IN the folklore of western Europe there is a legend of a sunken bell that had once been the pulse of a vigorous community, tolling off periods of work and calling people to worship. As a result of an act of God, however, the life of the town was cut short by plague, fire, or flood—according to the particular version—and its inhabitants destroyed or scattered, its streets delivered over to ghosts. Nothing was left except the mournful toll of the abandoned or sunken bell, which could still be heard by passing travelers during the late hours of the night. If legend is the product of folk imagination, the roots of this one lie deep in historical experience, for during the fourteenth century villages were left deserted throughout large sections of the continent.

The Problems of Saturation

The history of fourteenth-century Europe is perhaps best explained in terms of the widely held theory that economies that cease to expand begin to contract.
Mediaeval history is, from an economic point of view, the story of a general expansion that began about the year 1000 and continued at an accelerating rate for some three hundred years. During this period, population multiplied, trade expanded, new towns were founded, and huge areas of land were reclaimed for cultivation.

By the late thirteenth century, many sectors of the European economy began to show signs of having reached a saturation point. With such a vast subject as the economic life of Europe, it is impossible to establish a precise date of transition. Not only did circumstances vary greatly from country to country, but certain spheres of economic life continued to expand until well into the fourteenth century, while others had already begun to contract before it began. In addition, the documentary evidence is so confusing and even contradictory that trained economic historians often find themselves disagreeing about some of the most basic generalizations. Most, however, will agree that by the middle of the fourteenth century western Europe was undergoing a severe economic crisis.

It is almost never possible to determine just what reverses the momentum of the expanding economic cycle and turns it downward; but in the late thirteenth century one example of the effect of overexpansion can be identified. In the early Middle Ages, the large mass of peasants lived essentially as sub-
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In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, there was a marked increase in population. When the manors became crowded, people left the land for the towns. As these in turn filled up, a large number of new ones were created providing a growing and, by the standards of the time, an apparently unlimited market for grain. This new demand could be met only by a substantial increase of production. New land was needed, and new hands to work it. As a result, still more overflow population from the manors began to open areas that had hitherto been considered unpromising for cultivation. Because the topsoil of the river valleys of northwestern Europe and southeastern England is rich, deep, and all but inexhaustible, mediaeval society had managed to survive, even prosper, with crude agricultural methods. But applied to the new marginal lands these traditional methods produced profitable results only for the first few years and in the process exhausted the poor soil. It is a classic story, repeated as recently as the 1920's in the American Midwest. By 1300, many of the "colonists" found they could no longer count on adequate crops and began to abandon their recently reclaimed farms. At the same time, improved farming methods combined with more intensive efforts applied to both old and new lands led to the production of a surplus with its inevitable concomitant falling prices. In the meantime, in the towns, similar developments were taking place. Thus,
just as a disastrous downward trend in agricultural prices was bringing the reclamation of land to an abrupt halt, and laborers were leaving exhausted fields to seek work elsewhere, employment in the towns was becoming more and more difficult to find.

The Problems of Adversity

To add to the basic problem of overexpansion and saturation, western Europeans were faced with a series of calamities beyond their control. Because agriculture was still the dominant source of livelihood and because Europeans had not devised adequate techniques for storing food, the vagaries of climate, particularly rainfall, had an overwhelming effect on everyday life. Famine, endemic during the Middle Ages, assumed catastrophic proportions in the fourteenth century. A disastrous crop failure, for example, occurred in 1315, when summer rainfall became a deluge so constant and widespread that chroniclers compared it to the flood in the seventh chapter of Genesis. Crops were ruined from one end of Europe to the other, from Scotland and Russia in the north to Spain and Italy in the south, and the resulting famine was so severe in some areas that there were reports of people eating their own children. Hunger not only drove men to crime, it left them vulnerable to disease, and it threatened the social order. Apocalyptic prophecies were rife, anticipating or perhaps provoking such uprisings as that of the French shep-
herds or Pastoureaux. The harvest was abundant in 1316, but the damage was too great to be repaired in a single year. Serious shortages continued in many parts of Europe until 1317 and even longer in Poland and Silesia, where as late as 1319 it was reported that bodies of criminals were taken from the gallows and eaten by the poor.

The floods that caused the famine of 1315 were to become a recurrent problem in the fourteenth century. In Holland, for example, they exceeded in destructiveness anything known in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. In 1333, a terrible flood washed out the bridges of Florence, inflicting on that city the greatest natural disaster it had ever suffered. The climate not only became wetter; a study of glaciers in Greenland, Iceland, and Norway suggests that it also became significantly colder as well, thus accounting for the southward shift of the tree line in Scandinavia. And the cumulative effect of all these factors was to put a halt to economic expansion and to initiate a period of retrenchment.

This trend was reinforced by the contraction of trade routes—another development beyond the control of western Europeans. The last important Christian ports in the Holy Land—Acre, Tyre, Beirut, Sidon, and Tortosa—fell to the Moslems in 1291. At the same time, the Mongols, who had brought with them relative peace and favorable trading conditions, began to lose their control of the trade routes leading
to the Levant. The Ottoman Turks filled the vacuum left by the Mongol disintegration. In 1354 they had made their first beachhead in Europe, and by the end of the century they controlled the Balkans. A Western crusading army which tried to turn them back was defeated at Nicopolis in 1396, and only the short-lived revival of certain Mongol tribes under the celebrated Tamerlaine was able to check the Ottoman advance. But the situation was not really improved by Tamerlaine’s Mongols, who left behind them a swath of devastation, in which “was heard neither barking of dog, nor cackling of fowl, nor cry of child.” These disturbances in the East sharply curtailed the flourishing trade of the thirteenth century. In 1343, for example, a characteristic war between the Mongols and the Genoese in the Crimea caused a 50 to 100 per cent rise in the price of spices. The Ottomans themselves were not hostile to trade, but they were considerably less pliant than the weak Byzantine and Asiatic potentates who had ruled the area before.

Another malignant influence was the chronic war that plagued Europe and the Levant. Wars were fought among Italian cities, German princecedoms, northern trading powers, and western monarchies. There were also the smaller civil wars—town against country, class against class, clan against clan. Some of the most famous conflicts of history—from the Hundred Years’ War between England and France
to the family war between the Montagues and Capulets—belong to this period. In fact, taking these together with the even more numerous struggles lost in the confusion of its history, the fourteenth century suffered from more, bloodier, and longer wars than any since the tenth. The inevitable profiteering and speculation created and dissipated unstable fortunes with lightning speed and disastrous consequences. In time, this instability brought even the most solidly established firms to bankruptcy. A defaulted English war debt, for example, finally brought down the prestigious, but overextended, Florentine banking houses of the Bardi and Peruzzi, causing widespread economic hardship in all of Italy. Only the arms industry thrived, while peaceful enterprise languished in the ruined towns and desolated countryside.

*The Black Death*

Devastating as all these misfortunes were, there is a possibility that Europeans might have been able to overcome them by retrenchment and adjustment. They were, at least in exaggerated form, the common stuff of mediaeval life, which has made some historians unwilling to employ so categorical a term as “depression” to the tribulations of the first half of the fourteenth century. For the second half, however, such circumspection would be utterly inappropriate. In 1347, Europe was all but overwhelmed by a new calamity which far exceeded anything yet ex-
experienced in the West in either its impact or its extent.

The Black Death, or bubonic plague, entered Europe through the city of Constantinople. From there, it was transhiped along the trade routes that converged on the ports until it engulfed all of Europe. The disease had never been seen before and the medical profession was helpless to combat it. Nearly everyone who was infected fell with horrifying dispatch. Because of crowded and unsanitary conditions, towns suffered more than the countryside and the poor suffered more than the rich. The infection was no respecter of persons, but the young and vigorous seem to have fallen in undue proportion and the wealthy were by no means immune. From Italy to England it raged in full fury through 1348 and 1349, and then spread in the following years as far as Greenland, Iceland, and Russia. Then, after a brief respite, it became a constantly reappearing phenomenon, returning in the sixties, the seventies, and at later periodic intervals as if to complete a job unfinished.

To estimate the mortality rate of the Black Death one must indulge in a large amount of guesswork, for accurate data are unavailable. Contemporaries cited figures which have to be dismissed as products of hysteria, but even so scholars now generally agree that the death rate varied from twenty to fifty per hundred depending on the area. The population of Florence and Siena, for example, seems to have been cut by
half during the summer months of 1348 alone, while that of Bristol, England, was reduced by 35 to 40 per cent. Some towns escaped unscathed while others were totally destroyed. Even if the overall figure was “only” a quarter of the European population, the plague still killed a far greater percentage of the population than has any war—including those of the twentieth century. To describe the setting for his *Decameron*, Boccaccio reproduced, without attribution, Thucydides’ account of the disposal of the dead during the plague in Athens: “They dug for each graveyard a huge trench in which they laid the corpses as they arrived by hundreds at a time, piling them up tier by tier as merchandise is stowed in a ship and throwing in a little earth until they were filled to the top.”

The Black Death had a more decisive influence on the economy than all the earlier calamities combined. Famine and war tend to reduce population and food supply at roughly the same rate, but plague destroys the population without touching goods or property. Thus, while hamlets and towns were emptied, barns and warehouses remained full. The sheep roamed freely in the sheepfolds for lack of shepherds and wheat rotted in the fields for lack of reapers. The inevitable result was a tremendous oversupply of goods, an even greater contraction of markets, and an acute shortage of labor.

Some segments of society actually benefited from
this development. Prices dropped while the supply of money per capita increased. At the same time, because of the shortage of labor, salaries rose so sharply that, in the country, many serfs were able to buy their freedom. The lords were forced to make this concession and others in order to retain their agricultural workers, who were being lured to the towns by all manner of inducements, including personal freedom. As a result, the period is frequently designated as the golden age of wage labor.

But these blessings were far from unmixed. Landlords were badly hurt by the plummeting prices of grain and any remaining profits were eaten up by the sharply rising wages. Moreover, the customary dues that landlords had always received for the use of their mills and presses were reduced as the plague robbed the lords of their tenants. Nor could this loss be made up by raising rents and fees. Not only were these usually fixed by tradition and therefore difficult to alter, but even when they could be changed, they offered little help since any increase would make it even harder to attract and hold labor. The most obvious—and common—expedient, then, to compensate for the decline of income was to reduce the amount of cultivation.

Townsfolk too, while less severely hurt, were also affected. The agricultural crisis tended to drive peasants to the towns, where prices were still low and wages high. As a result, the condition of the working
population was frequently more prosperous than ever before. Unfortunately, however, there was no solid base for this improvement, since the decisive economic factor in the towns as in the country was the shrinking of markets. Manufacturers and entrepreneurs could no more afford to continue paying high wages than the landlords, since their goods too had to be sold at lower and lower prices. Even reduced production saturated the dwindling markets and choked the economy. The instinctive reaction in both town and country was to "crack down" on labor with restrictive legislation. Instead of attempting to develop new markets, an undertaking which seemed quite hopeless, the different economic groups struggled with one another for a larger share of the diminishing income, and the fourteenth century exhausted itself in some of the most bitter and destructive class warfare to be seen in Europe before the Industrial Revolution.

Agriculture and Industry

Viewed in the perspective of European history rather than in its immediate impact, the depression of the fourteenth century displays an irregular and sharply oscillating pattern of wages, prices, and gross product. But if certain areas of the economy flourished and the living standards of many rose, actually the total economy contracted and declined.

One positive result of the population decline, as
we have seen above, was the breaking of servile bonds. The sudden reduction of the population completed the work of previous centuries by freeing most of the serfs in both western and eastern Europe; and the cruel hardships of the period at least bore the fruit of positive social progress. Because farming had become so much less profitable, huge patches of marginal land that could not bear the strain of constant cultivation were returned to wilderness. Although it has been said that “in the history of land problems there is no sin like the sin of generalization,” there were few exceptions to this pattern of abandoned holdings throughout western Europe. Parts of Germany were the most severely affected. In the southwest, for example, the rate of abandonment ran to more than half, and in sections of the Austrian Alps and the Black Forest the population is still sparser today than it was before the plague.

In an economy dominated by agriculture, an agricultural depression was bound to affect all other spheres of enterprise, and often the impact was increased by other factors. In the mining industry, for example, the depression coincided with a depletion of ores, notably of silver and copper. Only iron seemed to have escaped the slump, partly because it was more easily obtainable and partly because of the constant demand for weapons of war. The exhaustion of silver, however, complicated by the chronic drain-age of European money to the East, caused an acute scarcity of bullion that led in turn to a widespread
debasement of the coinage. Not only were there constant complaints about this monetary chaos, but as the discovery of coin hoards demonstrates, men hastened to hide good coins underground.

The woolen and cloth industry also suffered from the general instability and stagnation, but in this instance losses in some areas contributed to gains in others. Because of constant war, decreasing demand, increasing duties, and savage competition, the foreign sale of English wool — once the country’s basic export — was sharply curtailed. It has been estimated that in the early fourteenth century the average export of English wool reached 35,000 sacks per year, but that by the mid-fifteenth century the figure had fallen to 8,000. This decline of trade in raw wool, however, was compensated for by an accompanying increase in its manufacture into cloth, which was stimulated by a technological revolution in fulling — the process of shrinking woolen cloth. The new techniques were based on the power of water mills and proved to be more efficient than the primitive methods of beating the cloth with clubs or trampling it under foot. The use of water mills also tended to disperse industry over the English countryside, which not only helped check the flight of labor to the towns but also enabled the manufacturers to escape the restrictive controls of city guilds. This transformation of the cloth trade was a first step in the long-term process of English industrialization.

As the English cloth industry prospered, that in
Flanders declined. Once one of the most advanced segments of mediaeval economy, it suffered severely during the fourteenth century from social unrest, war, the declining supply of English wool, and the new competition of finished cloth from England. In most instances the results of these pressures were catastrophic. The city of Ypres, which had once been a flourishing center of manufacture, saw its population drop from roughly 20,000 in the early fourteenth century to 8,000 by the end of the fifteenth century. The great Flemish city of Bruges managed to maintain its pre-eminence by its mercantile activity, but even Bruges was often crippled by social unrest and vain efforts to curb the competition of English cloth by the prohibition of English imports. By the end of the fifteenth century, the embargo on English cloth so reduced Bruges' total trade as to contribute to the rise of its rival Antwerp. Finally Bruges' long decline was completed by the silting up of its river.

It is not possible here to discuss the varied fortunes of manufacture and trade in all other parts of Europe, but it should be noted that even northern Italy, the most prosperous area of fourteenth-century Europe, suffered sharp fluctuations in its production and income. Thanks to advanced business techniques, however, Italy was able to siphon off a large percentage of European wealth during this period, a practice which accounts for the cordial dislike felt by northern Europeans for most Italians. Even in areas like France
and Germany, where manufacturing was less developed, the economic crisis left its mark. In Germany it brought about an exodus from the countryside that produced a golden age for towns. Splendid town halls were built and universities were founded, but in their shadow a large urban populace lived on the edge of destitution and despair.

Economic Alliances

In the first half of the fourteenth century, sharply fluctuating prices helped speculators amass huge individual fortunes. When the English crown defaulted on its debt to the Bardi and Peruzzi banks of Florence, English bankers reaped large returns by stepping into the breach and financing the war, while others made quick profits from the burgeoning cloth trade. But the instability of the age destroyed fortunes as quickly as it created them; and in the long run, it was not great speculators but conservative and responsible men who flourished. Among the attempts to lessen the devastating effects of depression, the formation of trade alliances yielded the most uniformly rewarding results.

The most famous of these was the Hanse or Hanseatic League of northern Germany. Throughout the thirteenth century, merchants from the German ports had plied the waters of the North Sea and the Baltic. Working in close cooperation, they had, by the end of the century, established extraterritorial enclaves
in London, Bruges, Bergen, and Novgorod. The pressures of the following century, however, transformed this informal system into a tightly knit alliance. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the informal league of merchants depended on the support of the governments of their respective cities—notably Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Wismar, and Rostock. This league was cemented by outside threats. When the King of Denmark tried to limit German traffic between the North Sea and the Baltic in 1367, the league of Hanseatic cities opened hostilities in defense of their merchants and trade. As a result, the Hanse won a resounding victory, sealed by the Peace of Stralsund in 1370, and gained control of the important timber, fish, and grain trade of the North. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, it not only dominated the Baltic but monopolized the trade with Poland, Russia, and large portions of Scandinavia. Indeed, the prestige of the Hanse was so great that Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen are still proud to call themselves Hanseatic cities and to perpetuate the Hanseatic initials on their automobile license plates as a reminder of their great tradition.

The success of the Hanse set a trend toward economic nationalism and monopoly throughout Europe. In England, a company of merchants known as the Staple was established by a royal grant to regulate the wool trade. If the first purpose of the grant was to collect taxes for the crown, it also served—at the
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cost of some restriction of trade—to provide a steady income for the members and to limit the possibility of unscrupulous speculation. After operating by turns from the leading cities of the Low Countries, it finally found, in 1363, a fixed seat in Calais, which had the advantage, for the crown, of being an English possession. Similar staples were established for tin, lead, and cloth.

The shrinking markets and increasing competition which characterized the depression encouraged the development of rational business methods. In fact some historians think that the advanced techniques of banking, bookkeeping, and business which were developed during this period provided the essentials for the birth of capitalism. Others, however, would point out that it takes more than mere institutions to make capitalism and would argue that the essential acquisitive spirit was still lacking in the fourteenth century. But if the capitalistic spirit was not fully present, one still cannot ignore the structural innovations which, together with the persistent courage of those who struggled to make a living, clearly contributed to the revival of the European economy by the second half of the fifteenth century.

Social Upheaval

The fourteenth century was an age of insecurity, in social as well as economic relations. Its history is dominated by nearly constant insurrection and up-
heaval and also records an obsession with social status and stability unprecedented in the earlier history of medieval society.

From the very beginning of the century, acute social unrest threatened the more populous and industrialized areas of Flanders and northern Italy. In these regions the workers were at the mercy of entrepreneurs who both supplied their raw materials and sold their finished products. Frustrated by declining prices and dwindling markets and tempted by the shortage of labor, these city workers maintained a constant struggle with the artisans and patricians. As early as 1302, this discontent flared up in Flanders in the so-called “Matins of Bruges,” in which the populace revolted, destroying the French garrison that defended the interests of the patricians. In retaliation, the King of France sent a large army to teach the rebels a lesson, but it was he himself who was taught. At Courtrai, the royal army was decisively defeated by a host of Flemish workers led by a poor weaver of Bruges. This startling victory, however, did not put an end either to social privilege or conflict. The upper classes managed to return to power and the brutal class struggle continued throughout the century.

In Italy, the most noteworthy uprising of the lower classes occurred in Florence. There, poor workmen known as Ciompi, primarily of the woolen industry, were prevented by Florentine law from
forming guilds and thus denied any voice in the city's government. In desperation, in the summer of 1378, they resorted to a series of violent riots and seized temporary control of the city. But even though they succeeded in forming their own government, their movement split, after a few short weeks, into moderate and extremist factions. To destroy the extremists, the moderates then made common cause with their immediate social superiors, the shopkeepers. These latter, organized in their powerful and change-resistant guilds, proved to be fatal allies. Establishing what came to be recognized as a characteristic revolutionary pattern, they abandoned the moderate proletarians just as soon as the extremists were suppressed and re-established the old order more or less intact. Thus, in 1382, the Florentine oligarchy recovered power and restored the old institutions, eliminating from the city's government virtually all the hard-won influence of the lower class. Indeed, urban insurrections of this sort occurred throughout Europe and frequently attained the same startling but transitory success. Earlier, in the 1340's, a similar social upheaval had shaken the Greek city of Thessalonica. There a sailors' guild massacred about one hundred patricians and attempted to rule through a lower-class democratic government; but, as in Florence, final victory was seized by the patricians.

Nor was social disturbance limited to the cities. Reference has already been made to the French shep-
herds, or Pastoureaux, who set out in 1320 to relieve Jerusalem, but rapidly turned against the symbols of authority in the neighboring towns and then exhausted their fury attacking the Jews. In Italy, at the beginning of the century, a certain Fra Dolcino preached a doctrine which combined mystical religion with hatred for the rich and attracted a band of some 4,000 companions who terrorized the Lombard countryside from the hills around Novara and Verceil for years. Flanders too experienced rural discontent. From 1323 until 1328, the peasants of the western maritime provinces fought against tithes and taxes in a violent civil war characterized by pillaging and destruction. Not surprisingly, the fourteenth century also saw the emergence of Robin Hood as a fully developed folk hero—the outlaw who made life miserable for the rich, but gave clear instructions to his followers to “do no husbonde harm that tilleth with his ploughe.”

One major factor in the widespread rural discontent during the fourteenth century was the devastation wrought by war. Mediaeval warriors seemed to love nothing better than to loot and burn the peasants’ huts and fields. In France, for example, in 1358, during the worst period of the Hundred Years’ War, the peasants reacted like crazed animals in a wild outburst which came to be known as the Jacquerie. Although this was by far the most serious and widespread rural revolt experienced in France until the
Revolution, the nobility was able eventually to subdue the disorganized peasants. "The misery caused by the nobles," according to one chronicler, "reached such a pitch . . . that there was no need for the enemy English to come to complete the destruction of the countryside."

And the English, it might be added, were soon occupied by an uprising of their own countryside in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Here, as elsewhere, the causes were manifold but the same basic pattern could be recognized. The rural laborers who as a result of the Black Death had been able to alleviate their miserable condition now began to feel both the impact of the increasing economic instability and the effect of the new repressive statutes aimed at reducing them once again to their pre-plague status. Having just begun to raise their heads, they were in no mood to submit again; bitter resentment smouldered until open revolt was finally touched off by a series of poll taxes. The conflagration of rebellion was fanned by primitive communists such as the renegade priest John Ball, who preached that "things cannot go well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common . . . and all distinctions leveled." After several successful provincial uprisings, the rebellious peasants converged on London in 1381 and, thanks to their momentum and the indolence of the authorities, took the city. Believing that they had only to get the ear of the king, the peasants faltered. The four-
teen-year-old Richard II bravely met them and promised to accede to their demands, but during one of the parleys the peasant leader, Wat Tyler, was struck down by the Lord Mayor of London. At once leaderless and naively confident of the sincerity of the King’s promises, the rebels dispersed, leaving themselves vulnerable to the inevitable savage reprisals. The flames of revolt dissipated in the air like smoke.

Although the various social revolts of the fourteenth century differed in detail, they had important common traits. Most remarkable was the widespread involvement of the poor. For the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, they began to act as an independent pressure group within the framework of society; and one distinguished historian, Christopher Dawson, even declares that “at no other time in European history has the common people asserted itself more vigorously or found more remarkable leaders.” Violent as they were, these revolts of the poor were regularly frustrated at the brink of success by three circumstances. First, needless to say, the upper classes were infinitely better organized, better supplied, and, in the long run, possessed of a greater sense of common purpose. Members of the ruling classes were frequently at odds among themselves, but when their class interests were seriously threatened they always managed to lay aside their differences and act together with great vigor. Second, the poor proved unable to make lasting, broadly based alliances. The
rural poor, being widely dispersed throughout fields and villages, found it difficult to meet and organize, while those in towns were as seriously divided by the diverse interests of their petty trades and crafts. Merchants were instinctively hostile to lower-class demands—the Lord Mayor of London who knocked down Wat Tyler was a fishmonger by profession. Finally, the poor had no common ideology or program. Their revolts were generally spontaneous reactions to immediate abuses; and even when they did manage to justify their actions with manifestos, these most often expressed religious and ethical egalitarianism and advocated a return to the Garden of Eden. Thus their efforts, which had seemed so near success, ended in discord, leaving them helpless before the reprisals of the frightened and vindictive rich.

_The Quest for Status_

The pervading sense of economic insecurity and the constant threat of violence created an obsession with social status. The land-holding nobility, having become painfully conscious of its own position, began to elaborate codes to keep the other classes in their place. Some of these took the form of sumptuary laws, which regulated the sort of clothing various classes were allowed to wear. With each class thus strictly distinguished by its dress, there could never be any doubt about a person’s station. Further, existing customs of heraldry and chivalry, which deter-
mined both the degrees of noble birth and standing and their appropriate representation in coats of arms and ceremonial, were elaborated and codified. In England, courts of heraldry and chivalry were established to determine rights of bearing noble insignia and to adjudicate personal disputes between gentlemen. The illustrious Order of the Garter was founded in 1340 as a society of special social merit; and English kings began the profitable sale of royal patents granting noble status for a fee. In the fourteenth century, moreover, such class distinctions carried more than ceremonial significance. During the Hundred Years’ War, for example, nobles taken prisoner in battle were spared by the rules of chivalry, while the common soldiers were massacred.

The same social distinctions were reflected in literature. Most poets wrote for a noble audience and therefore exalted the conception of “gentilesse,” or proper noble bearing. Gentility is the subject of an extended disquisition by Dante in his essay known as the Convivio and the idea is pivotal in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. In the latter, it was the Franklin, a character standing on the verge of nobility, who was most fascinated with the characteristics of “gentilesse.” Boccaccio too identified himself with the nobility in his Decameron when he attacked the “sort of fellows” who when “they have but little money in their pockets are all for a gentleman’s daughter” and “pretend to some coat of arms, saying
'I am of such a family, and my ancestors did so and so.'" Not surprisingly, it was in the 1350's, when Boccaccio was writing the Decameron, that mercantile families actually did commission agents to "find" documents attesting to the ancient and noble deeds of their ancestors. If these constant efforts to secure, define, and preserve noble titles served to aggravate the social hostilities of the age, this nearly universal obsession with status was symptomatic of vast and ominous insecurities.

Dislocation and the Vision of Death

Economic upheaval, social conflict, and natural calamity produced a pronounced streak of morbidity in the personality of the fourteenth century. One of the most popular quotations of the age was St. Augustine's admonition that "nothing is more certain than death, nothing less so than the hour of its coming." The Black Death undoubtedly contributed most to this mood by the horrifying manner in which it struck. Here and there a few doctors attempted to understand the nature and extent of the catastrophe in a scientific and rational manner, but in most cases the plague was believed to be a punishment of God, a direct manifestation of divine enmity. Acting on this assumption, Europeans could only retreat into penitence or hysteria, occasionally both, as did the flagellants. During the plague years of 1348–1349, armies of penitents marched across Europe beating
one another over the back with rods and lashes. Since most people felt that these flagellants were atoning not only for their own sins but for the sins of the world, they were welcomed wherever they went, and crowds assembled to accompany the beatings with tears and groans. Indeed, only the clergy, which viewed the movement as heretical, attempted to curb the hysteria; but the movement did not disappear until the end of the plague itself.

Among the mass reactions provoked by the Black Death were the contradictory tendencies to seek escape in dissolute and riotous living and to attribute all the misfortunes of the age to divine retribution for this very immorality. "We are so corrupt, the greatest number of us are so perverse," lamented one Italian writer, "that pest, war and famine no longer astonish anyone." If Europeans were never so degenerate as moralists had charged and if many individuals did seek salvation in piety and asceticism, there is no doubt that the plague produced shocking profligacy. Dress became showy and frequently bizarre, with exaggerated plumage, long-pointed toes, and an ostentatious display of expensive jewels, in spite of the vigorous condemnations of the churchmen of the period. At the same time interest in black magic and witchcraft increased and the heresy of the Free Spirit, which justified sexual license and social immorality, found many eager converts. A similar development was the deviant movement known as the "dancers."
Its devotees, both men and women, marched or danced through the countryside in perverse imitation of the flagellants, substituting promiscuity for penitence. The candid accounts of the Free Spirit heretics and the dancers in contemporary chronicles would have been censored until a very few years ago.

The new mood also pervaded the visual arts. While works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had expressed hope and faith, those of the fourteenth more often stressed the morbid and the pessimistic. Among the most popular themes were the seven deadly sins and the Last Judgment, both depicted with graphic details of hellish torments and frightful beasts. The same tendencies can be seen, especially during the last half of the century, in the transformation of the Crucifixion from a subject of redemption and triumph to one of pity and terror. The Virgin, who in the high Middle Ages had radiated hope in these scenes, became increasingly somber and pathetic until she is finally seen slumping in tears at the foot of the Cross.

This obsession with the macabre increased as the century progressed. Tombstone statues frequently depicted putrefying bodies, and there are countless illustrations of death carrying off healthy young men and women. Even the literature of the century is replete with gallows humor, such as the story of an old Italian dying of the plague. Avoided by his children and friends for fear of contagion, he called his
notary to add to his will the stipulation that on each anniversary of his death his heirs must leave a basket of pears for the flies. "In my sickness," he reasoned, "all my friends and relations have deserted me while only the flies have remained loyal. Thus I would not dare to ask grace from God if I did not prove thankful to them." The character of this all-pervasive mood was perhaps never better summarized than by the Greek who wrote, "Good fortune rarely smiles on us, and when it comes it withers as quickly as a flower, but this is by the will of God that we may be rightly chastened, otherwise we might get above ourselves and forget that we are mortal."

In the fourteenth century, the structure of European civilization was wracked by a series of desperate crises that inflicted deep injury on the personality of the age. Despite the morbid reactions provoked by these calamities, however, the survivors managed to muster courage and energy to contain their fears and to continue to struggle with the problems that threatened to overwhelm them.