Calamity followed calamity over the course of the fourteenth century. The High Middle Ages had been a period of slow but sustained population growth. That trend began to reverse itself at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when Europe’s climate took a turn for the worse. As Europe grew colder and wetter, crop yields fell and famine followed. Thus, Europe’s population was already weakened by malnutrition when plague struck in 1347, introduced into Europe through the same trade routes that had fueled the prosperity of the previous century. In the wake of the plague, peasant uprisings were frequent, as were uprisings of the urban poor. Between 1337 and 1453, the Hundred Years’ War — in actuality a series of wars and civil wars — wreaked havoc on France. Finally, the papacy experienced a period of sharp decline in prestige and power, as the political rivalries of secular rulers led to schism within the Church. The documents included in this chapter examine these catastrophes and their consequences. As you read the documents, think about the impact of war, disease, and religious strife on medieval social, religious, and political institutions. What changes in European society were made possible by the destruction of the fourteenth century? ■

11-1 | The Psychological and Emotional Impact of the Plague

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, The Decameron: The Plague Hits Florence (ca. 1350)

The first wave of the Black Death began in the late 1340s. The disease spread rapidly, and contemporaries understood very little about it, although they did associate it with rats. The only effective countermeasures were quarantine and isolation. The infection, which spread along trade routes from Central Asia, killed some 75 million people. Even after the first incidence receded, plague returned to Europe in many subsequent outbreaks until the 1700s, with varying mortality rates. In this document, excerpted from his famous collection of novellas, the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (JEE-oh-VAH-nee buh-CAH-chee-oh) details the chaos unleashed in Florence as a result of the plague.

In the year then of our Lord 1348, there happened at Florence, the finest city in all Italy, a most terrible plague; which, whether owing to the influence of the planets, or that it was sent from God as a just punishment for our sins, had broken out some years before in the Levant1; and after passing from place to place, and making incredible havoc all the way, had now reached the west; where, in spite of all the means that art and human foresight could suggest, such as keeping the city clear from filth, and excluding all suspected persons, notwithstanding frequent consultations what else was to be done; nor omitting prayers to God in frequent processions: in the spring of the forgoing year, it began to show itself in a sad and wonderful2 manner; and, different from what it had been in the east, where bleeding from the nose is the fatal prognostic, here there appeared certain tumors in the groin, or under the armpits, some as big as a small apple, others as an egg; and afterwards purple spots in most parts of the body; in some cases large and but few in number, in others smaller and more numerous, both sorts the usual messengers of death. . . .

These accidents, and others of the like sort, occasioned various fears and devices amongst those people who survived, all tending to the same uncharitable and cruel end; which was to avoid the sick, and everything that had been near them, expecting by that means to save themselves. And some holding it best to live temperately, and to avoid excesses of all kinds, made parties, and shut themselves up from the rest of the world; eating and drinking moderately of the best, and diverting themselves with music, and such other entertainments as they might have within doors; never listening to anything from without, to make them uneasy. Others maintained free living to be a better preservative, and would balk no passion or appetite they wished to gratify, drinking and revelling incessantly from tavern to tavern, or in private houses; which were frequently found deserted by the owners, and therefore common to every one, yet avoiding, with all this irregularity, to come near the infected. And such at that time was the public distress, that the laws, human and divine, were not regarded; for the officers, to put them in force, being either dead, sick, or in want of persons to assist them, every one did just as he pleased. A third sort of people
chose a method between these two: not confining themselves to rules of diet like the former, and yet avoiding the intemperance of the latter; but eating and drinking what their appetites required, they walked everywhere with odors and nosegays to smell to; as holding it best to corroborate the brain: for they supposed the whole atmosphere to be tainted with the stink of dead bodies, arising partly from the distemper itself, and partly from the fermenting of the medicines within them. Others of a more cruel disposition, as perhaps the more safe to themselves, declared that the only remedy was to avoid it: persuaded, therefore, of this, and taking care for themselves only, men and women in great numbers left the city, their houses, relations, and effects, and fled into the country; as if the wrath of God had been restrained to visit those only within the walls of the city. . . . I pass over the little regard that citizens and relations showed to each other; for their terror was such that a brother even fled from his brother, a wife from her husband, and, what is more uncommon, a parent from its own child.


READING QUESTIONS

1. According to this account, how did civil order break down during the plague?
2. How does the narrator try to explain why the plague happened?
3. What are some of the things people thought might save them from the plague?

11-2 | A Town Chronicler Describes the Black Death
ANGELO DI TURA, Sienese Chronicle (1348–1351)

Densely populated and closely connected to the Mediterranean trade routes that brought the plague to Europe, Italian cities were among the hardest hit communities. Angelo di Tura was the town chronicler for the Tuscan town of Siena when the Black Death struck in the spring of 1348. According to di Tura, more people died in Siena in the first few months following the arrival of plague than had died in the previous twenty years. As you read his account of the devastation, reflect on the impact of the plague on the town’s ability to function. With more than half the population wiped out, how did the Sienese community keep from falling into anarchy?

The mortality, which was a thing horrible and cruel, began in Siena in the month of May [1348]. I do not know from where came this cruelty or these pitiless ways, which were painful to see and stupefied everyone. There are not words to describe how horrible these events have been and, in fact, whoever can say that they have not lived in utterly horrid conditions can truly consider themselves lucky. The infected die almost immediately. They swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Fathers abandon their sons, wives their husbands, and one brother the other. In the end, everyone escapes and abandons anyone who might be infected. Moreover, it appears that this plague can be communicated through bad breath and even by just seeing one of the infected. In these ways, they die and no one can be found who would want to bury them, not even for money or in the name of friendship. Those who get infected in their own house, they remove them the best way they can and they bury them without the supervision of a priest. No one controls anything and they do not even ring the church bells anymore. Throughout Siena, giant pits are being excavated for the multitudes of the dead and the hundreds that die every night. The bodies are thrown into these mass graves and are covered bit by bit. When those ditches are full, new ditches are dug. So many have died that new pits have to be made every day.

And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, have buried five of my sons with my own hands. Yet still I do not steal from those who were poorly buried like the dogs that eat them and litter them about the city. There is no one who weeps for any of the dead, for instead everyone awaits their own impending death. So many have died that everyone believes it is the end of the world. Medicine and other cures do not work. In fact, the more medicine people are given the quicker they die. The leaders of the city have elected three citizens that have been given 1,000 florins for the expense of taking care of the homeless and for burying them. These conditions have been so horrible that I do not reflect as often as I used to
about the situation. I have thought so much about these events that I cannot tell the stories any longer. This is how the people lived until September [1348], and it would be too much for me to write the whole story. One would find that in this period of time more people died than in twenty years or more. In Siena alone, 36,000 people have died. If you count the elderly and others, the number could be 52,000 in total. In all of the boroughs, the number could be as high as 30,000 more. So it can be seen that in total the death toll may be as high as 80,000. There are only about 10,000 people left in the city and those that live on are hopeless and in utter despair. They leave their homes and other things. Gold, silver, and copper lay scattered about. In the countryside, even more died, so many that farms and agricultural lands are left without people to work them. I cannot write about the cruelties that existed in the countryside: that wolves and other wild beasts eat the improperly buried and other horrors that are too difficult for anyone who would read this account. . . .

The city of Siena appeared uninhabited because almost no one was found there. The pestilence remained and everyone who survived celebrated his or her fate. Of the monks, priests, nuns, women, and others from the secular community, they didn’t worry about their expenses or games. Everyone appeared to be rich because they had survived and regained value in life. Now, no one knows how to put their life back in order.


READING QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterize di Tura’s reaction to the plague?
2. What explanation, if any, did di Tura offer for the terrible events he described?
3. What signs of social breakdown did he note? What do they suggest about the full extent of the impact of the plague on late medieval life?

11-3 | Social and Economic Unrest in England

The Anonimalle Chronicle: The English Peasants’ Revolt (1381)

Agricultural labor was traditionally carried out by serfs, who were bound by tradition to fulfill their obligations to their lords. The high mortality rate of the plague, however, resulted in a labor shortage across Europe. Some peasants tried to act on this advantage and force the lords to end their serfdom. When their demands were not satisfied, peasants often rose up against their lords. In England in 1381, an unpopular tax on all adult males prompted thousands of peasants to revolt. As you read this account of the revolt, pay particular attention to the targets of the peasants’ anger. What distinction did the rebels make between the nobility and the king?

And on that Thursday, the said feast of Corpus Christi, the King, being in the Tower [of London] very sad and sorry, mounted up into a little turret towards St. Catherine’s, where were lying a great number of the commons, and had proclamation made to them that they all should go peaceably to their homes, and he would pardon them all manner of their trespasses. But all cried with one voice that they would not go before they had captured the traitors who lay in the Tower, nor until they had got charters to free them from all manner of serfdom, and had got certain other points which they wished to demand. And the King benevolently granted all, and made a clerk write a bill in their presence in these terms: “Richard, King of England and France, gives great thanks to his good commons, for that they have so great a desire to see and to keep their king, and grants them pardon for all manner of trespasses and misprisions and felonies done up to this hour, and wills and commands that every one should now return to his own home, and wills and commands that each should put his grievances in writing, and have them sent to him; and he will provide, with the aid of his loyal lords and his good council, such remedy as shall be profitable both to him and to them, and to all the kingdom.” On this document he sealed his signet in presence of them all, and sent out the said bill by the hands of two of his knights to the folks before St. Catherine’s. And he caused it to be read to them, and the knight who read it stood up on an old chair before the others so that
all could hear. All this time the King was in the Tower in great distress of mind. And when the commons had heard the Bill, they said that this was nothing but trifles and mockery. Therefore they returned to London and had it cried around the City that all lawyers, and all the clerks of the Chancery and the Exchequer and every man who could write a brief or a letter should be beheaded, whenever they could be found. At this time they burnt several more houses in the City, and the King himself ascended to a high garret of the Tower and watched the fires. Then he came down again, and sent for the lords to have their counsel, but they knew not how they should counsel him, and all were wondrous abashed.

And by seven o’clock the King [went to meet the peasants]. And when he was come the commons all knelt down to him, saying “Welcome our Lord King Richard, if it pleases you, and we will not have any other king but you.” And Wat Tighler [Wat Tyler], their leader and chief, prayed in the name of the commons that he would suffer them to take and deal with all the traitors against him and the law, and the King granted that they should have at their disposition all who were traitors, and could be proved to be traitors by process of law. The said Walter and the commons were carrying two banners, and many pennons and pennoncels,¹ while they made their petition to the King. And they required that for the future no man should be in serfdom, nor make any manner of homage or suit to any lord, but should give a rent of 4d. an acre for his land. They asked also that no one should serve any man except by his own good will, and on terms of regular covenant.

And at this time the King made the commons draw themselves out in two lines, and proclaimed to them that he would confirm and grant it that they should be free, and generally should have their will, and that they might go through all the realm of England and catch all traitors and bring them to him in safety, and then he would deal with them as the law demanded.

[Meanwhile, fighting between the nobles and peasants continued, and many lords lost their heads to the commoners.]

And when he was summoned, . . . Wat Tighler of Maidstone, he came to the King with great confidence, mounted on a little horse, that the commons might see him. And he dismounted, holding in his hand a dagger which he had taken from another man, and when he had dismounted he half bent his knee, and then took the King by the hand, and shook his arm forcibly and roughly, saying to him, “Brother, be of good comfort and joyful, for you shall have, in the fortnight that is to come, praise from the commons even more than you have yet had, and we shall be good companions.” And the King said to Walter, “Why will you not go back to your own country?” But the other answered, with a great oath, that neither he nor his fellows would depart until they had got their charter such as they wished to have it, and had certain points rehearsed, and added to their charter which they wished to demand. And he said in a threatening fashion that the lords of the realm would rue it bitterly if these points were not settled to their pleasure. Then the King asked him what were the points which he wished to have revised, and he should have them freely, without contradiction, written out and sealed. Thereupon the said Walter rehearsed the points which were to be demanded; and he asked that . . . there should be equality among all people save only the King, and that the goods of Holy Church should not remain in the hands of the religious, nor of parsons and vicars, and other churchmen; but that clergy already in possession should have a sufficient sustenance from the endowments, and the rest of the goods should be divided among the people of the parish.

[The King agreed to these terms, and after he left, the Mayor of London captured Wat Tighler and killed him.]


READING QUESTIONS

1. Who did the peasants blame for their troubles? Why?
2. What demands did the peasants make? What do these demands reveal about their social and political beliefs?
3. Is it plausible that the Mayor of London would have Wat Tighler killed without the king’s consent? What does this tell you about the king’s true attitude toward the rebellion
At first glance, this German woodcut seems to be a straightforward depiction of the traditional medieval social and political hierarchy, with peasants at the bottom, merchants and craftsmen at the next level, secular and clerical elites one level higher, and the pope and emperor at the top. That interpretation is challenged, however, by the peasants perched at the top of tree, one with his foot on the pope’s shoulder and the other enjoying a nap. Moreover, instead of presenting the various social groups as part of a collective, with each group playing its own distinct and necessary role, the branches create clear separations between the groups, giving the impression that each group occupies a world of its own. As you examine the woodcut, come up with your own interpretation. What connections can you make between the woodcut and the social and economic developments of the fourteenth century?
READING QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterize the peasants at the bottom of the tree? What about the peasants at the top?
2. How would you describe the society depicted in the woodcut? What are its defining attributes?
3. Do you see this as a conservative or a subversive image? Why?

11-5 | CATHERINE OF SIENA, Letter to Gregory XI (1372)
In the early 1300s, the papacy moved its capital to Avignon, inside French territory. Because the pope was the bishop of Rome, it seemed wrong to move the head of the church away from his rightful home — and to a place where he could be easily influenced by the French king. Many people blamed the Avignon papacy for the plague and warfare across Europe. Still more linked the Avignon papacy to a general decline in the reputation and prestige of the Church. In the 1370s, Catherine joined the effort to persuade Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome. As you read her letter to the pope, consider how her gender and spiritual reputation might have influenced the pope’s reaction to her message.

Alas, what confusion is this, to see those who ought to be a mirror of voluntary poverty, meek as lambs, distributing the possessions of Holy Church to the poor: and they appear in such luxury and state and pomp and worldly vanity, more than if they had turned them to the world a thousand times! Nay, many seculars put them to shame who live a good and holy life. . . . For ever since [the Church] has aimed more at temporal than at spiritual, things have gone from bad to worse. See therefore that God, in judgment, has allowed much persecution and tribulation to befall her. But comfort you, father, and fear not for anything that could happen, which God does to make her state perfect once more, that lambs may feed in that garden, and not wolves who devour the honor that should belong to God, which they steal and give to themselves. Comfort you in Christ sweet Jesus; for I hope that His aid will be near you, plenitude of divine grace, aid and support divine in the way that I said before. Out of war you will attain greatest peace; out of persecution, greatest unity; not by human power, but by holy virtue, you will discomfit those visible demons, wicked men, and those invisible demons who never sleep around us.

But reflect, sweet father, that you could not do this easily unless you accomplished the other two things which precede the completion of the other: that is, your return to Rome and uplifting of the standard of the most holy Cross. Let not your holy desire fail on account of any scandal or rebellion of cities which you might see or hear; nay, let the flame of holy desire be more kindled to wish to do swiftly. Do not delay, then, your coming.


READING QUESTIONS

1. What did Catherine want the pope to do, and why did she want him to do it?
2. According to Catherine, what happened to the Church when the pope left Rome for Avignon?
3. What authority did Catherine have to make demands of the pope? How would you explain her prominence in the effort to persuade the pope to return to Rome?

11-6 | The Debate Over Joan of Arc’s Clothes (1429)
The public debate over Joan of Arc’s status began almost as soon as she presented herself to the French court. Even after Joan had been accepted by the Dauphin and joined the French in battle, supporters and opponents clashed over her claims to divine inspiration. In the spring of 1429, one of Joan’s supporters circulated a treatise entitled De mirabili victoria. Later that same year, an anonymous member of the
University of Paris countered with *De bono et malo spiritu*. One important point of contention between the two authors was Joan’s decision to wear men’s clothing. As you read the excerpts from these treatises, think about how female models and stereotypes shaped each author’s argument.

**De mirabili victoria**

Here follow three truths in justification of the wearing of male clothing by the Pucelle,\(^1\) chosen while following her sheep.

I. The old law [of the Old Testament], prohibiting the woman from using the clothing of a man and the man from the clothing of a woman [Deuteronomy 22: 5], is purely judicial and does not carry any obligation under the new law [of the New Testament]. [This is] because it is a constant and necessary truth for salvation that the judicial precepts of the ancient law [Old Testament] are quashed and, as such, do not bind the new one, unless they have been instituted again and confirmed by superiors.

II. This law [of the Old Testament] included a moral dimension that must remain in all law. It can be expressed as a prohibition on indecent clothing both for the man and for the woman, [as this is] contrary to the requirement of virtue. This should affect all circumstances bound by law, so that the wise person will judge when, where, to whom and how it is appropriate, and in this way the rest. This [law of the Old Testament] on these things is not confined to that one situation.

III. This law [of the Old Testament], whether judicial or moral, does not condemn the wearing of the clothing of a man and a warrior by our Pucelle, manly and a warrior, whom God in heaven has chosen through certain signs as his standard-bearer for those fighting the enemies of justice and to raise up his friends, so that he might overthrow by the hand of a woman, a young girl [*puellaris*] and a virgin, the powerful weapons of iniquity, with the help of the angels. By her virginity, she is loved and known, according to St. Jerome; and this frequently appears in the histories of saints, such as Cecilia,\(^2\) visibly with a crown of roses and lilies. On the other hand, through this she is safeguarded from the consequences of the cutting of her hair, which the Apostle prohibits from being seen on a woman.

Therefore may the iniquitous talk be put to an end and cease. For, when divine virtue operates, it establishes the means according to its aim; hence, it is not safe to disparage or to find fault, out of rash bravado, with those things which are from God, according to the Apostle.

Finally many details and examples from sacred and secular history could be added; for example those of Camilla and the Amazons,\(^3\) and moreover in cases either of necessity or evident utility, or where approved by custom, or by the authority and dispensation of superiors. But these are sufficient for brevity and for the truth. The party having just cause should be on close guard unless, through disbelief and ingratitude, or some injustices, they might render the divine help useless, that has begun so patiently and miraculously; just as [happened] for Moses and the sons of Israel, after having received such divine promises, as we read contained [in the scriptures]. For even if God does not change His advice, He does change his opinion according to what people deserve.

**De bono et malo spiritu**

Regarding the preceding, I mean to deduce from canon law a small number of issues, in praise of all-mighty God, and in exaltation of the holy catholic faith.

And first, we have a duty to adhere firmly to the catholic faith, following the chapter *Firmiter* of the title *De Summa Trinitate*, without giving in any manner our approval to superstitious innovations, seeing that they engender discords, as one reads in the chapter *Cum consuetudinis* of the title *De consuetudine*.

Item, to give his support so easily to a young girl that was not known, without the support of a miracle or on the testimony of the holy scriptures, is to undermine this truth and this unchanging force of the catholic faith: wise men and canonists would not have any doubt about this. The proof is in the chapter *Cum ex injuncto* of the title *De haæreticis*.

Item, if those who approve of the matter of this Pucelle say that she has been sent by God in an invisible, and in some sense inspired way, and that such an invisible mission is much more worthy than a visible mission, just as a divine mission is more worthy than a human mission, it is reasonable to reply to them that this entirely inner mission escapes observation, it is not enough that someone claims purely and simply to be sent from God — this is the claim of all heretics — but it is necessary that he proves this
invisible mission to us through a miraculous work or by a precise testimony drawn from the holy scripture. All this is demonstrated in the chapter cited above, *Cum ex injuncto*.

Item, as this Pucelle has not proved in any of these ways that she has been sent from God, there is no room to believe in her on her word, but there is room to proceed against her as if suspected of heresy.

Added to this, if she has really been sent from God, she would not take clothing prohibited by God and forbidden for women by cannon law under penalty of anathema, according to the chapter *Si qua mulier*.

Moreover, in the case where those who let themselves be deceived by this Pucelle attempt to excuse and to justify her clothing in consideration of the matter for which she was supposedly sent, such niceties are useless; these are rather those excuses of which the Psalmist speaks, that one searches for to excuse sins (Psalm 140: 4), and they accuse more than they excuse, as it says in chapter *Quanto* of the title *De consuetudine*. In this case, one might do lots of evil things under the appearance of good. And yet it is necessary to refrain not only from evil, but from all appearance of evil, as one reads in the chapter *Cum ab omni* of the title *De vita et honestate clericorum*.

Item, if a women [*sic*] could put on male clothing as she liked with impunity, women would have unrestrained opportunities to fornicate and to practice manly acts which are legally forbidden for them according to doctrine, etc., [as this is] against the canonical teaching contained in the chapter *Nova quædam* of the title *De poenitentiiis et remissionibus*.

Item, in general, all masculine duties are forbidden to women, for example, to preach, to teach, to bear arms, to absolve, to excommunicate, etc., as one sees in that chapter *Nova quædam* and in the Digest, in the [second] law of the title *De regulis juris*.


**READING QUESTIONS**

1. On what grounds did the author of *De mirabili victoria* support Joan’s insistence on wearing men’s clothing?
2. Why did the author of *De bono et malo spiritu* believe that Joan’s clothes supported his position that she was, in all likelihood, a heretic?
3. What do these treatises tell you about late medieval ideas about women’s nature and their proper role in society?