

Introduction to 14th-c. Narratives

Nothing in the realm of human endeavor is more mysterious—or powerful—as a story. We tell stories constantly to make sense of the world around us, to memorialize a past event, to capture all of the buzzing intensity of a present moment, to point us toward the future. A story—*narrative* is the more fancy term—may be true, deliberately made up, or even a mixture of fact and fiction. All narratives, based on real life or invented, follow a very similar, and familiar, arc of beginning, middle, and end. They depend upon a cast of characters, real or imagined, and upon a place where things happened, real or imagined. Stories, to borrow words from Cicero, delight us, persuade us, or teach us—and sometimes all three at once.

When we find ourselves in the middle of a catastrophic, world-changing event like Covid-19, we want to hear a true story: what happened? What *really* happened? Were you there? What was it like? *Why* did it happen? We turn to witnesses and scientists and other kinds of experts and eagerly read and listen to and watch their narratives.

And often, in the months and years following a disaster, even decades and centuries after a disaster, we humans make art of the thing that so terrified us and so damaged us: we paint, we write poetry and novels, we make music and films.

Note, for example, this painting.



The anonymous street artist is practicing what is called *redirecting*; that is, the technique by which one commandeers and alters a painting, usually by adding monsters. This provocateur borrowed a famous portrait by the 15th-century Flemish painter Yan Van Eyck, “Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban,” and made it of this moment by adding a mask. We have infinite ways of telling stories to ourselves, of attempting to understand the trauma and the pain, the courage and the sheer will to persevere—this portrait is but one example, in which the artist turns to a well-known image from the past in order to tell a story about the present.

And this is why we'd like you to read what a few people had to say in the 14th century when they faced *their* world-altering pandemic. How might these stories still speak to us? What do we want to make of them? Let us begin with understanding what the Bubonic Plague is. Before you read the eye-witness accounts, please read "Bubonic Plague: The First Pandemic," and watch part of a recorded seminar on the Plague.

Boccaccio (1313-75), Italian humanist, writer, and poet; introduction to *The Decameron* (begun 1349, finished 1353)

Chaucer (1343-1400), English poet; excerpt from the Pardoner's Tale, *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1385)

Guy de Chauliac (c. 1300-1368), French physician and surgeon; excerpt from *Inventarium sive chirurgia magna* (*The Inventory, or the Great Work on Surgery*) (1363)

Ibn al-Wardi (c.1290-1349), Arab writer, philosopher, and historian, excerpt from *An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence* (c. 1348-9)

Petrarch (1304-c. 1374), Italian poet and scholar; letters

Albertus Pictor, *Death Playing Chess* (c.1480-90): the inspiration for Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957)



We've created two assignments. The first invites you to engage with the readings, and the second invites you to write, or find, narratives about Covid-19. All of us need to educate ourselves with respect to the latest, accurate scientific information about this pandemic. But we also need stories to make sense of our experiences. American novelist [Tim O'Brien](#), who has written about his experiences serving in Viet Nam, says: "Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is."