and Miracle plays. Although Mystery plays dealt more with the portrayal of the central mysteries of the New Testament such as the Incarnation and the Miracle plays illustrated the life of the great saints there was practically no distinction. These plays had a dual function: they served an educational purpose for those who could not read and at the same time, appeased in plague-time, an angry God by glorifying him or his saints. In this way the Christian drama triumphed over the ancient classical drama. Already in the fifth century the church had introduced public worship, from

40 Hecker, _loc. cit._, p. 68.
which the Mystery and Miracle plays gradually evolved. They had come to their full form already in the fourteenth century. It is known that an entire Miracle play was performed in the presence of Charles IV in 1360. Plague devastations gave them more impetus. The plays were usually performed next to the church. When the church allowed private associations to run them they moved away from the church; the subject matter was changed, and it started to look like what is known today as drama. The role of the plague in the renewed blossoming of these plays cannot be underestimated. The chronicles are full of reports about how the plague visited a town and how only then did the people all of a sudden decided to perform a Miracle or Mystery play. In some towns they are still preserved and performed today the way they could be seen centuries ago. It is said that the Oberammergauer Passionsspiele originated in 1633 that way. The plague carried away eighty-four persons. As a last resort six women and twelve men promised to give every ten years a play representing the sufferings of Christ. The plague receded immediately.\footnote{Crawfurd, \textit{loc. cit.}, p. 159.}\footnote{Ibid., p. 467.}
In addition to the renewed frequent performance of Miracle and Mystery plays, the church circulated the 'Pestblätter.' They were rough woodcuts or copper-plate engravings, produced en masse particularly in Germany, depicting the suffering Christ on the cross or some saint. Below the picture was either a little prayer or advice as to how to treat a case of plague. Often medical faculties put out 'Pestblätter' too, without the religious picture, the entire space being devoted to hygenic precautions.

University reform was triggered by the black death on account of the high mortality rate among scholars. Not only was the mortality rate high among the clergy which came into close contact with plague victims, but whole universities had to move because of the plague. In 1545 the University of Paris came to a complete standstill.\(^43\) During the pest year of 1521, not a single student matriculated at the University of Vienna.\(^44\) In 1553, an entire group of students followed their professor of civil law to the University of Bourges (later, in 1626, only one professor at this university was spared by the plague).

\(^{43}\text{Thorndike, loc. cit., p. 466.}\)

\(^{44}\text{Ibid., p. 467.}\)
The entire system had become corrupted. Those professors who were persuaded to stay demanded enormous amounts of money. The quality of the institutions declined. Professorships, priories, guardianships could be bought by the young, inexperienced students. Thomas Moore received a letter saying that 'the number of scholars is diminished. So our walls fall down. So all liberal customs grow old. The Colleges alone persist.' But precisely because of this visible decline in educational institutions, many more were founded by responsible, concerned men. Charles IV, formerly a student at Paris, gave between 1355, and 1369 alone five charters to universities, a tremendous number in those days. In the introductions to these five charters Charles makes it clear that the stifling of knowledge by the black death calls for immediate remedies. In other countries the same development can be observed, first a complete decline and then founding of new colleges generously supported. Three colleges at Cambridge and two at Oxford can be traced directly to the plague. Since with the death of the old

45 Nohl, loc. cit., p. 466.


47 Campbell, loc. cit., p. 149.
scholars and ancient ways of thinking numerous reforms at these institutions were instituted, the entire conception of the university as a practical extension of the church became doubtful. The teachings of the humanists, who were largely dependent on universities, and the introduction of the vernacular by young people who could not speak Latin or did not want to, might not have gained such momentum if it were not for the decline of influence of the old style clergy and the fresh breeze which blew through these reorganized universities. From this more relaxed atmosphere the ground work was laid for the sixteenth century emphasis on writing in the vernacular. The tremendous influence of the appearance of writings in German connected with the technical breakthrough of printing on the development of German literature as such can only be guessed at.

A more direct influence of the plague on writings can be traced through the works written about and during the Reformation. In Spain and Italy it was generally assumed after the Reformation that the black death must have come from Germany. Only a country which could produce Luther could be the home of such a plague. King Philip IV of Spain even attributed plague-making to the Lutherans and had his coast carefully guarded to prevent this evil from entering his domain. In general it can be said that
both sides accused each other of being responsible. In a Protestant book of remedies the 'heathen idolatrous atrocities of the Catholics' are spoken of. The title of a poem runs: 'An approved medicine against the evils of the soul which cannot be obtained from Saints Sebastian or Rochus, but from the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Physician of Israel.' Luther indulged in writing pamphlets entitled: 'Is it right to flee from the epidemic?' He summed up the cause of the fear of the plague by asserting that the lack of faith on the part of the people was the reason. 'In popery the people relied on the merits of the monks and other things of that kind; but now each one must look after himself and behave accordingly. Now, as with many, the faith and its resulting fruit is slight, the consequence is this dread of death.

An apparent opponent of the Reformation described a plague outbreak in Eisleben long after Luther was dead: 'Truthful and exact account of the native town of the late Dr. Luther – how Eisleben was nearly extinguished and has now recovered: Conditions in Eisleben are such as to break one's heart and bring tears into one's eyes, and

48 Nohl, loc. cit., p. 139.
49 Ibid., p. 136.
50 Ibid., p. 139.
would make one believe that God has forgone all mercy. It would be vain to endeavour to describe the great quantities of corpses.... When Magister Hardtke expired in his agony a blue smoke was seen to rise from his throat.... A typical reply from someone who was in favor of the Reformation went as follows: 'The statement in regard to Magister Hardtke, a most truthful, honest and exemplary priest, is not surprising, nor that an attempt should be made to slander the honest man in his grave. Medical men can furnish reports concerning this to the effect that this is by no means unusual, but naturally takes place in the case of all expiring men.'

Summarizing the influences of the plague on the European intellectual and literary development, it can be said that this influence is manifold. There is the loss of power of the Catholic Church through the deterioration in the ranks of the clergy and the particularly high mortality rate among them and the strong anti-church flagellanti movement, followed by an attempt of the church to educate the illiterate masses with Miracle and Mystery plays to lead them back onto the 'right path.' A new brand of monk is, often forcefully, recruited, a monk who often did not speak Latin and was generally of lesser quality. The universities, first

51 Ibid., p. 65.
brought to a decline because of wide-spread plague outbreaks, become more and more numerous through the constant granting of new charters by farsighted statesmen. Universities cease to be mere extensions of the church; new scholars, often preferring the vernacular, and new ideas appear. Students gain certain rights, and reforms within the university organization are not impossible any more. Mysticism gains in momentum. Although there is a gap in the chronicles and generally little literary output immediately after plague outbreaks, literature becomes more realistic. The transcendental adoration of woman formerly called love is replaced by a real human sensuality. Boccaccio and Guillaume de Machaut demonstrated that it was desirable to enjoy existence to its full extent and to allow none of its transitory joys to escape. A full affirmation of life was contrasted with the horrors of the plague. Sensuality became emancipated from religion; the Church's conception of sexuality did not dominate any more. Amidst violent anti-Semitic persecutions, the peasant became aware of his economic importance. When labor, on account of the mortality rate, became scarce the peasants formed co-operatives leading to unrest and violent uprisings. Some scholars even trace the social and moral degeneracy and political anarchy in the centuries that followed
the plague to the Black Death. The great pestilence outbreaks killed a lot of people, and at the same time also dug the grave for the Middle Ages.
A Selected Bibliography


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