Session 2: Documents

• Please read the documents in this PowerPoint in preparation for the second session. There are still no penalties for failing to do all your reading—except some limits to understanding as the content of some of the documents will be referred to in the lecture.

• Petrarch’s letter is related to the Babylonian Captivity and his feelings about the corruption of the Church.

• There are two short primary sources on the Black Death and also a longer excerpt from Boccaccio’s Decamerone. The shorter works will give ample insight, but, if you want to read part of an important piece of Italian literature, read the Boccaccio, which is also a primary source.

• A reminder: on a PowerPoint you can enlarge using the symbols at the bottom of the slide.
In 1305, a Frenchman was elected as Pope Clement V and in 1309 he moved the seat of papal power from Rome to Avignon in Southern France, beginning the period known as the Avignon Papacy (until 1377). During this epoch, the papacy increasingly came under the influence of the French monarchy. Petrarch (1304–1374) was an Italian scholar, poet, and humanist and spent much of his life in the service of the church. Both a devout Catholic and a staunch defender of the papacy, he is famous for his poetry as well as his collection of letters to various friends, cardinals, and bishops. Below is one of Petrarch's letters denouncing the Avignon Papacy as decadent, corrupt, and materialistic. Comparing the geography of Avignon to the Greek underworld, he ends by declaring that the corruption of the church has made him physically ill.

For the full online text, from which the following is excerpted click here.

... Now I am living in France, in the Babylon of the West. The sun in its travels sees nothing more hideous than this place on the shores of the wild Rhone, which suggests the hellish streams of Cocytus and Acheron. Here reign the successors of the poor fishermen of Galilee; they have strangely forgotten their origin. I am astounded, as I recall their predecessors, to see these men loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting of the spoils of princes and nations; to see luxurious palaces and heights crowned with fortifications, instead of a boat turned downward for shelter.

We no longer find the simple nets which were once used to gain a frugal sustenance from the lake of Galilee, and with which, having labored all night an caught nothing, they took, at daybreak, a multitude of fishes, in the name of Jesus. One is stupefied nowadays to hear the lying tongues, and to see worthless parchments turned by a leaden seal into nets which are used, in Christ's name, but by the arts of Belial, to catch hordes of unwary Christians. These fish, too, are dressed and laid on the burning coals of anxiety before they fill the insatiable maw of their captors.

Instead of holy solitude we find a criminal host and crowds of the most infamous satellites; instead of sobriety, licentious banquets; instead of pious pilgrimages, preternatural and foul sloth; instead of the bare feet of the apostles, the snowy couriers of brigands fly past us, the horses decked in gold and fed on gold, soon to be shod with gold, if the Lord does not check this slavish luxury. In short, we seem to be among the kings of the Persians or Parthians, before whom we must fall down and worship, and who cannot be approached except presents be offered. O ye unkempt and emaciated old men, is it for this you labored? Is it for this that you have sown the field of the Lord and watered it with your holy blood? But let us leave the subject.

Commiserate the cruel fate which holds your friend here. He may merit punishment, but certainly not one like this. Here I am, at a more advanced age, back in the haunts of my childhood, dragged again by fate among the disagree-able surroundings of my early days, when I thought I was freed from them. I have been so depressed and overcome that the heaviness of my soul has passed into bodily afflictions, so that I am really ill and can only give voice to sighs and groans. Although many things offer themselves which I wanted to communicate to you, as both my stomachs are troubling me you need look for nothing agreeable from me to-day. Sweet water cannot come from a bitter source. Nature has ordered that the sighs of an oppressed heart shall be distasteful, and the words of an injured soul harsh.

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2 The Avignon Papacy was sometimes referred to as the "Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy."
3 Major river in Europe running through Switzerland and Southeastern France.
4 Principle rivers in the underworld in Greek mythology.
5 A region in Northern Israel where Jesus carried out most of his earthly ministry.
6 The color worn by bishops to signify their position in the Church.
7 A demon in Christian and Jewish texts.
8 The Parthian Empire, located in present-day Iran, flourished from 247 B.C. to 224 A.D.
9 Perhaps a pun upon the Latin stomachus, which means ill humor as well as stomach.
The mortality began in Siena in May; it was a horrible and cruel matter, and I do not know where to begin to describe its cruelty and pitiless ways, which made almost all who saw it become stupefied with the pain. And it is not possible to describe the horrible thing; indeed one can be called blessed who did not see such horribleness. And those struck died almost at once; they would swell beneath their armpits and in their groin, and fall dead while talking. Father abandoned son, wife husband, and one brother the other; each one fled and left the other, since this disease seemed to strike through breath and the eyes. And thus people died, and no one could be found to bury the dead for money or out of friendship, so members of each household buried their own dead in a ditch, without a priest, without services, without the tolling of the death bell. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and filled with the multitude of the dead. And they died by the hundreds both day and night, and each was thrown in those pits and each layer covered with dirt. And as soon as these pits were filled, more pits were dug.

And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried five of my children with my own hands. But there were also bodies that were so poorly covered with earth that dogs dragged them out and ate many bodies, all through the city. And no one lamented the death of others, since each one awaited his own death. And so many people died, that everyone thought that the end of the world had come. And no medicine nor any other remedy worked, and the more remedies were administered, the sooner the victims died. And the governors [of Siena] appointed three citizens who received one thousand gold florins from the commune of Siena, which they were supposed to spend on the sick poor people and use to bury the poor who had died. And it was so horrible that I, the author, do not want to think about it, and, therefore, I will not talk about it any longer. And one finds that there died during this period in Siena 36,000 persons who were twenty years old or less. With the aged and others who died, this added up to a total of 52,000. In the suburbs of Siena died 28,000 persons, so that in all one finds that 80,000 persons died in the city and suburbs of Siena. And at this period there were left in Siena and its suburbs about 30,000 persons, of whom there remained in the city fewer than 10,000 persons. And those who survived were filled with despair and almost devoid of feeling. And many enclosures and other places were abandoned, and all the mines of silver, gold and copper, which existed in the territory of Siena, were abandoned as one can see, because in the countryside many more people died, and many areas and villages were abandoned since no person lived there. I will not describe the cruelty that happened in the countryside, how the wolves and other wild beasts devoured the badly buried bodies, and the other cruelties that would be too painful to read about.

The Black Death Comes to Padua, 1348

Almighty God, who does not want the death of a sinner, but that he should convert and live, first warned, then struck the human race with this not unoteworthy destruction. Wanting to afflict the human race with the greatest plague, unrivaled, He began it in the farthest reaches of the world and in the East unleashed the plague to work His horrible judgment. Indeed soon after it struck the Tartars, the Turks and all the other infidels, on the 25th of January 1348 at eleven in the evening, there was a terrible earthquake that lasted for half an hour to the terror of the Christians. After that, this unheard of plague crossed the seas into the regions of the Veneto, Lombardy, Tuscany, Germany, France and almost the whole world. Certain infected persons coming from the East carried this [disease]. These killed everyone by sight, touch or breath. This was an incurable infection that could not be avoided. This wife fled the embrace of her dear husband, father from son, brother from brother; on the contrary, people killed for the home, honors, and clothing of the sick. Quite often those burying, carrying, viewing or touching the dead expired almost at once. Thus, one infected sheep killed the whole flock. Thus, the occupants of a household where someone had died followed the others to the dogs. Even the bodies of nobles remained unburied. Many were buried at the high price by vile persons without [the benefit of] priests and candles. Indeed at Venice, where a hundred thousand perished, ships hired at a great expense carried the corpses to the islands. The city was almost deserted. One [sick] person came undetected to Padua, where he infected the whole city, so that one third of the population died. Cities, wanting to avoid this plague, prohibited the entry of all outsiders. Thus, merchants could not travel from city to city. Shut off, cities and castles became destitute. No voices were heard, except sighs, moans and laments. There ceased the voice of the bride and groom, the sound of the zither, the joyful song of the youth. Those plagues that raged in the time of the Pharaohs, of David, of Ezekiel and of Pope Gregory were now considered as nothing. For this plague encompassed the whole world.

This plague was worse for those infected as mentioned above, these vomited blood and died immediately. Others were sick with cancers or with worms. As death approached, almost all of these developed incurable boils around their genitals, under their armpits, and in other parts of the body, attacked with poisonous fevers. These died on the first or second day; after the third day, there was rarely any hope for recovery; they lapsed into a coma, from which they never awoke, and died. Against this [plague] the physicians openly acknowledged that they were ignorant of any remedy; indeed the vast majority of them died from this very disease.

Day the First

Here beginneth the first day of the Decameron wherein (after demonstration made by the author of the manner in which it came to pass that the persons who are hereinafter presented foregathered for the purpose of devising together) under the governance of Pampinea is discoursed of that which is most agreeable unto each

I say, then, that the years [of the era] of the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God had attained to the number of one thousand three hundred and forty-eight, when into the notable city of Florence, fair over every other of Italy, there came the death-dealing pestilence, which, through the operation of the heavenly bodies or of our own iniquitous dealings, being sent down upon mankind for our correction by the just wrath of God, had some years before appeared in the parts of the East and after having bereft these latter of an innumerable number of inhabitants, extending without cease from one place to another, had now unhappily spread towards the West. And thereagainst no wisdom availing nor human foresight (whereby the city was purged of many impurities by officers deputed to that end and it was forbidden unto any sick person to enter therein and many were the counsels given for the preservation of health) nor yet humble supplications, not once but many times both in ordered processions and on other wise made unto God by devout persons,—about the coming in of the Spring of the aforesaid year, it began on horrible and miraculous wise to show forth its dolorous effects. Yet not as it had done in the East, where, if any bled at the nose, it was a manifest sign of inevitable death; nay, but in men and women alike there appeared, at the beginning of the malady, certain swellings, either on the groin or under the armpits, whereof some waxed of the bigness of a common apple, others like unto 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 awhile, the fashion of the contagion began to change into black or livid blotches, which showed themselves in many [first] on the arms and about the thighs and [after spread to] every other 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.

To the cure of these maladies nor counsel nor virtue of any medicine appeared to avail or profit aught; on the contrary,—whether it was that the nature of the infection suffered it not or that the ignorance of the physicians (of whom, over and above the men of art, the number, both men and women, who had never had any teaching of medicine, was become exceeding great,) availed not to know whence it arose and consequently took not due measures thereagainst,—not only did few recover thereof, but well nigh all died within the third day from the appearance of the aforesaid signs, this sooner and that later, and for the most part without fever or other accident. And this pestilence was the more virulent for that, by communication with those who were sick thereof, it got hold upon the sound, no otherwise than fire upon things dry or greasy, wheras they are brought very near thereunto. Nay, the mischief was yet greater; for that not only did converse and consortition with the sick give to the sound infection of cause of common death, but the mere touching of the clothes or whatsoever other thing had been touched or used of the sick appeared of itself to communicate the malady to the toucher. A marvellous thing to hear is that which I have to tell and one which, had it not been seen of many men's eyes and of mine own, I had scarce dared credit, much less set down in writing, though I had heard it from one worthy of belief. I say, then, that of such efficiency was the nature of the pestilence in question in communicating itself from one to another, that, not only did it pass from man to man, but this, which is much more, it many times visibly did;—to wit, a thing which had pertained to a man sick or dead of the aforesaid sickness, being touched by an animal foreign to the human species, not only infected this latter with the plague, but in a very brief space of time killed it. Of this mine own eyes (as hath a little before been said) had one day, among others, experience on this wise; to wit, that the rags of a poor man, who had died of the plague, being cast out into the public way, two hogs came up to them and having first, after their wont, rooted amain among them with their snouts, took them in their mouths and tossed them about their jaws; then, in a little while, after turning round and round, they both, as if they had taken poison, fell down dead upon the rags with which they had in an ill hour intermeddled.

From these things and many others like unto them or yet stranger divers fears and conceits were begotten in those who abide alive, which well nigh all tended to a very barbarous conclusion, namely, to shun and flee from the sick and all that pertained to them, and thus doing, each thought to secure immunity for himself. Some there were who conceived that to live moderately and keep oneself from all excess was the best defence against such a danger; wherefore, making up their company, they lived removed from every other and shut themselves up in those houses where none had been sick and where living was best; and there, using very temperately of the most delicate
viands and the finest wines and eschewing all incontinence, they abode with music and such other diversions as they might have, never suffering themselves to speak with any nor choosing to hear any news from without of death or sick folk. 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. That which they said they put in practice as best they might, going about day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking without stint or measure; and on this wise they did yet more freely in other folk's houses, so but they scented there aught that liked or tempted them, as they might lightly do, for that every one—as he were to live no longer—had abandoned all care of his possessions, as of himself, wherefore the most part of the houses were become common good and strangers used them, whereas they happened upon them, like as the very owner might have done; and with all this bestial preoccupation, they still shunned the sick to the best of their power.

In this sore affliction and misery of our city, the reverend authority of the laws, both human and divine, was all in a manner dissolved and fallen into decay, for [lack of] the ministers and executors thereof, who, like other men, were all either dead or sick or else left so destitute of followers that they were unable to exercise any office, wherefore every one had license to do whatsoever pleased him. Many others held a middle course between the two aforesaid, not straitening themselves so exactly in the matter of diet as the first neither allowing themselves such license in drinking and other debauchery as the second, but using things in sufficiency, according to their appetites; nor did they seclude themselves, but went about, carrying in their hands, some flowers, some odoriferous herbs and other sene divers kinds of spices,

Some were of a more barbarous, though, peradventure, a surer way of thinking, avouching that there was no remedy against pestilences better than—no, nor any so good as—to flee before them; wherefore, moved by this reasoning and recking of nought but themselves, very many, both men and women, abandoned their own city, their own houses and homes, their kinsfolk and possessions, and sought the country seats of others, or, at the least, their own, as if the wrath of God, being moved to punish the iniquity of mankind, would not proceed to do so wheresoe'er they might be, but would content itself with afflicting those only who were found within the walls of their city, or as if they were persuaded that no person was to remain therein and that its last hour was come. And albeit these, who opined thus variously, died not all, yet neither did they all escape; nay, many of each way of thinking and in every place sickened of the plague and languished on all sides, well nigh abandoned, having themselves, what while they were whole, set the example to those who abode in health.

Indeed, leaving be that townsman avoided townsman and that well nigh no neighbour took thought unto other and that kinsfolk seldom or never visited one another and held no converse together save from afar, this tribulation had stricken such terror to the hearts of all, men and women alike, that brother forsook brother, uncle nephew and sister brother and oftentimes wife husband; nay (what is yet more extraordinary and well nigh incredible) fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend their very children, as they had not been theirs. By reason whereof there remained unto those (and the number of them, both males and females, was incalculable) who fell sick, none other succour than that which they owed either to the charity of friends (and of these there were few) or the greed of servants, who tended them, allured by high and extravagant wage; albeit, for all this, these latter were not grown many, and those men and women of mean understanding and for the most part unused to such offices, who served for well nigh nought but to reach things called for by the sick or to note when they died; and in the doing of these services many of them perished with their gain.

Of this abandonment of the sick by neighbours, kinsfolk and friends and of the scarcity of servants arose an usage before well nigh unheard, to wit, that no woman, how fair or lovestome 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 of her sickness required it; the which belike, in those who recovered, was the occasion of lesser modesty in time to come. Moreover, there ensued of this abandonment the death of many who peradventure, had they been succoured, would have escaped alive; wherefore, as well for the lack of the opportune services which the sick availed not to have as for the virulence of the plague, such was the multitude of those who died in the city by day and by night that it was an astonishment to hear tell thereof, much more to see it; and thence, as it were of necessity, there sprang up among those who abode alive things contrary to the pristine manners of the townsfolk.

It was then (even as we yet see it used) a custom that the kinswomen and she-neighbours of the dead should assemble in his house and there conduce with those who more nearly pertained unto him, whilst his neighbours and many other citizens forgathered with his next of kin before his house, whither, according to the dead man's quality, came the clergy, and he with funeral pomp of chants and candles was borne on the shoulders of his peers to the church chosen by himself before his death; which usages, after the virulence of the plague began to increase, were either altogether or for the most part laid aside, and other and strange customs sprang up in their stead. For that, not only did folk die without having a multitude of women about them, but many there were who departed this life without witness and few indeed were they to whom the pious plaints and bitter tears of their kinsfolk were vouchsafed; nay, in lieu of these things there obtained, for the most part, laughter and jests and gibes and feasting and merrymaking
in company; which usance women, laying aside womanly pitifulness, had right well learned for their own safety.

Few, again, were they whose bodies were accompanied to the church by more than half a score or a dozen of their neighbours, and of these no worshipful and illustrious citizens, but a sort of blood-suckers, sprung from the dregs of the people, who styled themselves pickmen[8] and did such offices for hire, shouldered the bier and bore it with hurried steps, not to that church which the dead man had chosen before his death, but most times to the nearest, behind five or six[9] priests, with little light[10] and whiles none at all, which latter, with the aid of the said pickmen, thrust him into what grave soever they first found unoccupied, without troubling themselves with too long or too formal a service.

The condition of the common people (and be like, in great part, of the middle class also) was yet more pitiable to behold, for that these, for the most part retained by hope[11] or poverty in their houses and abiding in their own quarters, sickened by the thousand daily and being altogether untended and unsuccoured, died well nigh all without recourse. Many breathed their last in the open street, whilst other many, for all they died in their houses, made it known to the neighbours that they were dead rather by the stench of their rotting bodies than otherwise; and of these and others who died all about the whole city was full. For the most part one and the same usance was observed by the neighbours, moved more by fear lest the corruption of the dead bodies should imperil themselves than by any charity they had for the departed; to wit, that either with their own hands or with the aid of certain bearers, whereas they might have any, they brought the bodies of those who had died forth of their houses and laid them before their doors, where, especially in the morning, those who went about might see corpses without number; then they fetched biers and some, in default thereof, they laid upon some board or other. Nor was it only one bier that carried two or three corpses, nor did this happen but once; nay, many might have been counted which contained husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son or the like. And an infinite number of times it befell that, two priests going with one cross for some one, three or four biers, borne by bearers, ranged themselves behind the latter,[12] and whereas the priests thought to have but one dead man to bury, they had six or eight, and whiles more. Nor therefore were the dead honoured with aught of tears or candles or funeral train; nay, the thing was come to such a pass that folk recked no more of men that died than nowadays they would of goats; whereby it very manifestly appeared that that which the natural course of things had not availed, by dint of small and infrequent harms, to teach the wise to endure with patience, the very greatness of their ills had brought even the simple to expect and make no account of. The consecrated ground sufficient not to the burial of the vast multitude of corpses aforesaid, which daily and well nigh hourly came carried in crowds to every church,—especially if it were sought to give each his own place, according to ancient usance,—there were made throughout the churchyards, after every other part was full,

vast trenches, wherein those who came after were laid by the hundred and being heaped up therein by layers, as goods are stowed aboard ship, were covered with a little earth, till such time as they reached the top of the trench.

Moreover,—not to go longer searching out and recalling every particular of our past miseries, as they befell throughout the city,—I say that, whilst so sinister a time prevailed in the latter, on no wise therefor was the surrounding country spared, wherein,

(13) let being the castles, which in their littleness were like unto the city,) throughout the scattered villages and in the fields, the poor and miserable husbandmen and their families, without succour of physician or aid of servitor, died, not like men, but well nigh like beasts, by the ways or in their tillages or about the houses, indifferently by day and night. By reason whereof, growing lax like the townsfolk in their manners and customs, they recked not of any thing or business of theirs; nay, all, as if they looked for death that very day, studied with all their wit, not to help to maturity the future produce of their cattle and their fields and the fruits of their own past toils, but to consume those which were ready to hand. Thus it came to pass that the oxen, the asses, the sheep, the goats, the swine, the fowls, nay, the very dogs, so faithful to mankind, being driven forth of their own houses, went straying at their pleasure about the fields, where the very corn was abandoned, without being cut, much less gathered in; and many, well nigh like reasonable creatures, after grazing all day, returned at night, glutted, to their houses, without the constraint of any herdsman.

To leave the country and return to the city, what more can be said save that such and so great was the cruelty of heaven (and in part, peradventure, of that men) that, between March and the following July, what with the virulence of that pestiferous sickness and the number of sick folk ill tended or forsaken in their need, through the fearfulness of those who were whole, it is believed for certain that upward of an hundred thousand human beings perished within the walls of the city of Florence, which, peradventure, before the advent of that death-dealing calamity, had not been accounted to hold so many? Alas, how many great palaces, how many goodly houses, how many noble mansions, once full of families, of lords and of ladies, abode empty even to the meanest servant! How many memorable families, how many ample heritages, how many famous fortunes were seen to remain without lawful heir! How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, how many sprightly youths, whom, not others only, but Galen, Hippocrates or Æsculapius themselves would have judged most hale, breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, comrades and friends and that same night supped with their ancestors in the other world!