**AP Euro Chapter 11 – Opposing Viewpoints – Causes of the Black Death: Contemporary Views**

*For each document: Read & annotate for main ideas; Determine 1. Its intended AUDIENCE, 2. its PURPOSE, 3. Its historical context [determined by time and place], and 4. Its author’s POINT OF VIEW [how who that person is influenced what they wrote / said.*

**The Black Death [aka The PLAGUE]** was the most terrifying natural calamity of the Middle Ages and affected wide areas of Europe, North Africa, and Asia. People were often baffled by the plague, especially by its causes, and gave widely different explanations. The first selection [Document 1] is taken from the preface to the *Decameron* by the fourteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio. The other selections [Documents 2 & 3] are from contemporary treatises that offered widely different explanations for the great plague. The remaining documents relate to subsequent plagues.

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| **Document 1: Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron -*** In the year of Our Lord 1348 the deadly plague broke out in the great city of Florence, most beautiful of Italian cities. Whether through the operation of the heavenly bodies or because of our own iniquities which the just wrath of God sought to correct, the plague had arisen in the East some years before, causing the death of countless human beings. It spread without stop from one place to another, until, unfortunately, it swept over the West. Neither knowledge nor human foresight availed against it, though the city was cleansed of much filth by chosen officers in charge and sick persons were forbidden to enter it, while advice was broadcast for the preservation of health. Nor did humble supplications serve. Not once but many times they were ordained in the form of processions and other ways for the propitiation of God by the faithful, but, in spite of everything, toward the spring of the year the plague began to show its ravages.**Document 2: On Earthquakes as the Cause of Plague -** There is a fourth opinion, which I consider more likely than the others, which is that insofar as the mortality arose from natural causes its immediate cause was a corrupt and poisonous earthy exhalation, which infected the air in various parts of the world and, when breathed in by people, suffocated them and suddenly snuffed them out… It is a matter of scientific fact that earthquakes are caused by the exhalation of fumes enclosed in the bowels of the earth. When the fumes batter against the sides of the earth, and cannot get out, the earth is shaken and moves. I say that it is the vapor and corrupted air which has been vented—or so to speak purged—in the earthquake which occurred on St. Paul's day, 1347, along with the corrupted air vented in other earthquakes and eruptions, which has infected the air above the earth and killed people in various parts of the world; and I can bring various reasons in support of this conclusion.**Document 3: Herman Gigas on Well Poisoning -** In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world that in the opinion of well-informed men scarcely a tenth of mankind survived.… Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this wickedness, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. As evidence of this heinous crime, men say that the bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs, and as a result, in cities, towns and villages throughout Germany, and in fields and woods too, almost all the wells and springs have been blocked up or built over, so that no one can drink from them or use the water for cooking, and men have to use rain or river water instead. God, the LORD of vengeance, has not suffered [allowed] the malice of the Jews to go unpunished. Throughout Germany, in all but a few places, they were burnt. For fear of that punishment many accepted baptism and their lives were spared. This action was taken against the Jews in 1349, and it still continues unabated, for in a number of regions many people, noble and humble alike, have laid plans against them and their defenders which they will never abandon until the whole Jewish race has been destroyed.**Historical Thinking Skill - Historical Causation*** ***How could Boccaccio's explanation lead to distrust of religious authorities? How much should a historian trust a confession extracted by torture?***

*Sources: Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron. From The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio, trans. by Frances Winwar, pp. xxii–xxiv, xxviii–xxix. Reprinted by permission of The Limited Editions Club. On Earthquakes as the Cause of Plague and Herman Gigas on Well Poisoning. From The Black Death, edited and trans. by Rebecca Horrox, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK. Reprinted with permission.* |

**How did people respond to the Plague? What belief or concern caused each response?**

*Again, read and annotate for main ideas [the response and its cause]. Determine 1. Its intended AUDIENCE, 2. Its PURPOSE, 3. Its historical context [determined by time and place], and 4. Its author’s POINT OF VIEW [how who that person is influenced what they wrote / said. Also, it there bias represented? Can the source be trusted?*

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| **Document 4: Nicholas Versoris, French author, *Book of Reason*, 1523** – Since the rich fled, death was principally directed towards the poor so that only a few of the Paris porters and wage earners, who had lived there in large numbers before the misfortune, were left.**Document 5: Johann Weyer, German Physician, *The Deceptions of Demons*, 1583** – About 40 people at Casale in Western Lombardy smeared the bolts of the town gates with an ointment to spread the plague. Those who touched the gates were infected and many died. The heirs of the dead and diseased actually paid people at Casale to smear the gates in order to obtain their inheritances more quickly.**Document 6: Heinrich von Staden, Count of the Palitinate and traveler to Russia, 1571** – Whatever house the pestilence visited was immediately nailed up, and if a person died within, he had to be buried there. Many died of hunger in their own houses. Throughout the country, all the roads and highways were guarded so that a person could not pass from one place to another.**Document 7: Lisabetta Centenni, Italian housewife, legal deposition, 1624** – My husband Ottavio had a malignant fever. We were sure he would die. Sister Angelica del Macchia, prioress at Crocetta, sent me a little piece of bread that had touched the body of St. Domenica. I fed it to my husband and suddenly the fever broke.**Document 8: Nehemiah Wallington, English Puritan, diary entry, 1625** – And thus would I meditate with myself alone: what if the sickness should come into this house? Who would I be willing to give up to the disease? Then I would say, the maid. Who next? My son John. Who next? My daughter Elizabeth. Who next? Myself.**Document 9: Father Dragoni, Roman Catholic priest, letter to the Health Magistracy of Florence, 163**0 – I have accompanied severity with compassion and charity. I have managed and fed the convalescents and servants of two pest houses; I have paid guards and gravediggers with the alms your lordships have sent me.**Document 10: H. de Rochas, French physician, *The Reform of Medicine*, 1647** – Plague-stricken patients hang around their necks toads, either dead or alive, whose venom should, within a few days, draw out the poison of the disease.**Document 11: Miguel Parets, Barcelona tanner, diary, 1651** – The demand for nurses in Barcelona was so great that they were hard to find. Many times all they did was to make the patients die more quickly, because the sooner they died, the sooner the nurses collected the fees they had agreed on.**Document 12: Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722** – The trading nations of Europe were afraid of us; no port of France, Holland, or Spain, or Italy would admit our ships. Foreign exportation being stopped, the general trade in manufactured goods stopped next. |