

ENGL 408 Final Paper: Spring 2022

PROMPT: 1.

Consider scapegoating as an epiphenomenon of plague narratives from Sophocles to Chaucer and how the human urge to blame and sacrifice minorities is still present in the era of COVID.

“Scapegoating” is the action of blaming a person or a group of people for the faults of another; or, in the instance of plague discussion, of no one at all. In the Bible, the term “scapegoat” was used to quite literally describe a goat that was sent into the wilderness after the Jewish chief priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it (Leviticus 16). Similarly, during times of plague across 14th century Europe, scapegoating was used to place blame on minorities for the cause of the plague. As seen in various texts discussed in class, minorities such as Jews, heretics, and lepers were seen as the cause of suffering for everyone else. In some cases, such as that of the flagellants, scapegoating was placed on oneself and used for atonement. Although notions of scapegoating go back as far as the Bible, instances of misplaced blame still occur today. In the recent events of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole of China and its people were scapegoats for the cause of the disease. Because the disease originated from Wuhan, China, people found it easy to pin the blame on this specific region. Made political by American president Donald Trump, right-wing conservatives widely started to refer to COVID-19 as “Wuhan Flu.” A rise in violence against Asian-Americans was also recorded throughout the span

of the pandemic, with more than 9,000 reports of racially motivated attacks occurring between March 2020 and June 2021 ([NPR](#)). With this in mind, it is clear that the existence of scapegoating has and will continue to exist.

Situations in which these violent crimes target minorities seem to be ever present, and are magnified in the face of stress: stressors such as a worldwide pandemic certainly heighten this even further, increasing the rate at which marginalized groups are used as scapegoats and are sacrificed for unjust purposes. As seen throughout the texts in which have been lengthily discussed within this class, plague and disease creates an environment for stress which inevitably leads towards scapegoating in some manner. In the face of a deadly or otherwise compromising illness, people are bound to come face to face with death; especially in the wake of a disease as infectious and deadly as the Black Plague or leprosy. As mentioned earlier, the coronavirus is not nearly as deadly or vicious as either of these diseases that have been majorly discussed throughout class, but the spread of the virus and the panic that ensued create a similar situation. It is interesting to note that this human urge to blame and sacrifice others, particularly minorities, during times of great stress such as a pandemic has occurred throughout history. History is meant to teach future generations mistakes that should not be repeated, and yet the same situations seem to be occurring over and over again. What is the root of this desire to blame and sacrifice others? Why do specific minority groups face this judgement and scrutiny? Why is blame and scapegoating a major reaction to stress in the face of a natural disaster such as a pandemic? It is clear that no human created these diseases or started a worldwide pandemic, so how is it rational that these thought processes become commonplace? These are all important questions that

should be answered in order to understand the importance of understanding plague history and literature, especially in order to break this cycle of repeating history.

Jewish peoples were amongst the most blamed groups during the plague era. Jews were referred to as “*merdaille*,” literally translating to scoundrels, filthy scum, shit, etc. Through our reading of *Le Jugement Dou Roy De Navarre* (The Judgement of the King of Navarre, 1349), we discussed multiple instances of obligatory scapegoating. In the course of the prologue, the author Guillaume de Machaut refers to “shameful Judea,” blaming the Jews as an entire group for not only causing the plague, but also for spreading it. Machaut claimed that the Jews poisoned the wells and streams, leading to the disease that wreaked havoc. Likewise, the deaths of Christians was pinned on the Jewish people, “For all the Jews were put to death... And likewise many Christians Died a shameful death because of this” (Machaut). Similarly, following the onslaught of COVID-19 across the world, Americans began to fault China as a whole for its role in the spread of the coronavirus. Although executions such as those described in Machaut’s *The Judgement of the King of Navarre* did not occur in the modern era, social exclusion and insult wracked the country and its people as a whole. In fact, “73% of U.S. adults say they have an unfavorable view of [China]” following the outbreak of COVID-19 ([Pew Research Center](#)).

Within Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale* (1387), implications of dehumanizing and even demonizing Jewish peoples can be viewed. Manuscripts within the text depict caricatures and stereotypes of Jews such as people with large or oversized noses, beards, etc. This example becomes present later on in history as propaganda from Germany during World War II depicts these same caricatures meant to pin Jews as “others.” It is fair to say that Adolf

Hitler himself took inspiration from these caricatures for his own use in demonizing this group of people. Furthermore, according to the Romans, the Jews were the ones that killed Jesus and profited from his death, “as if the Jews hadn’t ripped the body of our pleasant lord... As if the Jews hadn’t torn him sufficiently...” which expands upon this long-standing notion that Jews are the cause of pain and even sin as a whole (Chaucer).

On a similar note, looking at Hartmann von Aue’s *Der Arme Herinrich* (Poor Lord Henry), the sin of Pride is discussed. In biblical terms, the sin of Pride was considered the original and most serious of the seven deadly sins because it was believed that the prideful boastered the capability and willpower to challenge God. Blame fell upon the sin of Pride for the infection of leprosy, as opposed to the real, scientific reason; much like how minority groups were blamed for the causation of other diseases, including that of COVID-19. The persecution and scapegoating of minorities can be viewed as far back as the Bible, which is mentioned throughout a majority of the texts we have discussed in class. For example, the story of King Herod from the Bible is alluded to through sections of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. In this story, King Herod publicly identified himself as a Jew. However, due to the extravagant and decadent lifestyle that King Herod and his fellow Herodians experienced, other Jews treated him with antipathy. Later, Herod executed several members of his family, including his own wife. This story is used throughout history, and even lightly mentioned or touched upon in several readings such as *Macbeth*, to call attention to the cruel and inhumane deeds of one Jewish man. The deeds of one person are attached to all others of that same group, much like how the birth of the coronavirus within China has since given Chinese peoples, especially Chinese-Americans, a negative connotation.

Aside from the Jews being the main focus of blame and scapegoating, other minorities experienced scapegoating and similar behaviors of violence and hate directed towards them. During the times of leprosy, the disease was pinned on women. Instances of this can be seen in *Poor Lord Henry*, wherein the main character, Henry, is exposed to those deemed as sinful simply because he has contracted leprosy. Within the story, it is said that the cure to Henry's leprosy resides in the sacrificial blood of a virgin. A young girl steps forward to sacrifice her life for Henry to cure him (Aue). This delves into the theme of virgin martyrs, which once again ties into scapegoating. For this young girl in *Poor Lord Henry*, a fear is present in which she must face the consequences of choosing to either give up her life to save Henry, or not to give up her life. This decision is heavily skewed in that the choice is almost coerced: the young, innocent, impressionable girl fears God, and perhaps even Henry, should she not complete this "selfless" act. By allowing (and even encouraging) someone else, in this case "innocent," virgin women, to die, the real cause of the issue is ignored. Instances such as this can also be seen within the Bible; with particularly notable occurrences being that of Bathsheba and Delilah. In both of these stories, which are alluded to within *Poor Lord Henry*, the two women mentioned endure the blame for the misfortune of others.

In terms of the modern era, the contents of this class weigh heavily on the mind. Although not nearly as deadly or infectious as the Black Plague or leprosy, the COVID-19 pandemic still shows striking similarities to the events that take place within the texts within our own society now. As mentioned previously, instances of violence against Asians, particularly those of Chinese descent, has risen over the span of the past couple years in which the COVID-19 pandemic has taken hold. Because the coronavirus originated in China, many people

angered by the mass outbreak have since blamed the country and those from it as a whole for the cause of the pandemic; even if these people have lived in or been to China. This human urge to blame others for the cause of something goes as far back as childhood for some, with children blaming others for their own mistakes in order to avoid consequences and/or responsibilities. This behavior became especially common in America, as the previous president, Donald Trump, publicly shamed and blamed China and Chinese citizens for the outbreak. Namecalling such as “Wuhan flu” and “Chinese disease” became commonplace for many Trump supporters to use during the height of the pandemic (and likewise the height of Trump’s presidency). Racism increased for Asian-Americans during the pandemic, as well, “Roughly two months after the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the US, 60 percent of Asian Americans reported having witnessed someone blaming people of Asian background for the coronavirus epidemic. This was a time when President Donald Trump regularly and directly blamed China for spreading COVID-19” ([Finding](#)). Perhaps this ties into the earlier idea that to be associated with something or contracted with a specific disease is equivalent to sin. Although the whole of China and its people are not the cause of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak and spread, they are the subject of scapegoating and blame simply for being associated with it. The irony in this is the extended efforts of the Chinese government to contain and defeat the spread of the virus as quickly as possible; succeeding at a much faster rate than the efforts of the United States to do the same.

In 2021, a shooting took place in Atlanta, Georgia in which a man shot and killed eight people, six of whom were of Asian descent, outside of a spa plaza. The shooting sparked outrage, and many called for justice for those that were killed. The shooting took place amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in which many Asian women felt targeted and outcast. Following these

outbreaks of anti-Asian violence and language, especially throughout the United States, movements like the Stop AAPI Hate (Asian American Pacific Islander) action caused a call for improvement and progress. Stop AAPI Hate is dedicated towards tracking and stopping hate crimes across various communities, but incidents continue to be recorded and ignored. Just a year after the Atlanta shooting, nearly 11,000 more cases of Asian hate crime and violence were recorded— showing little improvement from the previous year in terms of statistics ([Choi](#)). These numbers also only count the instances that were reported to police, meaning much more violence towards this already marginalized group is certain to have taken place.

To conclude, in the face of a major stressor such as a worldwide pandemic, the human urge to sacrifice and blame minorities, taking the form of scapegoating, flourishes and becomes commonplace. Throughout history, this scapegoating of minorities has existed. Within the literature discussed in this class, we are able to catch a brief glimpse of the unjust treatment these groups received; and even now as we live through the COVID-19 pandemic, the existence of these scapegoat groups is evident. Cases of anti-Asian violence and hate crimes against specific groups become normalized in a sense under the presence of disaster. History has taught us that these groups were brutally harmed and terribly treated: Jews being hung, drowned, beheaded, etc. for their “crimes” involving the existence of plague; the flagellants committing acts of horrific self-harm and violence in an effort to atone for a sin that wasn’t theirs to begin with. . . . Groups have since been formed to put a stop to this unjust treatment and to break this cyclical, metaphoric “wheel” that rolls over others, but how effective are they in the grand scheme of things? If history is to continue as it has for the past several centuries, this behavior of scapegoating will inevitably continue well into the future. However, I believe that it is the

responsibility of students such as myself to learn about these historic events and to tell the tales.

In doing so, hopefully actions such as these will lessen with time, and those affected by this

cruelty and hatred can be at peace.

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