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Texts and Teaching:

Literary Docudrama in the Classroom: Teaching with

John Hatcher's *The Black Death: A Personal History*

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John Hatcher's *The Black Death: A Personal History* is an unconventional text. It recounts the experience of plague by a single, extraordinarily well-documented village in Suffolk, England: Walsham le Willows. While such a focus perhaps seems fairly standard of case studies or microhistory, Hatcher's book is more than a narrow treatment of a corner of England. In a preface entitled "The Nature of This Book," he opens with a discussion of both his journey toward the realization that he wanted to write a markedly different sort of treatment of the Black Death than present in extant scholarship and a rather startling confession: while he based his text on the abundant sources for Walsham, he had created a "literary docudrama rather than conventional history" (ix). Because the everyday lives and deaths of the people who lived in Walsham are inaccessible in the historical record, Hatcher takes what some would call liberties by inventing these details in his quest to write an "intimate history of the Black Death" (xi). Perhaps the most striking element of Hatcher's approach involves his "invention" (xiv) of the book's central figure, Master John, the village priest. Silence in the records on the identity of fourteenth-century Walsham's spiritual leader allows Hatcher to create the character of Master John as the book's protagonist, as well as the reader's guide to the village. He explains that Master John is a composite character based on fourteenth-century evidence, although

he notes that his decision to make the character “a good priest” (xiv) was an arbitrary one. Hatcher personalizes the Black Death and its effects by recounting the experience of the disease through Master John and the book’s other “characters,” who are almost all based on actual people living in Walsham at the time.

The text reads more as a gripping historical novel than a traditional narrative. After an introduction to the leading figures of Walsham and their less established tenants and neighbors, readers then witness, with no small degree of dread, the approach of the plague and its devastation of the village. Hatcher’s chronological account opens in 1345 with a detailed description of the ritual that accompanied the “good death” of prosperous resident William Wodebite and closes in 1350 after the ravages of the Black Death had seen the medieval ideal of the “good death” replaced by chaos, confusion, and isolation. Each chapter opens with a section in italics that provides historical context for the events that the characters are experiencing in the pages that follow; this material represents the most traditional element of the book. The narrative unfolds in a series of “tableaux,” scenes which provide windows through which the reader may understand the epidemic. These scenes permit the reader to also be a viewer, watching the action develop in an almost cinematic way that is particularly appealing to students.

Because of the book’s episodic approach, it is “user friendly” and can be accessed by students of different skill levels. In recent semesters we have selected Hatcher’s text for several rather diverse audiences, including a group of high-achieving Honors students in a one-credit hour General Honors seminar required for the completion of Honors graduation requirements, a group of mature adult learners in a continuing education program, and a group of traditional undergraduate students in a history class. The Honors students choose a seminar on the Black Death because the topic is unconventional and something to which they will have little exposure in their own courses of study; there are typically many science and business majors as a consequence of the current strength of these programs in higher education. This circumstance provides great opportunities in

the classroom, as students bring methodologies from their academic specialties to bear on the course topic, but it also means they have little background in historical thinking in general and in the medieval period more specifically. The adult learners who enroll in continuing education courses are also seeking an interesting topic, and many are well traveled, fascinated by the past, and informal students of history, although often without a great deal of academic training in the subject. Students in more traditional history courses, including a Freshman Seminar on the Black Death, a lower division course on the Middle Ages, and an upper division course on Medieval England, have also responded particularly well to this work. Like the Honors and adult learners, undergraduate history students have been able to learn the larger issues by engaging with the storyline and caring about the characters and what happens to them. Minimal endnotes mean that the narrative is rarely interrupted, another benefit for maintaining students' interest.

Hatcher's text offers advantages for all of these student populations and can serve instructors in a variety of ways. In addition to class discussions and quizzes, students use this book as a source for papers written about a topic from the course. While this book is certainly a secondary source and much of it embellished, students can find primary information that can act as a starting point for their research. Hatcher's thoughtful exploration of his methodology also allows for meaningful general conversations about what history *is* and where the line is drawn between history and fiction. This is an important discussion, both for students who lack formal exposure to historical thinking and for those who are focusing on the acquisition of historical skills in a more traditional undergraduate history course. Their reactions to Hatcher's authorial decisions, particularly concerning Master John and his fate, often drive class sessions. Their comments in the seminar and in written analyses of the text suggest that they regularly reevaluate the place and purpose of Master John in the narrative. Some power through the text driven by annoyance with this fictional "do-gooder" who seems too virtuous to be true, while others take a different route, understanding Master

John's function as the calm in the eye of the storm, whose breaking point, when reached, drives home the scope and scale of the disaster in a powerful way. Many students remark on experiencing the reading equivalent of holding their breath, half-convinced that many Walsham residents will be spared the plague. The disease does not arrive in force until the midway point of the book, in Chapter 10, and after the first deaths are described, the text assumes an almost eerie silence as the village suffers in the vice-like grasp of the disease. Some students express frustration that the book says little about what they want to know most: how did people living through the period *feel*? That reaction is also valuable, of course, as it leads us back to a contemplation of the limitations of the available primary sources. It allows for a consideration of the fact that the institutions responsible for creating the historical record were themselves paralyzed by the scale of the disaster, so although we may desire to know what was happening in those terrible months, the record simply does not allow us direct access to that suffering.

Hatcher's book can be particularly useful in teaching the Black Death from a medical perspective. The coming of the plague to Walsham, as portended and signaled in messages brought by merchants who had attended markets and trading Fairs in affected areas and in letters from outside monks and priests, gives a sense of the palpable anxiety suffered by the people of Walsham and how information about the disease was disseminated. Students can feel what that fear must have been like, especially without knowledge of the cause or how the disease was spread. For example, characters express beliefs about *miasma*, "bad air," and the idea that beams of light coming from the eyes passed the disease. After Agnes Chapman's husband became sick, she became terrified, realizing "that she had many times look directly at her husband's face since he had become ill, completely forgetting that to look into the eyes of a victim was the surest way of catching the pestilence" (153). The characters' lack of knowledge is offset by information about the causes, vectors, and forms (bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic) of the disease, as well as survival rates. Students are thus able to use the clues

the characters have about the illness to “diagnose” them, increasing their investment into the story. The reader sees medical practices, burial procedures, and social interaction in a time of epidemic.

The pestilence took many forms, just as the villagers of Walsham had been warned it would. Though the majority died, like John Chapman and Robert Helpe, with fevered minds and bodies, unbearable pains in their heads, and a large blackened boil or carbuncle in the groin, armpit, or neck, there were others who died without these telltale signs. These victims died swifter and, some say, even more horrible deaths, with intolerable chest and head pain, vomiting, coughing and spitting up large quantities of blood (166-67).

Hatcher’s presentation of Walsham exposes students to many of the structures, environments, institutions, and beliefs of the late medieval period more generally and so offers an opportunity discuss the plague’s historical context in a substantial way. The concept of the “good death,” for example, is connected to the medieval Christian approach to dying, and by extension to living, and its treatment in the text allows modern students to gain access to a way of thinking about essential questions of the human experience that is often inaccessible to them. *The Black Death* provides a great deal of information about religious beliefs and practices like pilgrimage, funeral processions, confraternities, masses for the dead, confession, and the Cult of Mary. It compares the information on sacramental observance prior to the epidemic with post-epidemic practices and enables students to learn not only about the immediate religious effects of the Black Death but also about medieval liturgical practices in general. Furthermore, they can see the long-term effects of clerical ignorance and misbehavior that led, in part, to the Reformation. For example, Master John “hoped fervently that the devotions of his parishioners would succeed in placating God,” but expressed dismay that in places stricken with plague like Avignon, “they felt compelled to bestow the ability to hear confession, and perhaps even to absolve sins, on the lowliest of clergy, including those who had scarcely begun their training in holy orders” (115). Later we read that when Master John “tested their ability to recite Mass, matins, and hours, he found that they gabbled their words and skipped over parts of the text, and that their Latin needed considerable improvement” (118). Students thus learn not only the normal practices of

clergy, but also how the Black Death caused a desperate search for clergy to perform last rites, even if unprepared.

In book discussions, or while searching for paper topics, students particularly respond to the section of the book on the importance of pilgrimage for the common people in the medieval period. Hatcher gives us information about pilgrimage in the chapter introduction, explaining that people undertook religious journeys as penance, thanks for good fortune, an expression of devotion, or for the adventure of travel. After news of the plague had spread rapidly through England, “the pious and the petrified feverishly sought the protection bestowed by the worship of saints and relics” (65). The inhabitants of Walsham recognized that “the most efficacious pilgrimage by far was that to Our Lady of Walsingham,” giving students not only a sense of how important the Cult of Mary was at this time, but also what pilgrimage was like: often difficult and inconvenient, but valuable enough to undertake nonetheless. “Long queues formed at all the stalls and little shops along the way that sold wax, palms, and tokens, brooches and badges of lead and tin, and, most precious of all, the tiny sealed lead flasks containing holy water and a drop of milk from the breast of the Virgin” (68). The water was known for its curative qualities, and thus pilgrims believed that it might also protect them from plague.

Perhaps the most pervasive subject throughout this book, and the one most informational to students, involves manorialism and feudal land holdings in the fourteenth century. The village of Walsham was divided into two separate manors owned by different lords, Lady Rose de Valognes and Sir Nicholas Walsham. A relatively small number of families who possessed twenty or more acres of farm land, the Cranmers, Wodebites, and Syres, became Walsham’s elite villagers and either owned them outright, or held them from lords in exchange of low rents. The larger landholders had the choice to farm their land or lease it out in small plots at high rents. The unfree serfs in Walsham were subjected to a range of fees, including the heriot, or death tax, consisting of their second best animal, and fines paid upon marriage, or the childwyte, paid for giving birth outside of wedlock. In the section of the book set during the autumn and winter

of 1348, a manorial court session held on Friday, October 24 illustrates these fees and other legal concerns. For example, small fines were levied on those who allowed their animals to graze on common fields without right or taking small quantities of the lord's crops without permission. Some tenants had sold pieces of land without license and heirs had neglected to pay an inheritance fee. However, later in the book, the manorial court session held the following year illustrates the major problem of the inability to find tenants to take land vacated by death, either because of a shortage of people, or because many survivors acquired land for themselves and no longer wished to work for others. This was especially true for women and the poor, and this work clearly depicts the decline of serfdom in the aftermath of the plague.

Lady Rose experienced these problems on her manor: "Many holdings were lying vacant for want of tenants, her demesne farm had scarcely been tended for weeks on end and was now in a very poor state; the local peasant officials appointed to act on her behalf were apparently either dead or shirking their duties, and her tenants were failing to perform their customary work" (190). Furthermore, the book illustrates the effects of the Ordinance of Laborers of 1349, which specified that tenants were to give their labor to their lords to fulfill their contracts before undertaking wage labor, which paid increasingly well after the plague, especially for women. Lady Rose ordered her estate steward, John Blakey, to enforce the ordinance: "you must force my own tenants to work for me all the days they are required to by the ancient customs of the manor. More than this, I rely on you to instruct my tenants that when they hire themselves out as day laborers, they must first offer themselves to me" (191). Furthermore, Blakey relents and hires women for many of the farming jobs previously done by men.

Two women in the book, Olivia and Hilary Cranmer, experienced the benefits of these new post-plague realities. The succession of deaths in their elite landowning family meant that these widowed sisters inherited substantial lands for which they paid modest rents. They merged their lands, and when the difficulties and cost of find-

ing labor to help them cultivate lands became clear, they switched to pasturage, a larger trend in post-plague England. While Hilary remarried, Olivia did not, as she was independent and prosperous and did not care to risk losing control of her assets. These characters allow students to understand the larger gender issues caused at least in part by the Black Death. Because they are interested in the characters like the Cranmer sisters and what becomes of them during the plague, they can absorb rather complex ideas about the Middle Ages that otherwise might seem too distant or obscure to spend much time considering. In more blunt terms, students learn a great deal about medieval Europe almost in spite of themselves because they wish to understand the book better. The captivating pacing and tone of Hatcher's docudrama prompts students to a much deeper understanding of medieval Europe than one might initially imagine.

Hatcher's emphasis on the manor courts can also be used to inform a role-playing exercise. Such activities are valuable in promoting student engagement and application of historical thinking skills, and Hatcher's book allows students even greater access to "what it was like" in the past than other secondary sources, giving greater authenticity to the game's action. Assigning each student a character from the class's own fictional village (students gain greater investment in the project by naming the village themselves), arranging characters in status/occupational groups, and providing various opportunities for them to interact in character allows students an opportunity to engage in historical action. The culmination of the game is a manor court session, not unlike the ones Hatcher's text describes, in which the student teams are presented with various scenarios concerning inheritance, wages, other economic opportunities, and law-breaking and must decide how to act, drawing on what they have learned from Walsham and from the primary sources provided to enhance their understanding of contemporary reactions. Following Hatcher's lead in emphasizing the sessions of the manor court as a lens through which to understand the plague's impact has dramatically improved the quality of students' historical thinking in course RPGs as well as their historicity.

References to the Hundred Years' War and the Avignon Papacy, the famine in England, flagellants, friars, the mendicants, and the Statute of Laborers round out this "personal history." An epilogue explains that the records for Walsham and High Hall manors had become patchy by the 1350s but that signs of discord continued in the form of women refusing the wages they were offered, unlicensed departure of *villeins*, failure to swear fealty, and other events, leading to an irrevocable end of serfdom and medieval feudalism, as seen in the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

While not all students have come to embrace Hatcher's methodology, more than one accusing it of being too "fluffy" and crossing an academic line, we find that engagement is key to teaching today's students. While we might argue as historians that works like this one, or like Barbara Hanawalt's *Growing Up in Medieval London*, sacrifice purity for engagement, it is impossible to argue that a well-research text that clearly explains its methodology and hooks student interest is a bad thing. The dynamic narrative reads like a work of fiction, or even like a screen play. In fact, this book, like Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*, would make an effective movie. Like Davis, Hatcher is successful at relating history in a unique way. John Hatcher's *The Black Death: A Personal History* is simultaneously appealing and instructive, and teachers would be hard pressed to find a text that does those things so well. It is why we keep assigning this text year after year in our courses.

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Couple being "treated" for The Plague, 14th century

