Graduation in the Time of Covid: Lessons from the Black Death

History Department Commencement Speech--2020

Hello History majors of the class of 2020! I'm so sorry that I'm delivering this speech from my living room, rather than in person. I hope you, your friends, and your families are safe and healthy! They are the ones who helped you get here, and they will be helping you in the next stage of your life, so put me on pause and thank them. There are possibly a few modest upsides to this arrangement however: one is that there is a good chance that the room where you are watching this video ceremony has windows. I hope the sun is shining. If past graduations are any guide, a live graduation would have been in a windowless auditorium in the MLB. Another upside of this format is that in person I was told I could speak for 25 minutes, in the video version of graduation, they really only want me to speak for 15 minutes.

Professor Berry, our Director of Undergraduate Studies invited me to be the History Department's graduation speaker on Feb. 18th. While actually only a little over two months ago, it seems like a lifetime, because so much has changed. On Feb. 18th we still had a week to go before spring break. The weather was terrible, and classes still met face-to-face. In national news Mike Bloomberg qualified for the Democrats' presidential debate and *Sonic Hedgehog* led the box office with a record debut, which means that lots of people actually left their houses, they stood in line, sat close together, shared popcorn, and watched a movie in a movie theater! On Feb. 18th, few of us had much experience with Zoom or trying to participate in a class discussion with a cat's butt in your face, and even fewer would have been able to explain coherently the difference between synchronous and asynchronous classes. The Corona virus was certainly in the news, however. On the 18th we learned that Li Wenliang, a neurologist and director of a hospital in Wuhan, China, who tried to get his government to take the epidemic seriously, had died from the Corona virus, and Apple predicted that the epidemic would affect their revenues. So, a lot has changed, but much remained the same: we still

complained about the weather, you continued to go to classes, write papers, and take exams, and I continued to teach classes and grade papers. In just a little over two months you've experienced one of the core lessons you've been learning as history majors: what gets recorded, narrated, debated, and remembered in the interplay of continuity and change is history. How will you think about this moment: will you think that this was a watershed that changed the trajectory of your life and the lives of everyone you know? Or will you think, "I didn't know what I was going to do after I graduated, and I still don't. My life hasn't changed."

I'm not sure what I would have said to you all in the face-to-face graduation speech. As a medieval European historian, who teaches about the Black Death and life after the Black Death, it seems that the most meaningful things I can say to you in light of the current circumstances is something about the pitfalls and benefits of comparing the Covid-19 pandemic to the Black Death. The press has made lots of these comparisons especially at the beginning of our stay at home order. For those of you who took some other class rather than my "Black Death" class or Professor Pernick's "Epidemics: Plagues and Cultures from the Black Death to the Present," let me tell you a bit about this earlier pandemic. First the name is not medieval, it only appears in the seventeenth century; medieval people called it the Great Pestilence. The Black Death was a pandemic of *Yersinia pestis*, bubonic plague, a disease caused by a bacterium that generally takes one of three forms: infection of the lymphatic, the pulmonary or blood system. Sometime between 1142 and 1339, in western China, *Y. pestis* split into four branches, an event known as a **polytomy**, or multiple divergence, but colloquially called the "Big Bang," by the geneticists who identified it. One of these branches was the strain that arrived in Europe in 1347-48. For reasons still not fully understood, *Y. pestis* jumped from its usual host, rodents—gerbils, marmots, and most famously rats—to humans. People from Beijing to Ireland, and from Sweden to the Sahara got sick and died. In the autumn of 1347 it arrived in Constantinople, by winter it was in Italy, and by the spring of 1348 it was in England. It would return

every twenty years or so until the eighteenth century. Current estimates suggest this first outbreak alone may have killed up to half the population in the space of a few years.

Medieval historians debate the importance of the Black Death. It was certainly traumatic, but did it actually change anything, or did it merely accelerate trends already underway. These debates are about scale, causality, and context. Was the arrival of plague in Eurasia and Africa a sign of Malthusian crisis and economic stagnation? A symptom of greater global connectedness through trade? Or part of a larger story of climate change? European historians agree that survivors in Europe lived very differently: they ate a better more diverse diet, were able to take up vacant land and farm it in new ways that diversified the economy, and they invested in adapting existing technology to new uses, such as turning fulling mills used for cloth, into saw mills, flour mills, and paper mills, making wooden boards, fine flour and paper more common and affordable. Where they disagree is on why? Some historians believe the plague accelerated the benefits of the commercial revolution that had started a century earlier. Other historians argue that the plague changed everything. Survivors took advantage of an economy that had gone as far as it could with the available technology, credit structure, and means of production, by making labor scarce and wages high. More recently, historians have argued that the epidemic as one of the many catastrophic problems that confront a planet whose climate is changing rapidly and therefore cannot be talked about on its own. In the fourteenth century, the world's climate was cooling, after a period of warmth known as the medieval climate anomaly, where plants animals, humans, and microbes had moved out of their natural habitats and altered local eco-systems. Plague was not the only new arrival to Europe: rinderpest and hops also arrived in Europe during this period.

On a number of levels, comparisons between the Black Death and Covid-19 are facile. Bubonic plague is caused by a bacterium, Covid-19 a virus. The Middle Ages had no germ theory, we live in the nuclear age. Covid-19 is spread person to person; our best evidence suggests that only the

pulmonary version of the plague spreads this way. The mortality rate of the Black Death was nearly 50% according to recent estimates, while Covid-19 appears to be fatal in about 3.5% of cases, although by the time you see this talk, this estimate may have changed. Eurasia was overwhelmingly rural, punctuated by some large cities, whereas we live in a global urban-focused economy that "does not sleep." These are significant differences. They have shaped the spread of the disease and responses to it, and they will shape how we respond to whatever happens next.

At the same time historical comparisons are how we try and make sense of our own world. One of the many skills that made your studies here at Michigan important for your future is that you learned to sift these comparisons for what is useful, what is sensational, and what is down-right wrong. Someone, possibly Mark Twain, said that "History doesn't so much repeat itself as rhyme." Differences between past and currents situations need to be recognized, but similarities are also important. The world in the fourteenth century was in the midst of dramatic and life-threatening climate change, and so are we. In the Middle Ages, people were scared of a disease they could not see, did not understand, and could not cure. I think we can understand those sentiments today. According to Boccaccio, whose *Decameron* gave us one of the most vivid descriptions of the plague, some people fled, some people partied, some people prayed. Again, we've seen all these responses today. Medieval Christians accused Jews of spreading plague and instigated massacres of entire communities of Jews. Asian-Americans have been blamed for spreading Covid-19 and have experiences a noticeable and alarming uptick in violence directed at them. In the wake of the plague, medieval chroniclers wrote movingly about people dying alone. Their accounts do not sound so different from the stories coming out of intensive care units and nursing homes. On an emotional register we recognize these people and their responses because they are ours. They are ours because we are all human, scared, angry, willful, and grief-stricken. But they are also ours because our own time connects back to the fourteenth century and beyond teaching us how to narrate disasters. We would think about our current situation

differently if people died surrounded by loved ones. In the immediate years following the Black Death, the economy crashed for lack of peasants to plant and harvest food and shear sheep, for lack of merchants and sailors to transport these products to workshops or markets, for lack of artisans to turn raw materials into commodities, and for lack of consumers to purchase their goods. You the class of 2020 started your senior year with the most robust job market in recent history and are now facing a collapsed economy, with unemployment claims at their highest since the Great Depression. Historical comparisons comfort us, because they give us the vocabulary to articulate the fears and hopes we have for our own lives and communities, they offer perspective, they tell us we are not alone, they tell us we are better off, they allow us to acknowledge how bad things are.

Comparisons between the Black Death and our own moment do something else, however. They allow us to think there is historical progress and reassure us about who we are as modern people. Jules Michelet described the Middle Ages as 1000 years without a bath, a sentiment that has served modernists well as they carve up chronology into useable and meaningful chunks, comforting themselves with the invention of indoor plumbing, the development of public health, and scientific discoveries. We are pretty certain we will get a vaccination for Covid-19. But as history majors, you know that historical progress is an illusion. The Romans had indoor plumbing, but what about Flint, MI? We have germ theory and as a result we have all but stopped travelling, we are quarantining our sick, we are wearing face masks in public, but we are also rationing PPEs and test kits even though public health officials tell us they are the only way to control the outbreak. And despite solid evidence that emerging diseases are a consequence of climate change, our carbon footprint continues to expand. So scientific research might bring greater knowledge, but we don't necessarily act on it, because scientific knowledge has to compete with economic thought, reluctance to change in the face of political self-interest, and genuine disbelief. George Santayana famously warned that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But we hope you've learned that on its this a

very problematic statement. What past we are to remember is fiercely contested—whose history should we learn: women's history, men's history; workers' history, factory owners' history; immigrants' history, native history; histories of the enslaved or enslavers; world leaders or the governed; of generals, soldiers, or civilians in the way? What happens when these histories inevitably conflict? Whose history are we in danger of repeating, whose have we decided is not important enough to learn? So, comparisons with the Black Death say more about our own vision of our world today, refracted through imaginings of what we think the Middle Ages were and what we believe about our own world today. You know this because even if you never took any medieval history classes, you took others that taught you to think beyond stereotypes and simplistic comparisons, you learned that history is not a unified single story, but many stories fraught with inconsistencies, diversions, politics, and multiple points of view.

By learning to think historically, you've learned that history is so much more than an assemblage of names and dates, but is instead a conversation about how we want to understand, explain, narrate, and interpret texts, artifacts, and images from the past. You are living in a historic moment, but you know as history majors that all moments have the potential to be historic. Changes in individual domestic habits as mundane as no longer going to the grocery store when played out in thousands of other households change markets, create new jobs, alter advertising strategies and rearrange local bus routes and the NY stock-exchange. Protecting your elderly and immune-compromised loved ones by shopping on-line brings the privileges and inequalities of our society to your doorstep when the shopper went to work because he or she needed a paycheck and the delivery person, who couldn't work from home brings you your purchase. Every moment can be historical, just how historic, will depend on how you and everyone else chooses to understand this pandemic's impact on their lives, and the lives of their community, and the narratives we chose to share about it in five years, ten years, thirty years. You shouldn't expect this narrative to remain constant, but change

as new contexts, information, and experiences color memories, decisions, first-person accounts, and MEMEs. All encounters with the past are necessarily and continually revised because of the nature of public and scholarly desire. So, comparisons to the Black Death can be useful, but we need to look at what work those comparisons are doing. Are they making us feel better because a 3.5% mortality rate is so much better than 50% or are they warning us that new diseases are a consequences of climate change, and that scapegoating and is still a problem.

We don't know how long we will be social distancing, and how we will move from it to what comes next. Use this time to think about what sorts of meaningful comparisons you can make to move you to the next phase in your life. Think about how history operates on large and small scales and in local and global geographies. Climate change, racism, economic inequality, can be fought in all these contexts. As medievalist Geraldine Heng has recently urged "forge an ethical relation to the past: we have an interaction that can be responsive to the urgencies of the present (thus acknowledging our situatedness in time and space) while simultaneously being able to hear what has not been sufficiently heard, (thus acknowledging that the past, too, has unheard demands." Use your hard-won skills to think about how power is exercised in the historical narratives you hear, read, and produce. What are you missing and what will you want to do about it? Congratulations history majors of 2020! This is a difficult time, but you are not unprepared. You know how to think, write, speak, and act! Do so with commitment, fervor, and love. Best wishes.