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Tom Lawrence, 'Infectious Fear: the Rhetoric of Pestilence in Middle English Didactic Texts on Death'.

The arrival of the bubonic plague in England in 1348 had a devastating impact on late medieval English society. Modern scholars estimate that the epidemic claimed the lives of around a third to a half of the English population within the space of eighteen months, while medieval chroniclers believed the scale of mortality to be even greater, estimating that only one in ten, or at best one in five, survived the plague.¹ Given that bubonic plague was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, one might expect to find an abundance of references to the disease in contemporary literary works, but they are in fact relatively uncommon.² Only a handful of references to the disease survive in Middle English literary texts, leading scholars such as Siegfried Wenzel to deduce that the impact on the bubonic plague on late medieval imaginative literature was "sparse".³ Although this claim seems reasonable at first glance, further research is needed to appreciate the influence and wider significance of the disease in Middle English literature. To date, the role of pestilence has been examined in a small number of isolated literary texts, primarily the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and John Lydgate. The most recent and wide-ranging study of the disease in late medieval literature is Bryon Lee Grigsby's *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, which examines the earliest responses to the plague in texts from various genres, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, and *Moses and Pharaoh* of the York Cycle, as well as two later fifteenth-century responses: John Lydgate's *Dietary and A Doctrine for Pestilence*, and William Bullein's *Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence*. Grigsby's central argument is that medieval authors interpreted bubonic plague along the same lines as theologians and doctors: as a divine punishment for sin. In their literary works, he advises, they consistently associated immoral behaviour with illness, and sought to

¹ Horrox, ed. *The Black Death*, 3.

² Medieval writers referred to the bubonic plague using a variety of non-specific terms such as morality, epidemic, plague, qualm, or pestilence. Of these terms, pestilence occurs most frequently in late medieval English texts. It is important to point that the word pestilence could refer to any infectious fatal disease; an outbreak of bubonic plague; as well as evil, harm, sin and disaster. The purpose of this essay is not to survey all literary uses of pestilence in late medieval texts but to trace the rhetorical use of pestilence, defined broadly as bubonic plague or a fatal epidemic. See 'pestilence', *Middle English Dictionary* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED33190>>.

³ Wenzel, "Pestilence and Middle English Literature", 148.

provide their readers with practical advice about how to avoid the disease and death by abstaining from sin. He writes: “In the Middle Ages, it appears that literature was a means by which medical information could be disseminated to the general population. Through this dissemination, people protected themselves from plague and treated those infected.”⁴

While some medieval theologians, doctors and authors undoubtedly comprehended sin as a cause of the pestilence and recommended that readers abstain from specific sins in order to avoid illness and death, there is another explanation for the role of pestilence in literary texts that has yet to be thoroughly explored. Namely, that the widely held belief that pestilence was a divine punishment for sin may have been deployed by medieval authors for rhetorical purposes. This essay argues that medieval writers employed the idea of pestilence as an endemic infectious lethal disease (the rhetoric of pestilence) to encourage readers to reflect on broader matters of corporal and spiritual health. It stresses that medieval readers feared bubonic plague, not only because of the threat it posed to their bodily health, but because of the serious spiritual implications of dying in an unprepared, sinful state. As Colin Platt notes, “the last thing that the plague permitted was a good death”, and to die suddenly without having been absolved of their sins would have been a terrifying prospect to medieval audiences.⁵ Indeed, a ‘bad’ death could jeopardise one’s salvation, potentially extending their stay in purgatory – the pains of which were believed to be worse than anything known on earth – or worse still, sentencing them to eternal damnation in hell.⁶ The rhetoric of pestilence thus served to reiterate and add urgency and relevancy to Christian teachings about the preparations for death. This explanation is particularly intriguing given that, while references to bubonic plague in medieval English literary works are few and scarce, they appear most frequently in texts which have a didactic intention and share the common theme of death, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, John Lydgate's *Danse Macabre*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Disputation between the Body and the Worms*, and the carol of moral counsel, ‘*Man, be Wys, and Arys*’. By examining references to bubonic plague in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts unified by theme and didactic agenda

⁴ Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, 179.

⁵ Platt, *King Death*, 100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vi; Lewis, “Framing Fiction with Death”, 163.

rather than approximate date of composition, this essay offers a new, less generalised interpretation of the epidemic that takes into account not only the wider historical and religious culture in which they were written and read, but also the literary contexts in which they appear.

One of the earliest and most famous references to bubonic plague in Middle English literature appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. One of the tavern's patrons, drinking in a tavern early in the morning, enquires about the identity of a corpse being carried to his grave. The tavern boy replies:

It was me toold er ye cam heer two houres.
He was, pardee, an old felawe of youres,
And sodeynly he was yslayn to-nyght,
Fordronke, as he sat on his bench upright.
Ther cam a privee thief men clepeth Deeth,
That in this contree al the peple sleeth,
And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,
And wente his wey withouten wordes mo.
He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence.⁷

The significance of plague in this passage has been interpreted in several ways. Grigsby argues that Chaucer is here making "a social statement that identifies sin as the cause of the pestilence".⁸ According to Grigsby, the principal sin that Chaucer has in mind is that of gluttony, which is represented through the rioter's excessive consumption of alcohol. He argues that Chaucer was aware that excessive drinking was believed by contemporary doctors and priests to make individuals more susceptible to plague, and therefore sought to disseminate this health warning to his readers in the hope that they would protect themselves from the disease by modifying their consumption of alcohol.⁹ In other words, Chaucer wanted to show how the rioter's excessive drinking made him vulnerable to the

⁷ Chaucer, 'Pardoner's Prologue' and 'Tale', Benson, ed. *Riverside Chaucer*, 671-9. All subsequent references refer to this edition and will be made by line number in the text.

⁸ Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

pestilence and ultimately brought about his demise. Peter Beidler offers another interpretation of the role of pestilence in the *Pardoner's Tale*, arguing that the plague setting is crucial to our understanding the Pardoner's choice of exemplum and motivation for telling it.¹⁰ The Pardoner's exemplum shows repeatedly that death targets the sinful, represented here by the drunken rioter, in order to urge the pilgrims to rid themselves of sin by purchasing pardons from him. For Beidler, the pestilence is just one of the ways by which death claims the lives of the sinful in the *Pardoner's Tale*: "Death takes, by poison, blade, or plague, those who so live that they deserve to die. The Pardoner wants to warn his audience that if they are sinful, Death will take them".¹¹ The plague setting of the *Pardoner's Tale*, Beidler maintains, is significant because it provides insight into the characterisation and motivations of the Pardoner, who incites fear of the pestilence in order to frighten his fellow pilgrims into buying pardons from him.

While Grigsby and Beidler are right to assert that the pestilence is presented as a deadly punishment for sin in the *Pardoner's Tale*, they do not explore how this causal relationship between immorality and pestilence could have been utilised by Chaucer and other medieval authors for rhetorical purposes. *The Pardoner's Tale*, as a didactic work dealing with the theme of death, utilised the rhetoric of pestilence to encourage greater reflection on sin, death, and the lasting implications of dying in an unprepared, sinful state, a grisly fate that was more likely in an age of plague. This argument could be challenged on the grounds that the *Pardoner's Tale* is not strictly a didactic work nor does it have an explicitly stated didactic agenda. After all, the Pardoner tells his audience that he cares "nothyng for correccioun of synne" (404), and preaches for no reason other than greed: "I preche of no thyng but for coveityse" (424). Despite the Pardoner's hypocrisy and unscrupulous motivations though, he is an effective preacher capable of persuading others to repent their sins, as he boasts "For though myself be a ful vicious man, | A moral tale yet I yow telle kan" (459-60), and "Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne | From avarice and soore to repente" (429-30). Furthermore, the Pardoner's tale takes the literary form of an exemplar – a short story employed by medieval preachers in their sermons to illustrate a moral principle – which he tells at the request of his fellow pilgrims who ask

¹⁰ Beidler, "The Plague and Chaucer's Pardoner", 257.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

for a moral story from which they may learn something useful, “som moral thing, that we may leere | som wit” (325-26). Therefore, while we may question the Pardoner’s morality, there are persuasive reasons for thinking about the *Pardoner’s Tale* as a didactic work. Indeed, if we accept the *Pardoner’s Tale* as a quasi-didactic work, we can better understand the rhetorical role of pestilence in the text.

The rhetoric of pestilence appears in the context of a violent murder:

It was me toold er ye cam heer two houres.
He was, pardee, an old felawe of youres,
And sodeynly he was yslayn to-nyght,
Fordronke, as he sat on his bench upright.
Ther cam a privee thief men clepeth Deeth,
That in this contree al the peple sleeth,
And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,
And wente his wey withouten wordes mo.
He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence. (671-679)

The tavern boy describes how a “privee thief”, Death personified, drove a spear through the heart of one of the tavern’s patrons the evening before. Images of the living being attacked by Death such as this were a common sight in late medieval England, particularly in Books of Hours, the prayer books owned by wealthy laymen and women.¹² Philippa Tristram associates the iconography of Death as a frightful attacker of the living with the “prevalence of sudden death in the time of the pestilence”.¹³ This is an interesting suggestion as Chaucer’s Death is said to have slain “a thousand [...] this pestilence” (479). It is reasonable to assume that the tavern’s “fordronken” patron, along with the thousand others who succumbed during the outbreak of pestilence, died suddenly in an unshriven state and, as a result, would have jeopardised their salvation.

Having established both the sudden and violent manner by which Death slayed the tavern’s patron, and the likelihood that the victim died in a sinful, unconfessed state,

¹² Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, 4.

¹³ Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death*, 117.

it is important to look again at the characterisation of the rioter as “fordronken”.¹⁴ While the rioter’s consumption of alcohol may have made him more susceptible to plague, as Grigsby suggests, there is another less literal interpretation of the drunkenness in the *Pardoner’s Tale*. It is clear from the quotation that the rioter’s drunkenness was caused by overindulgence in worldly pleasure which left him physically and spiritually vulnerable and unprepared at the point of death.¹⁵ His drunkenness can thus be interpreted as a metaphor for his spiritual passivity, ignorance and lethargy, which is intriguing given that the deceased rioter is not the only drunken individual in the *Pardoner’s Tale*. The tavern boy tells us that he was “an old felawe” (672) of the three murderous brothers and they themselves are drunk before Prime when they vow to slay death. Furthermore, two of the brothers are murdered by the youngest who laces their wine with a deadly poison. They complain that Death “alleoure freendes sleeth” (754), suggesting that the pestilence has taken other sinful individuals like themselves. The association with alcohol does not stop here: the Pardoner – who makes no secret of his immoral behaviour in his prologue – drinks “corny ale” as he tells his tale as do other members of the pilgrimage (322).

Drunkenness emerges, then, as a sign of spiritual complacency and neglect in the *Pardoner’s Tale*. The spiritual drunkenness of the rioters is such that they behave in a manner that would have seemed foolish and perilous to medieval Christian audiences, especially in an age of pestilence when death could come suddenly and without warning. The sins of rioters are many (pride, excessive drinking, oath breaking, betrayal, murder) and in stark contrast with other characters in the exemplum, such as the tavern owner, the boy, and the old man; it is through these characters that the traditional Christian lessons about active preparation for death are conveyed.¹⁶

Having described the ‘fordronken’ rioter’s death, the boy offers some advice that his mother taught him:

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that John M. Bowers interprets the drunkenness as a social metaphor for physical, psychological and spiritual disease in Bowers, “Drunkenness is Ful of Stryving”, 757-84. Similarly, Katherine B. Trower argues that the Pardoner is spiritually diseased in Trower, “Spiritual Sickness in the Physician’s and Pardoner’s Tales”, 75.

¹⁵ This interpretation is supported by John M. Steadman who interprets the rioters as ‘lovers of the world’ who ignore the true condition of man in their quest to slay Death. See Steadman, ‘Old Age and Contemptus Mundi’, 80. See also Adelman, “That We May Leere Some Wit”, where she interprets the rioters’ attempt to kill death as a symptom of their spiritual disease (97).

¹⁶ Helen Cooper identifies ‘the sins of gluttony and drunkenness, gambling (“hazardrye”), and blasphemy, collectively known as the “tavern sins”’ in the *Pardoner’s Tale*. Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, 265.

‘And, maister, er ye come in his presence,
Me thynketh that it were necessarie
For to be war of swich an adversarie.
Beth redy for to meete hym everemoore.’ (680-3)

The boy warns the rioters of the importance of preparing themselves to meet an adversary such as Death and of being ever ready for that encounter. This advice is similar to the spiritual guidance about the Christian preparations for death found in texts associated with the *Ars Moriendi*, popular late medieval manuals on the craft of dying.¹⁷ The boy’s advice is endorsed by the tavernkeeper who describes how death has devastated a nearby village, claiming the lives of men, women, children, labourers and servants indiscriminately:

“The child seith sooth, for he hath slayn this yeer,
Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village,
Bothe man and womman, child, and hyne, and page;
I trowe his habitacioun be there.
To been avysed greet wysdom it were,
Er that he dide a man a dishonour.” (686-91)

It would be very wise, the tavernkeeper urges his unruly patrons, to accept the boy’s advice before Death harms them. This prudent and proactive approach to death is embodied by another character in the exemplum: the old man whom the rioters encounter on their quest to slay death. The figure of the old man provides an example of how to lead a Christian life in an age of plague when death could come suddenly and too soon. The old man describes himself as a “restelees kaityf” (728), an impatient captive of the world. He is ready to meet death; in fact he seeks it. He knocks the earth with his staff and asks it to accept him; he says he would be willing to exchange his “cheste” (734), (his body and worldly coffin), for a burial shroud. The old man has readied himself for death but accepts he must wait “as longe tyme as it is Goddes wille” (726). He not only embodies the boy’s and taverner’s advice about the Christian preparation for death, but appeals to

¹⁷ For more information on the popularity of the *Ars Moriendi* in the fifteenth century see Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*.

the rioters to change their immoral behaviour: “God save yow that boghte agayn mankynde | And yow amende!” (766-7).

The rhetorical role of pestilence in the *Pardoner’s Tale* is complex. While the pestilence is presented as a divine punishment for immorality in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, it is not clear that Chaucer’s sole aim was to provide medical information about how to avoid infection, illness and death. The crux of Grigsby’s argument is that medieval authors disseminated medical information to their readers in order to help them avoid corporal illness and mortality. Yet the threat of pestilence extended beyond the physical; the disease was feared because of the impact it could have upon one’s spiritual health which, in the medieval Christian culture, was believed to be far more important than one’s temporal, bodily wellbeing. This belief is made clear in the *Ars Moriendi*: “Though bodily death be the most dreadful of all fearful things [...] yet the spiritual death of the soul is as much more horrible and detestable as the soul is more worthy and precious than the body.”¹⁸ Chaucer utilised pestilence as a rhetorical device urging readers to reflect upon their mortality, their spiritual health, and prospects of salvation. Beidler argues that the *Pardoner’s* exemplum seeks to frighten the pilgrims into believing that death targets the sinful and, in doing so, profit from the selling of pardons. The implication here is that the pilgrims may have sought to rid themselves of sin in order to avoid death, yet the appeal of the *Pardoner’s* pardons was not only to protect against illness and mortality, but to safeguard their salvation, to ensure that, if the pilgrims were to die suddenly, their souls would progress “into the bliss of heaven” as promised by the *Pardoner* (912). The threat of pestilence, of a sudden agonising death, not only endorses the *Pardoner’s* services, but underpins the importance of actively preparing for death in an age of pestilence. The pestilence is then presented as a danger not only to the mortal body but the eternal life of the soul; it serves to condemn the reckless immoral behaviour of rioters, the dangers presented by spiritual drunkenness, and advocate a more proactive, strategic approach to mortality.

The rhetoric of pestilence is not only present in the *Pardoner’s Tale* but in a number of other fifteenth-century didactic texts on the theme of death, including John

¹⁸ Horrox, *The Black Death*, 345.

Lydgate's English translation of the French *Danse Macabre*, which is thought to have been composed around the year of 1426. The text provides instruction on the art of death by staging a series of fatal encounters between Death personified and social stereotypical figures drawn from the three estates.¹⁹ A reference to the "stroke of pestilence" appears in the poem's *verba translatoris*:

O [3]ee folks / harde herted as a stone
Which to the world / haue al your aduertence
Like as hit sholde / laste euere in oone
Where ys 3our witte / where ys 3oure prouidence
To see a-forne the sodeyne / vyolence
Of cruel deth / that ben so wyse and sage
Whiche sleeth allas / by stroke of pestilence
Bothe 3onge and olde / of low and hie parage.²⁰

In the same way that Chaucer presents pestilence as a sudden punishment for 'drunken' individuals in the *Pardoner's Tale*, Lydgate's rhetoric of pestilence is aimed at "harde herted" readers who overindulge in worldly pleasures and live life as if it were endless. The text at once constructs an audience that is unprepared to die and highlights the perils of sudden death. The prospect of a sudden and unprepared death would have been understandably terrifying to medieval audiences. For medieval Christians to achieve a 'good' death, they would need time to settle their worldly and spiritual affairs. They would have wanted to die "in a state of preparedness, that he should be 'shriven' (absolved) of his sins".²¹

In the *verba translatoris*, Lydgate presents the pestilence as a deadly, highly contagious and fast-acting disease which makes the threat of a sudden, imminent and unprepared death a real possibility. The pestilence serves the rhetorical purpose of

¹⁹ For a discussion of estates satire in *The Canterbury Tales* see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1073.

²⁰ Lydgate, *The Dance of Death*, 1-8. All subsequent references refer to the A Version of the text unless otherwise stated, and will be given by line number in the text.

²¹ Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*, 40.

frightening readers and encouraging them to contemplate their mortality; a meditative practice which medieval preachers and moralists saw as a valuable part of the preparations for death.²² The rhetoric of pestilence can then be seen to further the text's moral and religious didactic programme set out in its prologue:

I obeyed / vnto her requeste
Ther of to make / a pleyne translacioun
In Inglishe tunge / of entencioun
That prowde folkes whiche that ben stoute & bolde
As in a myrrowre / to-forn yn her reasoun
Her owgly fine / may clierli ther be-holde.

By example / that thei yn her ententis
A-mende her life / in eueri maner age
The whiche daunce / at seint Innocentis
Portreied is / with al the surplu[s]age
To schewe this worlde / is but a pilgrimage
Ȝeuen vn-to vs / owre lyues to correcte (ll. 27-38).

Lydgate envisaged his Danse Macabre as a spiritual resource which will enable “prowde folks” – his imagined fearless, arrogant and obstinate audience – to reflect upon the terrifying end that awaits them. The text's didactic strategy is to provide examples of the transience of life and ultimately persuade readers to amend and correct their lives. The rhetoric of pestilence should then be understood as a strategic part of the text's didactic programme, an “example” showing how death can strike suddenly.²³ Although the Danse Macabre is not strictly in the literary tradition of the *Ars Moriendi*, it nevertheless offers readers important Christian advice on the art of death, “doctrine” that Lydgate would have known well as a member of the Benedictine order:

Ȝe mai sene here / doctryne ful notable
Ȝowre life to lede / whiche that ys mortal

²² Horrox, “Purgatory, Prayer, and Plague”, 93.

²³ For a discussion of literary motifs relating to death in the *Danse Macabre* see Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death*, 168-71; Smyth, “Pestilence and Poetry: John Lydgate's *Danse Macabre*”, 39-56.

Ther bi to lerne / in [e]special

How 3e schulle trace the daunce of machabre (ll. 43-6).

The rhetoric of pestilence is utilised once again to underpin the importance of actively preparing for death. When Death invites the Physician to dance, he replies:

Ful longe a-gon / that I vn-to phesike

Sette my witte / and my diligence

In speculalif / & also in practike

To gete a name / thurgh myn excellence

To fynde oute / a-3ens pestilence

Perseruatifes / to staunche hit & to fyne

But I dar saie / shortli in sentence

A-3ens dethe / is worth no medicyne (ll. 425-32)

The Physician explains that he tried to develop remedies against the pestilence but now recognises that there is no medicine that can protect against death. In the B Version of the text, the Physician gives a different response which makes an interesting distinction between bodily and spiritual wellbeing:

Allas to long / and to myche to phisik

For lucre I plye[d] / al my bisynesse

Bothe in speclacion / & in practik

To knowe & konne / al bodely siknesse

But of gostly helthe / I was reklesse

Wher-fore shal helpe nother herbe nor roote

Nor no medicine / sauff godis goodnesse

For a-geyns deth / is fynaly no boote. (ll. 473-80).

The Physician explains that he strived to understand and cure all kinds of bodily sickness, but was reckless with regard to his ‘gostly health’. He neglected his spiritual wellbeing and realises that neither knowledge nor medical treatment can defend against death. The rhetoric of pestilence is employed here not only to assert the omnipresent threat of

mortality; it also demonstrates that, since mortal death is unavoidable, spiritual health is more important than temporal, bodily wellbeing. Lydgate's employment of the rhetoric of pestilence in the *Danse Macabre* is similar to Chaucer's in the *Pardoner's Tale*. Both authors present the plague as an unstoppable endemic cause of bodily, and sometimes spiritual, death, encouraging their readers to contemplate mortality and turn their attention to the spiritual health of the soul.

The rhetoric of pestilence performs a similar didactic role in another fifteenth-century literary work, *The Disputation between the Body and Worms*. The authorship and exact date of the composition of the *Disputation* is unknown, though the only known copy of the text survives in a single manuscript of Carthusian provenance, London, British Library Additional MS 37049, which was produced in Northern England between the years 1460-1500.²⁴ In this debate poem, a pilgrim has a dream in which he overhears a debate between the rotting body and the worms that consume it in the grave. The pilgrim's vision occurs during a period of high mortality due to many diseases including the pestilence:

In þe ceson of huge mortalitie,
Of sondry disseses, with þe pestilence
Heuely reynand, whilom in cuntre²⁵

By framing the pilgrim's vision in a context of a devastating pandemic, the poet creates an urgent context in which reflecting upon one's morality, the possibility of sudden death, and the importance of dying well, is of paramount importance. In the same way that Chaucer presents his readers with positive and negative Christian role models (through the characterisation of the rioters, the boy, tavern keeper and old man), so too does the *Disputation* poet present readers with different approaches to the threat of pestilence through the characterisation of the pilgrim narrator and the rotting body of the noblewoman.

²⁴ For more information about London, British Library Additional MS 37049, see Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*.

²⁵ Conlee, ed. *A Disputation between the Body and Worms*, 1-3. All subsequent references refer to this edition and will be made by line number in the text.

The pilgrim narrator responds to the threat of pestilence by undertaking a pilgrimage; he is moved by conscience to tend to his spiritual health. This detail is significant since in the later Middle Ages pilgrimages were understood as one way by which an individual could prepare the soul for journey after death, potentially shortening its stay in purgatory and assisting its entry into heaven.²⁶ There are also other indications of the pilgrim's exemplary Christian character in the poem. When traveling on a holy day, he wanted to find a church to attend mass. When he finds an abandoned church, he prays with his rosary beads before a devotional image:

I knelyd me downe & to my prayers went,
With lawe obeysaunce mekyd me downe
To ane ymage, with gret deuocione' (12-4).

At the end of the poem, the pilgrim explains his active role in the making of the text:

With þis I woke fro slepe sompnolent,
Or of a slomery meditacone;
To a holy man of hye excellent
Mefed I þis dreame & strange vysion
Whilk bad me put it vndir scripcion,
Als nere as I cowde remembyr me verely,
In als fayir langage as I cowde godely,

Vnto þe reders þinge delectabyll,
And a monyscyon both to styr & to mefe
Man & woman to be acceptabyll
Vnto our Lord, & al lustes for to lefe
Of warldy þinges, whilk dos þaim grefe
And þe more rather to call vnto mynde
Oure Saueour & to Hym vs bynde. Amen. (205-18)

²⁶ Hadly, *Death in Medieval England*, 56.

The pilgrim explains that a holy man instructed him to record his visionary experience as accurately as possible in writing for the spiritual benefit of others. The Disputation has a similar didactic purpose to *The Pardoner's Tale* and *Danse Macabre*: it aims to stir and move readers to abstain from worldly pleasures and prepare their souls for judgement. The pilgrim figure serves as a role model for the cautious reader: he is an individual actively preparing his soul for death during the time of pestilence when such spiritual precautions are necessary.

The Disputation also provides the reader with an example of how not to respond to the threat of pestilence through the figure of the proud noblewoman who refuses to accept her mortality and objects to her treatment by the worms sent to destroy her body. The debate is a warning of the dangers of failing to live and die well. It also presents an opportunity for the poet to convey traditional Christian lessons about the nature and implications of death. The debate is full of rhetorical literary motifs associated with late medieval death lyrics – including *ubi sunt*, the nine worthies, the harbingers of death, and an explanation of liturgy and scripture of Ash Wednesday – which are employed to persuade the body that she lived unwisely and failed to adequately prepare for death.²⁷ It is not surprising to see references to pestilence employed alongside other rhetorical techniques in this didactic text; the poem's setting during a period of a high mortality due to the pestilence lends urgency and relevancy to the poem's warnings about the preparations for death.

At the end of the debate, the body repents its sins and offers the following advice to readers:

Ȝa, now is to late tyme paste to calle agayne,
As now at þis stownde, bot put me onely
In þe mercy of our Lord God most sufferayne
Whilk is for þe best so to do sothely,
And þat þos on lyfe may hafe space to be redy

²⁷ These didactic literary motifs are discussed in Malvern, "An Earnest 'Monyscyon' and 'Thing Delectabyll'" *Viator*, 13 (1982), 415-43.

To rememor in þe same wyse also,

Contynewly þinkyng in þe tyme to cum þerto. (177-83)

The body recognises that it is too late for her to make amends for her sins, urging those who are alive to ready themselves for death and to continually think about its coming. In other words, she advises readers to do precisely as the pilgrim has done: to actively prepare the soul for death before it is too late. In the Disputation between the Body and Worms, the reader is presented with the proud body – a figure not unlike Chaucer’s drunken rioters or Lydgate’s “prowde folks” – who was too concerned with worldly pleasures and failed to prepare adequately. The rhetoric of pestilence is utilised to prompt the reader to reflect on the prospect of dying suddenly in a sinful, unconfessed state and urge them to make amends.

The rhetoric of pestilence is exemplified further in the morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, which survives uniquely in the so-called Macro Manuscript (Washington, DC, Folger Library, MS V.a.354), copied around 1440 in the East Midlands.²⁸ The play itself is thought to have been composed earlier in the first quarter of the fifteenth century.²⁹ *The Castle of Perseverance* dramatizes the life of Mankind and the ongoing human struggle against sin which culminates in a fatal encounter between Death and Mankind. When Death boasts of his power to slay men, his speech is full of tropes from late medieval English death lyrics; he points out that there is no defence against death (2792-3; 2815), wealth and status are irrelevant in death (2794-99; 2805-11; 2827-8), and criticises the pride of mankind (2822-3). The didacticism of Death’s speech is made clear by multiple references to teaching and learning; he refers to himself as a teacher who has taught lords and ladies in every land (2795-6) and will teach “a new lessun” to Mankind (2833). The rhetoric of pestilence appears among these didactic warnings about the nature of death and operates alongside them:

In þe grete pestelens,
Panne was I wel knowe.
But now al-most I am forþete;
Men, of deth, holde no tale;

²⁸ Klausner, ed. *The Castle of Perseverance*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

In coveytyse here good þey gete;
Þe grete fyschys ete þe smale;
But whanne I dele my derne dette,
Þo prowde men I schal a-vale (2816-23)

The figure of Death recalls the pestilence almost nostalgically, as a period of time when men were more aware of his presence. He makes the same judgment as Chaucer, Lydgate and the Disputation poet: men are now too proud and careless to remember death; they have almost forgotten that life on earth is mortal. The implication here is that the pestilence – a period of infectious disease and high mortality rates – gave rise to a culture of actively remembering and preparing for death which, Death claims, has been lost. The author of the Castle of Perseverance represents mankind as forgetful, complacent and unaware of the fate that awaits them. It is only when Death drives a spear through Mankind's chest that he realises the spiritual implications of his sinful life and begs for mercy in his dying breath, his last opportunity for repentance and salvation. At this point in the play, Mankind appeals to the audience – “good men” – to learn from his example:

Now, good men, takythe example at me.
Do for youreself whyl ye han spase.
For many men thus servyd be
Thorwe the werld in dyverse place.
I bolne and bleyke in blody ble
And as a flour fadyth my face.
To Helle I schal bothe fare and fle
But God me graunte of hys grace. (2995-3002)

Mankind urges the audience to prepare themselves for death while they have time to do so and to thereby avoid the frightening situation that he, and many other men throughout the world, find themselves at the point of death. His message is clear: to hell I shall go unless God grants mercy. The play concludes with a final plea to the audience that echoes Mankind's earlier warning and prescribes the same meditative practice suggested in the Danse Macabre and Disputation:

To saue ʒou fro synnyng,
Evyr at þe begynnyng
Thynke on ʒoure last endyng! (3646-8)

The play urges its audience to save themselves from sin by continually contemplating their death as early as possible. It recommends the habitual meditative practice of remembering and anticipating death. The author of *Castle of Perseverance* does not seem to be interested in disseminating medical or theological information about the pestilence so much as reiterating Christian teachings about the preparation for death.

A final example of the rhetoric of pestilence is taken from the fifteenth-century carol of moral counsel: ‘Man, be Wys, and Arys’, in which the complex relationship between sin, pestilence and death is articulated most clearly. The carol encourages the reader to contemplate their mortality by reminding them of the lives lost in recent disasters:

Thynk, man, on the dere yeres thre:
For hunger deyid gret plente,
Powre and riche, bond and fre,
Thei leyn dede in euery way.

Thynk, man, on the pestelens tweye:
In euery cuntre men gunne deye;
Deth left neyther for lowe ne heye,
But lettyd hem of here pray.³⁰

The carol urges contemplation on morality caused by famine, reminding the audience that a great number of rich and poor men died from starvation. It also encourages reflection on the pestilence, warning that men in every country have died and that death spared no one, preventing them from praying for mercy. The carol is similar to other fifteenth-

³⁰ Greene, ed. ‘Man, be wys, and arys’. In *The Early English Carols*, 7-14. All subsequent references refer to this edition and will be made by line number in the text.

century texts discussed above in its combination of pestilence, warnings about the imminence of death and spiritual instruction:

Lok, man, how thou ledyst thi lyf,
And how thou spendyst thi wyttes v;
Go to cherche, and do the schryf,
And bryng thi sowle in redy way. (30-4)

The carol's spiritual advice is specific and direct, recommending that readers contemplate how they lead their lives and actively prepare their souls for death through prayer, the confession of sin and penance. The poet utilises the pestilence as a poignant example of how one can die suddenly and too soon; it is intended to frighten and motivate readers to tend to their spiritual health and begin preparations for death.

Having examined references to pestilence in a range of Middle English didactic texts on the theme of death, it is possible to draw new conclusions about their purpose and wider cultural significance. While it is important to recognise that medieval authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate would have been aware of medical and theological interpretations of the pestilence, it is not certain that their primary aim was to disseminate this information to their readers, nor should we limit the possible meaning of pestilence in late medieval literary texts to within the boundaries of what was thought by contemporary priests and doctors. After all, medieval authors were not only aware of medical and theological information, they were also recipients of other cultural information, such as Christian guidance on the preparations for death. It is important to bear in mind that medieval authors were more than capable of utilising the concept of pestilence for their own rhetorical purposes or, in this case, to support the didactic aims of their literary compositions.

What is clear is that in the hundred years following the initial outbreak of bubonic plague, writers addressing the theme of death were drawn to the idea of pestilence as a means of urging their readers to contemplate their mortality and make adequate preparations for their salvation. Since it cannot be proved that these authors were directly influenced by one another, the convergence of thinking about the pestilence in late medieval didactic texts is significant. The rhetoric of pestilence as a potential cause of

sudden, unconfessed death lent both urgency and relevancy to traditional Christian teachings about sin and the spiritual implications of dying in a sinful state. This essay has revealed some key rhetorical strategies by which medieval authors encouraged readers to reflect on their mortality, worldly existence and salvation. Allegory emerges as a preferred mode for spiritual edification. John Lydgate's *Danse Macabre* provides insight into the lives and deaths of individuals drawn from the Three Estates, enabling readers to observe the implications of sinful living and an unconfessed death. Similarly, *The Castle of Perseverance* dramatizes the lifecycle of a human showing how, after a battle between good and evil forces, the individual finds himself vulnerable at the point of death, spared the pains of purgatory and hell only through repentance and the mercy of God. This allegorical mode of instruction is also present, though more subtlety, in the *Pardoner's Tale* and *Disputation between the Body and Worms*. *The Pardoner's Tale* presents the reader with different approaches to death through the figures of the rioters whom die in an unconfessed state, and the old man who welcomes his demise. Chaucer's pilgrims also embody different approaches to death, which is significant since they are pilgrims in both the literal and metaphorical sense, in that they journey to the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury and because, as Lydgate reminds us, "this worlde is but a pilgrimage" (35). The behaviour of the Pardoner would have been perceived as reckless in an age of plague and is in stark contrast to that of other pilgrims, such as the Plowman and his brother, the Parson whose tale is a treatise on penitence. The metaphor of life as a pilgrimage resurfaces in the *Disputation* where the reader is presented with two approaches to worldly existence through the figures of the pilgrim and the vain noblewoman: the former prioritised his spiritual health by undertaking a pilgrimage in a climate of endemic disease and death, while the latter invested in temporal, worldly pleasure and refused to take responsibility for the fate of her soul until it was too late.

Each of the texts discussed above advocates a proactive and strategic approach to death, urging readers to take greater responsibility for their spiritual wellbeing and salvation. They are testimony to what Eamon Duffy has described as "the overwhelming preoccupation of the clergy and laity alike, from peasant to prince, from parish clerk to pontiff, with the safe transition of their souls from this world to the next, above all with

the shortening and easing of their stay in purgatory.”³¹ In the Middle Ages, the fate of soul was believed ‘to some extent be determined by things that a person did during their lifetime’³² and these texts, through their graphic depictions of sinful behaviour, sudden death and last minute repentance, encouraged readers to contemplate their demise and accept greater responsibility for their salvation.

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³¹ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 302.

³² Hadly, *Death in Medieval England*, 66.

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