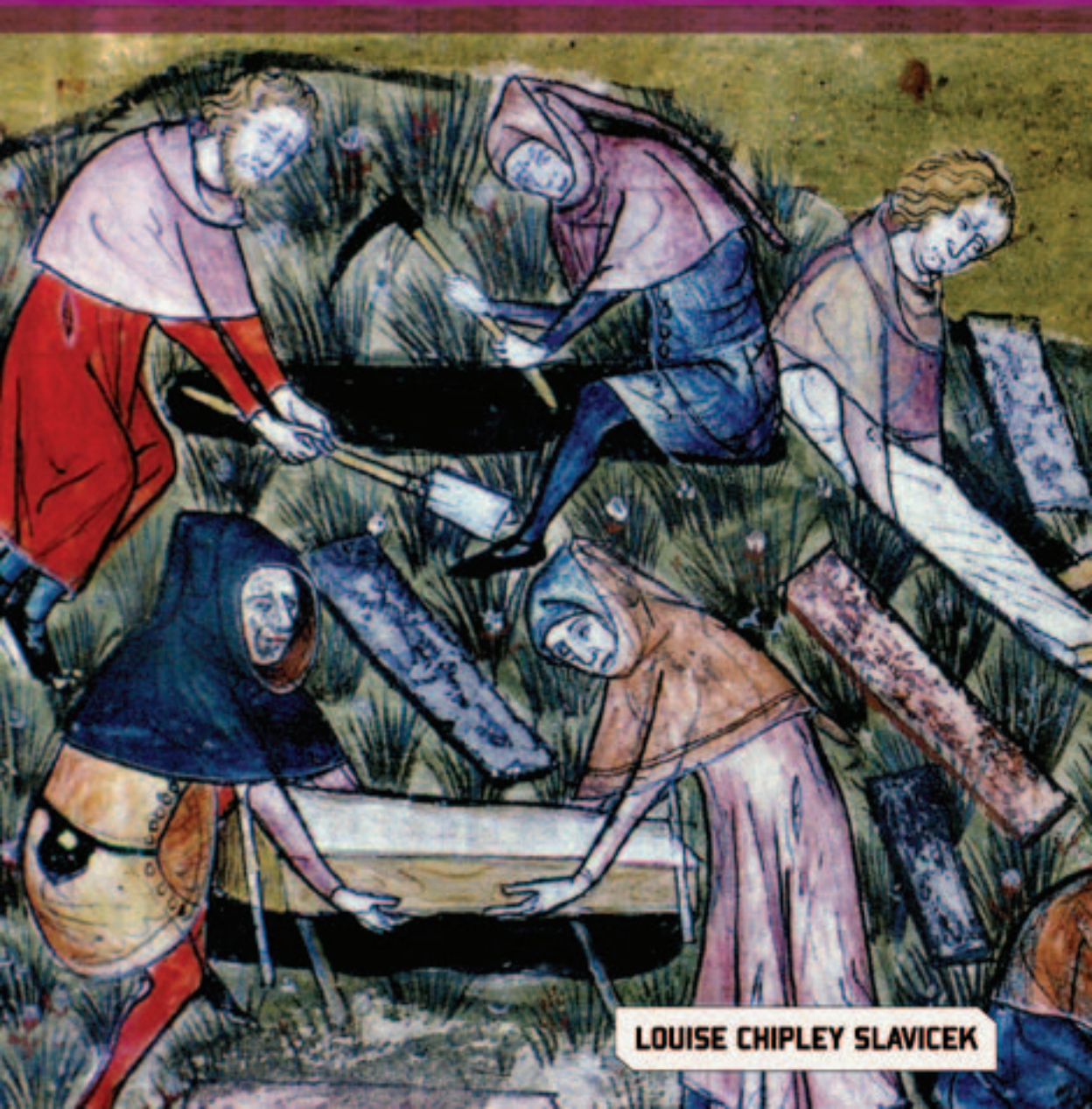
GREAT HISTORIC DISASTERS

THE BLACK DEATH



LOUISE CHIPLEY SLAVICEK

THE GREAT MORTALITY AND LITERATURE

The Black Death, most scholars agree, had a significant influence on the literature as well as the art of the late Middle Ages. In his *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, the most celebrated writer of the era, emphasized hedonistic (sensual) pleasures and generally sought to amuse and entertain his readers. However, Chaucer, who was probably a child during the Black Death in England, also used the *Canterbury Tales* to criticize what he viewed as the low moral standards of much of the post-plague Catholic clergy, whom he ridiculed as money-grubbers in his famous collection of stories.

After the *Canterbury Tales*, the best-known literary work of the Black Death era was *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio, who lost many close friends and family members to the illness, included a detailed and chilling account of the plague in his native Florence in *The Decameron*'s lengthy introduction. The main body of the work, however, consists of a collection of witty and often bawdy tales that 10 young Florentine nobles who have recently fled their plague-ravished hometown for the countryside tell one another to pass the time. Far removed from the somber mood of the book's introduction, the stories' lighthearted tone aptly illustrates the escapist mentality of some of Boccaccio's contemporaries, who sought to drown their anxieties in merrymaking and to live for the moment.

In contrast to Chaucer's and Boccaccio's famous works, much of the literature of the post-plague era was unremittingly melancholy and pessimistic in tone. The prominent French writer Eustace Deschamps (1340?–1404), for instance, once observed gloomily: "Happy is he who has no children, for . . . they give only trouble and anxiety; . . . they are always in danger of falling and hurting themselves; they contract some illness and die. . . . Nothing but cares and sorrows; no happiness compensates us for our anxiety. . . ." A few decades later, an anonymous English poet composed the lugubrious

"Disputation Betwixt the Body and Worms," which features a particularly morbid dialogue between a once beautiful noblewoman and the worms now devouring her rotting corpse:

> The body speaks to the worms:
> *'Worms, worms,' this body said,*
> *'Why do you act thus? What causes you to eat me thus?*
> *By you my flesh is horribly decorated,*
> *Which was once a figure noble and attractive,*
> *Very fragrant and sweet,*
> *Best loved of all creatures*
> *Called lady and sovereign, I assure you'. . .*
>
> Worms speak to the body:
> *'Nay, nay! We will not yet depart from you*
> *Not while one of your bones hangs with another,*
> *'Til we have scoured and polished them*
> *And made everything between them as clean as we can.*
> *For our labor we ask to extract nothing,*
> *Not riches of gold or silver, nor any other reward*
> *But only for we worms to feed on you.'*

The moral of this gruesome tale, the poem's author declared, was unmistakable: "When you least expect it, death comes to conquer you." Therefore, the poet admonishes his readers, "It is good to think on death." Clearly, his was a message that the death-obsessed culture of late medieval Europe had already taken to heart.