1348: Plague, *Fortuna*
Disorder in the Center

Week 03 – Lecture 02
24 September 2004

C. The Musical Text:
Center and Margins

Hildegard of Bingen:
*The Order of Virtues*

- Note Hildegard’s drawing: perfect human being within circle [nimbus] --- eternal order.

- Individual within a cosmos: “humility”

What does the music signify?

- Music for ancients/medievals: represents cosmic order, cosmic harmony
  -- cf. Aristotle: the perfect motion of the planets [“harmony of the spheres”]
What do the words signify?

- An ode to “humility”:
  - *humus* = “ground”
  - *human* = made from *humus*
  - humble person: one whose feet on the ground
  - Individual knows one’s place in cosmic order

OPPOSITE: Myths of Daedulus/Icarus and Tower of Babel: those who want to “fly too high” have lost sense of their place [i.e., the virtue of *humility*] in the cosmic order

The Virtues sing to their sister, the virtue of Innocence

- Mourn for this,
  - mourn, oh Innocence, you who in your fair modesty lost no perfection,
  - who did not devour greedily <the apple!> with the gullet of the Serpent of old.
  
  *<allusion to Garden of Eden>*

Then, enter the Devil!

- NB: the Devil speaks/shouts but does not sing; song = cosmic harmony; he is cosmic disorder
- He tries to tempt them to abandon their *humility* before the cosmic order and follow his own “rebellion”
- cf. Satan: led rebellion of angels… cf. Chain of being

The Devil speaks:

- What power can claim that there is no power but God?
  
  I say: whoever wants to follow me and do my will---

  I’ll give them everything!
  
  *<NB: allusion to temptations of Christ in the desert>*

Devil continues:

- As for you, Humility, you have nothing that you can give your followers: none of you even *know what you are!*

- Cf. Garden of Eden -- serpent’s temptation: eat of the Tree of Knowledge !!! You will not be *humble; “You will be as gods.”*
Humility gives her retort:

• My comrades and I know very well that you are the dragon of old who craved to fly higher than the Highest One:
  
  but God himself hurled you in the abyss.

Virtues conclude:

• “As for us, we Virtues dwell in the heights.”
  
  \[ \text{Nos quatem omnes in excelsis habitamus.} \]

• The individual is returned to his / her proper place in the collective whole

• NB: as in Greek tragic “catharsis”: all return to proper place in the universe: virtues, Devil, we ourselves [{\textit{humility}]}]

This is the sense of CONFIDENCE in cosmic order rationality and STRICT BOUNDARIES between “safety” and danger that the Plague is about to destroy . . . .

I. 1348: The Black Plague
Product of Malthusian Crisis???

Thomas Malthus (1766-1834)

Thesis: The rate of increase of the population tends to be out of proportion to its means of subsistence. Therefore population must be controlled mainly by sexual restraint

IF NOT: Nature will do deplete population for us --- dustbowls; famine; plague.

John Boswell: “Those who celebrate the ‘Law of Nature’ don’t know much about nature.”

1250: The “High Middle Ages”
Europe at its limits

• 1000 A.D. - End of Viking Invasions
• Europe
  
  – drains marshes for farming
  
  – resumes trading with “East”
• Eco-system limits:
  
  – Weather: colder / wetter
  
  – Lessened agrarian yields
  
  – ca. 1300: series of famines and epidemics
“Geography of Disease” --- The Silk Road

http://www.silkroadproject.org/
1330s: Plague kills 2/3 of China’s population
1338: Arrives in Central Asia
1345: Volga River
1347: Lower Egypt/ Southern Italy/ Palestine
1348: Arabia/ Tunisia/ Northern Italy/ Iberia/ France/ England
1349: Northern Germany

“Geography of disease”: self and other / alien / “foreign”
Fact: plague “invaded” from China -- outside
Fantasy: Jews poisoned wells of Europe – from within… from the “marginal”…

“The Plague, SARS, and Gay Rights”
http://www.familyresearchinst.org/FRR_03_05.html
Delusional fantasy not a thing of the past…

1348: Plague invades France -- Most populous of kingdoms

- Bubonic Plague: incubation of 6 days; 60% chance of dying
- Pneumonic Plague: incubation of 2 days, spread by coughing
  - 100% chance of dying in 14th century
- Kills 1/3 of Western Europe

IN THE WAKE OF THE PLAGUE

- Malthusian Crisis?
  1/3 of Western Europe killed
  Ecological balance restored
  Population reduced back in proportion to the means of subsistence
  Plague is endemic: keeps coming back for 300 years
  England recovers only in 1500s
  France recovers only in 1700s

The PLAGUE in Monty Python and the Holy Grail:
“Bring out yer dead! Bring out yer dead!”
II. Representations of shift in cultural mood: disorder moves from margins to center

The end of the confident / optimistic / rationalist “High Middle Ages”

What do I mean by “representing shift in mood”?

Pablo Picasso, “Guernica” [1937]

Jackson Pollock: “Number 8, 1949” (detail)

SPECIFICALLY MEDIEVAL:

A Crisis of Mediation:
The Remoteness of God and the arbitrariness of his will (and of the world)
Crisis in mediation

Priest / Holy water = "mediation"

Fundamental crisis in TRUST

Anxious question for post-1348: Does mediation work? [Especially since our whole societal order depends on it!] Or is it smoke and mirrors? Are appearances deceptive?

Fundamental crisis in TRUST
Crisis in mediation

The “essence” of a thing is what it is or its “what-ness.”

For medievals, “essence” [what a thing is] precedes its “existence” [the fact that it is]

i.e., your identity / meaning is fixed and unchangeable even before you are born

Unchanging: BLOOD / GENEALOGY

Changing: meritocracy; individual effort

REVIEW:
Philosophical “Essentialism”

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14th century: New popularity of
William of Occam

Essentialism v. “NOMINALISM”

L. nomen = “name”

There is no essential connection between a thing and the name (representation / meaning) we give it

IN OTHER WORDS: names and meanings are ARBITRARY and CONTINGENT agreements

Shakespeare: “A rose by any other name would still smell sweet as a rose.”

For a nominalist, we never know what things are “in themselves” / “as they are” / “in their essence.”

We only know the names we arbitrarily assign to them --- on a temporary / contingent / pragmatic consensual basis.

Negatively, this begins an age of skepticism.

Positively, this begins the long-range basis for modern science --- MODELS [names] --- for which all knowledge is hypothetical, subject to falsification, not “things-in-themselves” but rather things as they are-for-us [observed by us].

The Name of the Rose --- a murder-mystery set in a medieval monastery.
The hero is a Sherlock Holmes-type Franciscan investigator who is a nominalist scientist --- a thinly-veiled allusion to William of Occam. He is in continual arguments with the more old-fashioned “essentialist” monks.

Gertrude Stein

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

(“Sacred Emily,” 1913)
• Nominalism = end of rational religion
  – Scotus: “God could have willed the inverse of the 10 commandments”: “Thou shalt steal!”
  – Occam: “If God had willed the absolute opposite of the 10 commandments [‘Thou shalt commit adultery’] they would have been binding absolutely
  – God’s will is not reasonable — it is arbitrary and yet absolutely binding.

Title I: “O Fortuna”

- O Fortuna/ velut Luna / statu variabilis
  - O Fortune, like the moon you are changeable.
  - semper crescis / aut descrescis / vita detestabilis
  - ever waxing / and waning; hateful life!
  - nunc obdurat / et tunc curat
  - now oppresses / and then soothes
  - ludo mentis aciem,
  - as playful whim has it,
  - egestatem / potestatem / dissolvit ut glaciem.
  - poverty / power / it melts them both like ice.

- Sors salutis / et virtutis / michi nunc contraria
  - In health / and in virtue / Fate is against me
  - est affectus / et defectus / semper in angoria.
  - I am driven on / and weighted down always enslaved.
  - Hac in hora / sine mora / cordam pulsum tangite;
  - So at this hour / without delay pluck the vibrating strings;
  - quod per sortem / sternit fortun / necum annes plangite!
  - since Fate / strikes down the strong man everyone weep with me!

Carmina Burana

- The end of a predictable cosmic meaningful order; the beginning of a sense of arbitrariness at hands of Fortune

Title II: "Fortune plango vulnera"

- Sors immanis / et inanis / rota tu volubilis,
  - Fate --- monstrous / and empty, / you whirling wheel,
  - status malus / vana salus / semper dissolubilis,
  - you are malevolent / well-being is in vain / and always dissolves into nothing,
  - obumbra / et velata / michi quoque niteris;
  - shadowed / and veiled / you plague me too;
  - nunc per ludum / dorsum nudum / fero tui sceleris
  - I bare my back to your villainy.

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Verum est, quod legitur, / fronte capillata,
It is truly written
that she has a fine head of hair,
sed plerumque sequitur / occasio calvata.
but when she seizes opportunity
she is bald.*** (Repeat loudly)

{***NB: anthropological boundaries being bent: HAIR!
Is she female or male? Only males are bald! Trans-gender}

In Fortune solio / sederam elatus,
On Fortune's throne
I used to sit raised up,

prosperitatis vario / flore coronatus;
crowned with flowers of prosperity;

quipquid enim florui / felix et beatus,
though I may have flourished
happy and blessed,

nunc a summo corrui / gloria privatus.
now I fall from the peak
deprived of glory. (Repeat loudly)

Fortune rota volvitur;
descoendo minoratus;
The wheel of Fortune turns;
down I go, demeaned;
alter in altum tollitur; nimis exaltatus
another is raised up; / far too high up

rex sedet in vertice - caveat ruinam!
sits the king at the summit ---
let him fear ruin!
nam sub axe legimus: Hecubam reginam.
for under the axis is written:
"Queen Hecuba."*** (Repeat loudly)

** In Greek mythology: Hecuba, once daughter of a king, was turned
into a dog! NB: anthropological boundaries! (trans-species)

Plague can strike anyone anytime
Fortune turns her wheel as she wants: loves to bring about “reversals of fortune”
The world: no longer divided neatly into safety and danger
What used to be predictable / orderly / controllable –> now subject to occult arbitrary
forces beyond our control...
Definition of CULTURAL TRAUMA:
“a collective encounter with chaos.”

TRAUMA = CHAOS
“Disorder at the Center” of a culture’s “ordered pattern of ideas and values” [Douglas]

O Fortuna!