

Crisis and Renaissance

1340–1492

CURRENTS of both crisis and renewal swept through medieval society in the years 1340–1492. On the one hand, throughout the fourteenth century, Europeans faced myriad challenges, from pestilence to war to rebellions. On the other hand, the city-states of the northern Italian peninsula helped to spark a period of great creativity that historians often refer to as the Renaissance, which reached its peak in the 1400s. The documents in this chapter capture these twin themes, beginning with contemporary accounts of the catastrophic effects of the Black Death and the search for scapegoats, though many people viewed the plague as divine punishment. The Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) added to people's troubles as the kings of France and England battled for land and prestige. Both sides raised taxes to finance the war, leading to a wave of rebellions, including the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, described in Document 2. The very church that at its height had claimed to be the spiritual and temporal head of Christendom could not help because it was a house divided and threatened by abuses and calls for reform, as the selections by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400; Document 3) and letters of Jan Hus (1427–1415; Document 4) reveal. At the same time, however, men of the upper classes in Italy defined themselves self-consciously as living in new times. For such men and a few women, this was a time of rebirth, distinct from what they viewed as a millennium of barbarism. Imitating the values and styles of antiquity, the Renaissance was defined by the *studia humanitatis* (roughly, the liberal arts), from which the term *humanism* was derived. The fifth document illustrates the application and possibilities of humanism, whereas the sixth document demonstrates that the realities of Italian life often did not match Renaissance ideals.

1.

Demographic Catastrophe

The Black Death (Fourteenth Century)

Few events in history have had such a shattering impact on every aspect of society as the plague, which reached Europe in 1347. The Black Death decimated a society already weakened by a demographic crisis, famines, and climatic disasters. It is esti-

mated that one-third of Europe's population died in the first wave of plague, which was followed by repeated outbreaks. Some cities may have lost over half their people in 1347–1348 alone. Though the devastation was social, psychological, economic, political, and even artistic, many historians believe that in the long term the plague led to significant changes and even improvements in Western life. The following documents describe the arrival of the plague in various places and responses to it, including searches for its cause and people on whom to fix blame. The plague ultimately precipitated much of the crisis that characterized the fourteenth century.

From Ordinances against the Spread of Plague, Pistoia

2 May, 1348

1. So that the sickness which is now threatening the region around Pistoia shall be prevented from taking hold of the citizens of Pistoia, no citizen or resident of Pistoia, wherever they are from or of what condition, status or standing they may be, shall dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca; and no one shall come to Pistoia from those places; penalty 500 pence. And no one from Pistoia shall receive or give hospitality to people who have come from those places; same penalty. And the guards who keep the gates of the city of Pistoia shall not permit anyone travelling to the city from Pisa or Lucca to enter; penalty 10 pence from each of the guards responsible for the gate through which such an entry has been made. But citizens of Pistoia now living within the city may go to Pisa and Lucca, and return again, if they first obtain permission from the common council—who will vote on the merits of the case presented to them. The licence is to be drawn up by the notary of the *anziani* and gonfalonier of the city.¹ And this ordinance is to be upheld and observed from the day of its ratification until 1 October, or longer if the council sees fit.

2. No one, whether from Pistoia or elsewhere, shall dare or presume to bring or fetch to Pistoia, whether in person or by an agent, any old linen or woollen cloths, for male or female clothing or for bedspreads; penalty 200 pence, and the cloth to be burnt in the public piazza of Pistoia by the official who discovered it.²

From Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 16–21, 23, 194–97, 207, 208, 219–22.

¹The official rulers of Italian cities were the commune (a word which does not have its modern egalitarian connotations). They appointed a *podestà*, often a nobleman from outside the region, as their salaried chief executive. By the fourteenth century this arrangement was mirrored in many cities by the more broadly based *popolo*, represented by a governing council of *anziani* (elders). The *capitano del popolo* corresponded, in background and role, to the *podestà* of the commune.

²Later outbreaks of plague in Italian cities were often associated with the movement of cloth, and this requirement suggests that the connection may already have been noted. Contemporaries—who were not aware of the role played by fleas in the transmission of the disease—explained the connection as due to the trapping of corrupt air within the folds of fabric.

However it shall be lawful for citizens of Pistoia travelling within Pistoia and its territories to take linen and woollen cloths with them for their own use or wear, provided that they are in a pack or fardle weighing 30 lb or less. And this ordinance to be upheld and observed from the day of its ratification until 1 January. And if such cloth has already been brought into Pistoia, the bringer must take it away within three days of the ordinance's ratification; same penalty.

3. The bodies of the dead shall not be removed from the place of death until they have been enclosed in a wooden box, and the lid of planks nailed down³ so that no stench can escape, and covered with no more than one pall, coverlet or cloth; penalty 50 pence to be paid by the heirs of the deceased or, if there are no heirs, by the nearest kinsmen in the male line. The goods of the deceased are to stand as surety for the payment of the penalty. Also the bodies are to be carried to burial in the same box; same penalty. So that the civic officials can keep a check on this, the rectors of the chapels in Pistoia must notify the *podestà* and *capitano* when a corpse is brought into their chapel, giving the dead man's name and the contrada in which he was living when he died; same penalty. As soon as he has been notified, the *podestà* or *capitano* must send an official to the place, to find out whether this chapter of the ordinances is being observed, along with the other regulations governing funerals, and to punish those found guilty. And if the *podestà* or *capitano* is remiss in carrying out these orders he must be punished by those who appointed him; same penalty. But these regulations should not apply to the poor and destitute of the city, who are dealt with under another civic ordinance.

4. To avoid the foul stench which comes from dead bodies each grave shall be dug two and a half armslength deep, as this is reckoned in Pistoia;⁴ penalty 10 pence from anyone digging or ordering the digging of a grave which infringes the statute.

5. No one, of whatever condition, status or standing, shall dare or presume to bring a corpse into the city, whether coffined or not; penalty 25 pence. And the guards at the gates shall not allow such bodies to be brought into the city; same penalty, to be paid by every guard responsible for the gate through which the body was brought.

6. Any person attending a funeral shall not accompany the corpse or its kinsmen further than the door of the church where the burial is to take place, or go back to the house where the deceased lived, or to any other house on that occasion; penalty 10 pence. Nor is he to go [to] the week's mind of the deceased; same penalty.⁵

7. When someone dies, no one shall dare or presume to give or send any gift to the house of the deceased, or to any other place on that occasion, either before or after the funeral, or to visit the house, or eat there on that occasion; penalty 25 pence. This shall not apply to the sons and daughters of the deceased, his blood

³The bodies of ordinary people were generally buried in shrouds, although they might be carried to church in a coffin. This ordinance probably implies that they were to be buried in a coffin.

⁴A *braccio* in Pistoia measured between two and two and a half feet.

⁵This last sentence refers to a ban on attendance at the commemorative mass one week after a death.

brothers and sisters and their children, or to his grandchildren. The *podestà* and *capitano*, when notified by the rector as in chapter 3, must send an official to enquire whether anything has been done to the contrary and to punish those responsible.

From Gabriele de' Mussis (d. 1356), a Lawyer in Piacenza

In 1346, in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought sudden death. . . . An eastern settlement under the rule of the Tartars called Tana, which lay to the north of Constantinople and was much frequented by Italian merchants, was totally abandoned after an incident there which led to its being besieged and attacked by hordes of Tartars who gathered in a short space of time. The Christian merchants, who had been driven out by force, were so terrified of the power of the Tartars that, to save themselves and their belongings, they fled in an armed ship to Caffa, a settlement in the same part of the world which had been founded long ago by the Genoese.

Oh God! See how the heathen Tartar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly invested the city of Caffa and besieged the trapped Christians there for almost three years. There, hemmed in by an immense army, they could hardly draw breath, although food could be shipped in, which offered them some hope. But behold, the whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tartars and killed thousands upon thousands every day. It was as though arrows were raining down from heaven to strike and crush the Tartars' arrogance. All medical advice and attention was useless; the Tartars died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies: swellings in the armpit or groin caused by coagulating humors, followed by a putrid fever.

The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. What seemed like mountains of dead were thrown into the city, and the Christians could not hide or flee or escape from them, although they dumped as many of the bodies as they could in the sea. And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tartar army. Moreover, one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense.

Thus almost everyone who had been in the East, or in the regions to the south and north, fell victim to sudden death after contracting this pestilential disease, as if struck by a lethal arrow which raised a tumor on their bodies. The scale of the mortality and the form which it took persuaded those who lived, weeping and lamenting, through the bitter events of 1346 to 1348 — the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Cilicians, Georgians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens and Greeks (for almost all the East has been affected) that the last judgment had come. . . .

As it happened, among those who escaped from Caffa by boat were a few sailors who had been infected with the poisonous disease. Some boats were bound for Genoa, others went to Venice and to other Christian areas. When the sailors reached these places and mixed with the people there, it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence. . . .

Scarcely one in seven of the Genoese survived. In Venice, where an inquiry was held into the mortality, it was found that more than 70 percent of the people had died, and that within a short period 20 out of 24 excellent physicians had died. The rest of Italy, Sicily and Apulia and the neighboring regions maintain that they have been virtually emptied of inhabitants. The people of Florence, Pisa and Lucca, finding themselves bereft of their fellow residents, emphasize their losses. The Roman Curia at Avignon, the provinces on both sides of the Rhône, Spain, France, and the Empire cry up their griefs and disasters — all of which makes it extraordinarily difficult for me to give an accurate picture.

By contrast, what befell the Saracens can be established from trustworthy accounts. In the city of Babylon alone (the heart of the Sultan's power), 480,000 of his subjects are said to have been carried off by the disease in less than three months in 1348 — and this is known from the Sultan's register which records the names of the dead, because he receives a gold bezant for each person buried. . . .

I am overwhelmed, I can't go on. Everywhere one turns there is death and bitterness to be described. The hand of the Almighty strikes repeatedly, to greater and greater effect. The terrible judgment gains power as time goes by.

From Herman Gigas, a Franciscan Friar in Germany, Whose Account Goes until 1349

In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world that in the opinion of well-informed men scarcely a tenth of mankind survived. The victims did not linger long, but died on the second or third day. . . . Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. . . . [M]en say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs.

From Heinrich Truchess, a Former Papal Chaplain and Canon of Constance

The persecution of the Jews began in November 1348, and the first outbreak in Germany was at Sölden, where all the Jews were burnt on the strength of a rumor that they had poisoned wells and rivers, as was afterwards confirmed by their own confessions and also by the confessions of Christians whom they had corrupted. . . . Within the revolution of one year, that is from All Saints [1 November]

1348 until Michaelmas [29 September] 1349 all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt and killed for this crime, young men and maidens and the old along with the rest. And blessed be God who confounded the ungodly who were plotting the extinction of his church.

Papal Bull *Sicut Judeis* of Clement VI Issued in July 1348

Recently, however, it has been brought to our attention by public fame — or more accurately, infamy — that numerous Christians are blaming the plague with which God, provoked by their sins, has afflicted the Christian people, on poisonings carried out by the Jews at the instigation of the devil, and that out of their own hot-headedness they have impiously slain many Jews, making no exception for age or sex; and that the Jews have been falsely accused of such outrageous behavior. . . . [I]t cannot be true that the Jews, by such a heinous crime, are the cause or occasion of the plague, because throughout many parts of the world the same plague, by the hidden judgment of God, has afflicted and afflicts the Jews themselves and many other races who have never lived alongside them.

We order you by apostolic writing that each of you upon whom this charge has been laid, should straitly command those subject to you, both clerical and lay . . . not to dare (on their own authority or out of hot-headedness) to capture, strike, wound or kill any Jews or expel them from their service on these grounds; and you should demand obedience under pain of excommunication.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What explanations do these documents offer for the onset of plague? What do they suggest about the extent of Europeans' understanding of the disease and how it spread?
2. What strategies did the city of Pistoia adopt to prevent the spread of infection? How did those strategies differ from the ones described by Herman Gigas and Heinrich Truchess?
3. What do the accounts by Mussis and the bull of Pope Clement VI have in common? How did different groups of people react to the plague?

2.

Crisis and Change

Thomas Walsingham, *Peasant Rebels in London* (1381)

Thomas Walsingham (d. 1422) was the Benedictine author of six chronicles, including a portion of the famous "St. Alban's Chronicle." Although little is known of his life, his description of the Peasants' Revolt is a riveting and, by the standards of the time, reliable account of events early in the reign of King Richard II (r. 1377–1399).

From Thomas Walsingham, "Historia Anglicana I," in R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 169–76, 178–81.

The revolt, one of the largest of its kind, was a response to noble demands on a population experiencing declining incomes as a result of the Black Death, the costs of war with France, and the realm's poor administration. The poll tax imposed on adult males in 1380 sparked a rebellion, led by Wat Tyler (d. 1381) and preacher John Ball, of townsmen and peasants in southeastern England. The larger causes can be found in the final breakdown of serfdom — a breakdown vigorously opposed by a nobility in decline and supported by a peasantry with new opportunities brought about by the scarcity of laborers.

On the next day [Corpus Christi] the rebels went in and out of London and talked with the simple commons of the city about the acquiring of liberty and the seizure of the traitors, especially the duke of Lancaster whom they hated most of all; and in a short time easily persuaded all the poorer citizens to support them in their conspiracy. And when, later that day, the sun had climbed higher and grown warm and the rebels had tasted various wines and expensive drinks at will and so had become less drunk than mad (for the great men and common people of London had left all their cellars open to the rebels), they began to debate at length about the traitors with the more simple men of the city. Among other things they assembled and set out for the Savoy, the residence of the duke of Lancaster, unrivaled in splendor and nobility within England, which they then set to the flames. . . . This news so delighted the common people of London that, thinking it particularly shameful for others to harm and injure the duke before themselves, they immediately ran there like madmen, set fire to the place on all sides and so destroyed it. In order that the whole community of the realm should know that they were not motivated by avarice, they made a proclamation that no one should retain for his own use any object found there under penalty of execution. Instead they broke the gold and silver vessels, of which there were many at the Savoy, into pieces with their axes and threw them into the Thames or the sewers. They tore the golden cloths and silk hangings to pieces and crushed them underfoot; they ground up rings and other jewels inlaid with precious stones in small mortars, so that they could never be used again. . . .

After these malicious deeds, the rebels destroyed the place called the "Temple Bar" (in which the more noble apprentices of the law lived) because of their anger . . . and there many muniments which the lawyers were keeping in custody were consumed by fire. Even more insanely they set fire to the noble house of the Hospital of St. John at Clerkenwell so that it burnt continuously for the next seven days. . . .

For who would ever have believed that such rustics, and most inferior ones at that, would dare (not in crowds but individually) to enter the chamber of the king and of his mother with their filthy sticks; and undeterred by any of the soldiers, to stroke and lay their uncouth and sordid hands on the beards of several most noble knights. Moreover, they conversed familiarly with the soldiers asking them to be faithful to the ribalds and friendly in the future. . . . [They] gained access singly and in groups to the rooms in the Tower; they arrogantly lay and sat on the king's bed while joking; and several asked the king's mother to kiss them. . . . The rebels, who had formerly belonged to the most lowly condition of serf, went in and out like lords; and swineherds set themselves above soldiers. . . .

When the archbishop finally heard the rebels coming, he said to his men with great fortitude: "Let us go with confidence, for it is better to die when it can no longer help to live. At no previous time of my life could I have died in such security of conscience." A little later the executioners entered crying, "Where is that traitor to the kingdom? Where the despoiler of the common people?" . . . [They] dragged the archbishop along the passages by his arms and hood to their fellows once outside the gates on Tower Hill. . . . Words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks. . . .

Scarcely could the archbishop finish [his] speech before the rebels broke out with the horrible shout that they feared neither an interdict nor the Pope; all that remained for him, as a man false to the community and treasonable to the realm was to submit his neck to the executioners' swords. The archbishop now realized that his death was imminent and inevitable. . . . He was first struck severely but not fatally in the neck. He put his hand to the wound and said: "Ah! Ah! this is the hand of God." As he did not move his hand from the place of sorrow the second blow cut off the top of his fingers as well as severing part of the arteries. But the archbishop still did not die, and only on the eighth blow, wretchedly wounded in the neck and on the head, did he complete what we believe is worthy to be called his martyrdom. . . .

Nor did they show any reverence to any holy places but killed those whom they hated even if they were within churches and in sanctuary. I have heard from a trustworthy witness that thirty Flemings were violently dragged out of the church of the Austin Friars in London and executed in the open street. . . .

On the next day, Saturday 15 June (the feasts of Saints Vitus and Modestus), behold, the men of Kent showed themselves no less persistent in their wicked actions than on the previous day: they continued to kill men and to burn and destroy houses. The king sent messengers to the Kentishmen telling them that their fellows had left to live in peace henceforward and promising that he would give them too a similar form of peace if they would accept it. The rebels' greatest leader was called "Walter Helier" or "Tylere" (for such names had been given to him because of his trade), a cunning man endowed with much sense if he had decided to apply his intelligence to good purposes. . . .

On this the king, although a boy and of tender age, took courage and ordered the mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The mayor, a man of incomparable spirit and bravery, arrested Tyler without question and struck him a blow on the head which hurt him badly. Tyler was soon surrounded by the other servants of the king and pierced by sword thrusts in several parts of his body. His death, as he fell from his horse to the ground, was the first incident to restore to the English knighthood their almost extinct hope that they could resist the commons. . . .

But the king, with marvelous presence of mind and courage for so young a man, spurred his horse towards the commons and rode around them, saying, "What is this, my men? What are you doing? Surely you do not wish to fire on your own king? Do not attack me and do not regret the death of that traitor and ruffian. For I will be your king, your captain, and your leader. Follow me into the field where you can have all the things you would like to ask for." . . .

The commons were allowed to spend the night under the open sky. However the king ordered that the written and sealed charter which they had requested should be handed to them in order to avoid more trouble at that time. He knew that Essex was not yet pacified nor Kent settled; and the commons and rustics of both counties were ready to rebel if he failed to satisfy them quickly. . . .

Once they had this charter, the commons returned to their homes. But still the earlier evils by no means ceased.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Thomas Walsingham's class and position affect his recording of events? How does he describe the different classes of society?
2. What does the account suggest about economic and political conditions in late-fourteenth-century England?
3. How did the rebels choose their targets, both human and material? What were they seeking? Against what were they protesting?
4. What was the rebels' attitude toward religious authority? What might explain their actions in this regard?

3.

Satirizing the Church

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Prologue* (1387–1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400) wore many hats in his native England: soldier, diplomat, customs official, and politician. Yet it was his talent as a poet deeply in tune with pressing social and religious issues that gained him fame. In the late fourteenth century, he composed one of the great works of world literature, *The Canterbury Tales*, in Middle English. Here he claims to narrate the story of thirty pilgrims who embark on a journey to Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury. Each pilgrim is supposed to tell two stories to pass the time. The men and women, collectively representing most social classes and professions of the day, tell tales that are bawdy parodies of society, religion, and gender roles. Yet, at the same time, the stories also provide shrewd insights into human behavior and social evils. The following tale, told by the *Pardoner*, a medieval indulgence preacher, represents the worst of religion at a time of crisis in the church. Known as the Great Schism (1378–1417), two men claimed their right to the papacy, sparking increasingly vocal calls for reform. The *Pardoner* personified what many Christians regarded as the clergy's failings. Instead of using his preaching skills to teach the Christian life, the *Pardoner* is a con artist and hypocrite who willingly deceives to enrich himself and to eat well—two of Catholic Christianity's deadly sins: avarice and gluttony.

"Masters," quoth he, "in churches, when I preach,
I am at pains that all shall hear my speech,
And ring it out as roundly as a bell,
For I know all by heart the thing I tell.
My theme is always one, and ever was:
'*Radix malorum est cupiditas*.'¹

"First I announce the place whence I have come,
And then I show my pardons, all and some.
Our liege-lord's seal on my patent perfect,
I show that first, my safety to protect,
And then no man's so bold, no priest nor clerk,
As to disturb me in Christ's holy work;
And after that my tales I marshal all.
Indulgences of pope and cardinal,
Of patriarch and bishop, these I do
Show, and in Latin speak some words, a few,
To spice therewith a bit my sermoning
And stir men to devotion, marveling.
Then show I forth my hollow crystal-stones,
Which are crammed full of rags, aye, and of bones;
Relics are these, as they think, every one.
Then I've in latten box a shoulder bone
Which came out of a holy Hebrew's sheep.
'Good men,' say I, 'my words in memory keep;
If this bone shall be washed in any well,
Then if a cow, calf, sheep, or ox should swell
That's eaten snake, or been by serpent stung,
Take water of that well and wash its tongue,
And 'twill be well anon; and furthermore,
Of pox and scab and every other sore
Shall every sheep be healed that of this well
Drinks but one draught; take heed of what I tell.
And if the man that owns the beasts, I trow,
Shall every week, and that before cock-crow,
And before breakfast, drink thereof a draught,
As that Jew taught of yore in his priestcraft,
His beasts and all his store shall multiply.
And, good sirs, it's a cure for jealousy;
For though a man be fallen in jealous rage,
Let one make of this water his pottage
And nevermore shall he his wife mistrust,
Though he may know the truth of all her lust,

¹"Greed is the root of all evil."

Even though she'd taken two priests, aye, or three.

"Here is a mitten, too, that you may see.

Who puts his hand therein, I say again,

He shall have increased harvest of his grain,

After he's sown, be it of wheat or oats,

Just so he offers pence or offers goats.

"Good men and women, one thing I warn you,

If any man be here in church right now

That's done a sin so horrible that he

Dare not, for shame, of that sin shriven be,

Or any woman, be she young or old,

That's made her husband into a cuckold,

Such folk shall have no power and no grace

To offer to my relics in this place.

But whoso finds himself without such blame,

He will come up and offer, in God's name,

And I'll absolve him by authority

That has, by bull, been granted unto me.'

"By this fraud have I won me, year by year,

A hundred marks, since I've been pardoner.

I stand up like a scholar in pulpit,

And when the ignorant people all do sit,

I preach, as you have heard me say before,

And tell a hundred false japes, less or more.

I am at pains, then, to stretch forth my neck,

And east and west upon the folk I beck,

As does a dove that's sitting on a barn.

With hands and swift tongue, then, do I so yarn

That it's a joy to see my busyness.

Of avarice and of all such wickedness

Is all my preaching, thus to make them free

With offered pence, the which pence come to me.

For my intent is only pence to win,

And not at all for punishment of sin.

When they are dead, for all I think thereon

Their souls may well black-berrying have gone!

For, certainly, there's many a sermon grows

Ofttimes from evil purpose, as one knows;

Some for folks' pleasure and for flattery,

To be advanced by all hypocrisy,

And some for vainglory, and some for hate.

For, when I dare not otherwise debate,

Then do I sharpen well my tongue and sting

The man in sermons, and upon him fling

My lying defamations, if but he

Has wronged my brethren or — much worse — wronged me.

For though I mention not his proper name,

Men know whom I refer to, all the same,

By signs I make and other circumstances.

Thus I pay those who do us displeasances.

Thus spit I out my venom under hue

Of holiness, to seem both good and true.

"But briefly my intention I'll express;

I preach no sermon, save for covetousness.

For that my theme is yet, and ever was,

'*Radix malorum est cupiditas*.'

Thus can I preach against that self-same vice

Which I indulge, and that is avarice.

But though myself be guilty of that sin,

Yet can I cause these other folk to win

From avarice and really to repent.

But that is not my principal intent.

I preach no sermon, save for covetousness;

This should suffice of that, though, as I guess.

"Then do I cite examples, many a one,

Out of old stories and of time long gone,

For vulgar people all love stories old;

Such things they can re-tell well and can hold.

What? Think you that because I'm good at preaching

And win me gold and silver by my teaching

I'll live of my free will in poverty?

No, no, that's never been my policy!

For I will preach and beg in sundry lands;

I will not work and labor with my hands,

Nor baskets weave and try to live thereby,

Because I will not beg in vain, say I.

I will none of the apostles counterfeit;

I will have money, wool, and cheese, and wheat,

Though it be given by the poorest page,

Or by the poorest widow in village,

And though her children perish of famine.

Nay! I will drink good liquor of the vine

And have a pretty wench in every town.

But hearken, masters, to conclusion shown:

Your wish is that I tell you all a tale.

Now that I've drunk a draught of musty ale,

By God, I hope that I can tell something

That shall, in reason, be to your liking.

For though I am myself a vicious man,

Yet I would tell a moral tale, and can,

The which I'm wont to preach more gold to win.

Now hold your peace! my tale I will begin."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What methods does the Pardoner use to convince people to buy his indulgences? Why might these methods have been effective?
2. From the Pardoner's tale, what do you learn about saints' relics?
3. Although the tale is satiric, it is filled with examples of abuses in the church of Chaucer's day. What examples are described?

4. Preaching Reform

Jan Hus, *Letters* (1408–1415)

Like Chaucer, Jan Hus (1372–1415) lived in the midst of the anxiety and strife caused by the Great Schism. He, too, was a vocal critic of the church, but from a very different platform. A professor at the University of Prague in Bohemia and an ordained priest, in 1402 Hus was appointed rector of the Bethlehem Chapel. The chapel had been founded in 1391 to fill a gap in the city's divine services by providing preaching in the Czech language. Hus wholeheartedly embraced his position and used it to call for reform. Influenced by the writings of English scholar, John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384), Hus targeted a range of issues for criticism, including immorality within the priesthood, resistance to preaching and reading the Bible in the vernacular, and opposition to all Christians receiving both the bread and wine during communion. While he garnered considerable support among nobles and commoners alike, his views outraged many high church officials, including the archbishop of Prague, ultimately leading to his excommunication and exile in 1412. When invited to the Council of Constance in 1414 to defend his views, he gladly accepted. He was immediately imprisoned upon his arrival, however, which set the stage for his trial and execution in 1415. Aside from his sermons and other works, Hus was a prolific letter writer up to the very moment of his death. The letters below illuminate Hus at each stage in his career: as preacher and pastor in Prague, in exile, and in prison in Constance.

To Archbishop Zbyněk

Prague
After 6 July 1408

I commend my humble self in the faith and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹
Most reverend Father!

From *The Letters of John Hus*, trans. Matthew Spinka (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 1972), 22–23, 79–84, 165–67.

¹ . . . The youthful Archbishop Zbyněk, who assumed the office in August 1403, had been favourably inclined toward the reforms, particularly toward Hus. However, during the five years he occupied the see of Prague, the anti-reformist party sought to gain him to their side, and by 1408 they partly succeeded. . . .

Very often I repeat to myself that not long ago after your enthronement Your Paternity had set up the rule that whenever I should observe some defect in the administration, that I should instantly report such defect in person, or in Your absence by writing. This rule now compels me to express myself: how is it that fornicating and otherwise criminal priests walk about freely and without rigorous correction like unbroken bulls and lusty stallions,² with outstretched necks, while humble priests, who uproot the thorns of sin, who fulfil the duties of your administration with proper devotion, are not avaricious, but offer themselves freely for God's sake to the labour of proclaiming the gospel — these are jailed as heretics and suffer exile for the very proclamation of the gospel? O Father, what sort of devotion is it to prohibit the proclamation of the gospel — the duty which Christ commanded His disciples in the first place, saying: "Preach the gospel to every creature"?³ What kind of discretion is it to hinder the diligent and faithful worker from work? In truth I suppose that it is not Your Paternity, but other people's heinousness which disseminates such things. What poor priests will dare to fight against criminal conduct? Who will dare to make known vices?

"The harvest is truly plentiful, but the labourers are few," that is, the real ones. Therefore, Father, "pray the Lord of the harvest that He send faithful labourers into His harvest."⁴ It rests with Your Paternity to reap the whole harvest of the kingdom of Bohemia, to gather it into the Lord's barn, and in the day of your death to give account from each sheaf. How will Your Paternity be able to gather into the Lord's barn so many sheaves, if you deprive the labourers of the scythe of the preacher's word to please the idlers, who themselves do not reap and obstruct others in doing so, as soon as they touch with the word of the Lord upon their vices? . . .

Therefore, most reverend Father, open the inner, or the inward eye! Love the good, take note of the bad! Do not succumb to the flattery of the lovers of ostentation and avarice, but delight in the humble and the lovers of poverty! Drive the laggards to work, do not obstruct those who faithfully labour in the Lord's harvest. For the Word is not bound, whereby the salvation of souls is accomplished.

I would write more, but the duty of preaching the gospel does not permit. . . .

To the Praguers

In exile
c. November 1412

Master John Hus, in hope a priest and servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, to all who love God truly, confess His law, and await the appearing of the Saviour, with Whom they desire to dwell forever — "grace and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, Who offered Himself in death for our sins, that He might rescue us from this miserable world and from eternal damnation, in accordance with the will of God the Father, to Whom be glory for ever. Amen."⁵

² Jer. 5:8.

³ Mark 16:15.

⁴ Matt. 9:37–8.

⁵ Paraphrase of Gal. 1:3–5.

Dearly beloved, having heard of your desire for and progress in the law of God, I thank God in joy, and pray that He may grant you perfect understanding, that knowing the wiles of the Antichrist and of his messengers, you would not allow yourselves to be led astray from God's truth. I trust in His holy grace, that He will fulfil in you the good He began,⁶ and will not permit you to fall away from His truth, which many have forsaken in fear, being in greater terror of miserable man than of the Almighty God who has the power to kill and to give life, to condemn and to save,⁷ to preserve His faithful servants in temptation and to grant him — in lieu of the minute suffering — eternal life of immense joy. . . .

Therefore stand fast in the truth which you have learned: everything you do, do as God's sons. Trust that as Christ has conquered, you also will conquer. Remember Him who endured persecution from sinners, that you would not grow weary in your good desire. All of you, "laying aside every weight and every sin, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the creator and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is already seated at the right hand of God."⁸ . . .

Our gracious king, master, and father, beloved brother, the mighty creator and our merciful Redeemer indeed said: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me first. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but that I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you for my name's sake, for they do not know Him who sent me."⁹ . . .

Thus spoke the Saviour, warning His future disciples, teaching and comforting them, warning them to conduct themselves carefully, recognize the ravening wolves by their deeds, who wish to devour the whole world by their covetousness. He taught them to know the false prophets by the fact that they do not agree with the true prophets in word or deed; and to regard as false Christs those who assert that they are Christ's principal disciples, while in reality they are His chief foes. They would gladly stifle His word — if they could — for it is contrary to their pride, avarice, simony, fornication, and other deeds.

At first they attacked all the chapels to prevent the Word of God from being preached there;¹⁰ but Christ did not allow it. Now I hear that they decided to pull down Bethlehem,¹¹ and prohibited preaching in the churches where their iniquity is denounced. But I trust God that they will not succeed in this. At first they spread their nets of citations and excommunications for Hus,¹² and have already caught

⁶Phil. 1:6.

⁷James 4:12.

⁸Heb. 12:1-2.

⁹John 15:18-21.

¹⁰This refers to the prohibition of Pope Alexander V of 20 December 1409, whereby preaching in all but the parochial, cathedral, and monastic churches was forbidden. . . .

¹¹The papal command to do so was received in Prague before the end of September 1412.

¹²It could also be understood as "goose," since that is what his name means.

many. But because goose is a lazy bird, domestic, not flying high, their net has begun to tear; likewise many other birds who fly high to God by their [writings] and their lives will tear their nets. They issued citations, threatened with excommunications as with a wooden snare and in the end shot an arrow from the Antichrist's quiver when they stopped the divine service and praise. The more they wish to conceal their wickedness, the more they reveal it; and the more they desire to be free, the more work they have; and the more they endeavour to establish their traditions like nets, the more they tear them; and by seeking to have the worldly peace, they have lost it along with the spiritual. Wishing to harm others, they harm themselves even more. . . .

I write you this message, dearest brothers and beloved sisters, that you may stand firm in the truth you have learned, would not fear the citations, nor attend less than before the hearing of the Word of God on account of their cruel threats. . . .

Finally, I beseech you, dearly beloved, pray for those who proclaim God's truth with His grace; also pray for me, that I may write and preach more against the malice of the Antichrist, and that when need is the greatest, God may place me in the battle-array to defend His truth.

For know for certain that I do not flinch from yielding my miserable life for God's truth in danger or death. For I know that nothing is lacking to you in God's word; but that day by day the truth of the gospel is being spread ever wider. Nevertheless, I desire to live for those who suffer violence and need the preaching of the Word of God, in order that thus the malice of Antichrist may be revealed, so that the godly can escape it. On that account I preach elsewhere and minister as priest to others, in the knowledge that the will of God is thus fulfilled in me. . . .

To His Friends in Bohemia

Constance, Franciscan monastery

10 June 1415

Master John Hus,¹³ in hope a servant of God, to all the faithful Czechs who love the Lord God and will love Him, sends his wish that the Lord may grant them to dwell and die in His grace and to live forever in the joy of heaven. Amen.

Faithful and dear to God lords and ladies,¹⁴ both rich and poor!

I beseech and admonish you that you obey the Lord God, extol His word, and gladly hear and follow it. I pray that you hold that truth of God which I have drawn from the law of God, and have preached and written from the teachings of the saints. I also beseech you that if anyone has heard at my preaching or in private anything contrary to the truth of God, or if I have written it anywhere — which, I trust God, there is none of it — that he does not hold it. I also beseech you that if anyone saw in me any levity of morals in speaking or actions, that he does not hold them, but that he pray God for me that He may be pleased to forgive me. I beseech

¹³ . . . The letter was written in expectation that the next day Hus would be sentenced to death.

¹⁴The address may be understood as including nobles; otherwise, it should be "masters and mistresses."

the priests, particularly those who labour in the Word of God, that they love good morals and extol and honour them. I beseech them to beware of deceitful men, and particularly of unworthy priests. . . .

I beseech the lords that they deal mercifully with their poor and rule them justly. I beseech the burghers that they carry on their commerce justly. I beseech the craftsmen that they do their work faithfully and have their living from it. I beseech the servants that they serve their masters and mistresses faithfully. I beseech the masters that they, living worthily, teach their pupils faithfully; first of all to love God, and to study for the sake of His praise and the benefit of the community, as well as for the sake of their salvation — but not for the sake of avarice or of worldly prosperity. I beseech the students and other pupils that they obey and follow their masters in the good, and that they study diligently for the sake of God's praise and their own and other people's salvation.

I beseech all together that they give thanks and be grateful for the diligence of the [following] lords: Lord Wenceslas of Dubá otherwise of Leštno, Lord John of Chlum, Lord Henry of Plumlov, Lord William Zajíc, Lord Myška,¹⁵ and the other lords from Bohemia and Moravia, as well as the faithful lords of the Polish kingdom; for they, as God's brave defenders and supporters of the truth, have many times risen up against the whole Council and have brought proofs and arguments in order to secure my liberation. Especially believe what Lord Wenceslas of Dubá and Lord John of Chlum say, for they were present at the Council when for several days I defended myself. They know which Czechs brought many unworthy accusations against me, and how the whole Council shouted at me, and how I answered to what they demanded of me. . . .

I wrote this letter to you in prison, in chains, expecting tomorrow the sentence of death, in full hope in God that I swerve not from His truth nor recant the errors that the false witnesses have witnessed against me. How the Lord God has dealt graciously with me and has remained with me in strange temptations you shall learn when with God's help we shall meet in His joy. . . .

I also beseech, particularly you Praguers, to be kind toward Bethlehem as long as the Lord God will be pleased that the Word of God be preached there. For the devil has become enraged at that place and has incited pastors and canons against it, perceiving that his kingdom was being ruined there. I trust the Lord God that He will preserve that place according to His will and will increase its benefits through others more than He has done through my unworthy self.

Also I beseech you that you love one another, permit not the good to be oppressed by violence, and desire that everyone learns the truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of the contemporary church did Hus criticize and why? What do his criticisms reveal about his vision for the church and its pastors? In what ways did he himself seek to live out this vision?

¹⁵Henry of Plumlov was the principal Moravian noble; Zajíc and Myška were members of Sigismund's entourage.

2. What specific actions did Hus's detractors take against him and his supporters? Why do you think the archbishop of Prague and other church officials may have found his views threatening?
3. What advice did Hus give to his supporters in Prague while he was imprisoned in Constance? What does this letter suggest about the basis of his support? Do you think this may help to explain why many people in Bohemia reacted angrily to his execution?

5. Extolling Humanism

Giovanni Rucellai and Leonardo Bruni, *Florence in the Quattrocento* (1427 and 1457)

The Petrarchan ideal of humanism, which had refocused attention on the classics with special attention to language and letters, was given new expression in the 1400s. While Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) had found answers to many of his life questions through introspection, civic humanists felt that a true life could only be lived within the hustle and bustle of Italian city politics. A civic humanist was one who applied humanism's academic principles to the active, political life. The first document is by Giovanni Rucellai (1403–1481), a merchant connected through marriage and patronage to two great families of Florence, the Strozzi and Medici, who made their fortunes in business and banking, respectively. The second document is a funeral oration for a leading citizen, given in the midst of the wars with Milan by Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444), a noted scholar of the Greek language who served as Florence's chancellor and official historian. Both men paint portraits of Florence and the ideal Renaissance man.

Rucellai's "A Merchant's Praise of Florence"

Most people believe that our age, from 1400 onward, is the most fortunate period in Florence's history. I shall now explain why this is so. It is commonly believed that since 1400 the Italians have been superior to all other nations in the art of war, whereas before 1400 the northern Europeans were thought to be peerless. Thanks to their intelligence, astuteness, cunning, and strategic ability, the Italians are now the best at seizing cities and winning battles. In this age, moreover, there are more outstanding scholars of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in Florence than ever before. . . . Our men of letters have revived the elegance of the ancient style that has long been lost and forgotten. Those who have participated in the government of the city since 1400 have surpassed all their predecessors. Likewise, the dominion of Florence has considerably expanded. . . .

From Stefano Ugo Baldassarri and Arielle Saiber, eds., *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected Writings in Literature, History, and Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 73–75; and Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1995), 279–82.