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A DEAD ZONE IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF DEATH IN THE MIDDLE AGES: THE SENTIMENT OF SUSPICIOUS DEATH¹

Franck Collard

Medieval chroniclers referring to the deaths of individuals frequently indicate that the deceased have gone “the way of all flesh” or “paid their dues to nature.”² According to Aldobrandino of Sienna, “living and dying are at the whim of our Lord,” and death, determined by the heavens and inherent to the human condition since the Fall, appears to inspire no speculation in terms of its modalities.³ There have been numerous studies dedicated to its history, especially regarding the “sentiment of death.”⁴ Yet, perhaps because of these standard formulas, scholars have devoted no attention to a psychological phenomenon that is nonetheless quite present alongside evidence of human finitude: the questioning of death. This needs to be understood not in terms of the corporeal reality of death – though the criteria for establishing death doubtlessly merit specific research linking medicine and theology – but in terms of the doubts, assumptions, and speculations elicited by the passing of specific individuals. Here, positivist historians and physician-scientists such as

- 1 This work draws on several previous works, in particular *The Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages* (New York: Greenwood Publishing, 2008); “De l’émotion de la mort à l’émoti du meurtre. Quelques réflexions sur le sentiment de la mort suspecte à la fin du Moyen Âge,” *Revue Historique* 656 (2010): 873–907; “Faire l’histoire du corps empoisonné,” in *Le corps empoisonné. Pratiques, savoirs, imaginaire de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, Actes du colloque international de Poitiers (October 2012), ed. Lydie Bodiou, Frédéric Chauvaud and Myriam Soria (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014): 13–28.
- 2 See respectively *Cronica de Saint-Pierre d’Erfurt* (1072–1335), ed. O Holder-Egger, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* (henceforth MGH SS), XXX-1 (Hanover, 1896), 406–407: *mortui omnes carnis debitum persolverunt*; and *Annales Matseenses*, ed. MGH SS, IX (Hanover, 1851), 829: *Serenissimus imperator Ludwicus felix memorie apud civitatem Monacum nature debitum reddidit...*
- 3 Aldebrandin of Sienna, *Régime de santé*, ed. Landouzy and Pépin (Paris, 1911, repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1978), 6.
- 4 This is the title of a collective work, *Le sentiment de la mort au Moyen Âge*, ed. Claude Sutto (Montreal: L’Aurore, 1979).

Doctor Cabanès see only puerile flights of fancy and gullible allegations to be refuted or invalidated without attempting to understand their mechanisms.⁵ Though contemporary historiography, following the lead of Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle, has been receptive to the “representations” and imaginings of death as well as its corporeal elements, the investigation into suspicious deaths has thus far remained a relatively deserted field, with one exception regarding England.⁶ Barbara Rosenwein may have given the title “Confronting Death” to one of the chapters of her work *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, but there is no discussion of the problems possibly generated by confronting certain deaths.⁷ In an article that focuses on Castile at the end of the Medieval period, Emilio Mitre Fernández enumerates seven approaches to royal deaths in the documents of the time, but suspicious deaths are nowhere to be found. Nor are they mentioned in the study of Portuguese chronicles by Iona McCleery, and scarcely in the analysis of the “marvelous” death of the Black Prince.⁸

By applying various types of sources (narrative, legal, medical, and other), this chapter endeavors to demonstrate that suspicious reactions to deaths were frequent and that, far from reverting to credulity, they reflect a growing desire for knowledge, comprehension, and explication that spanned broad social categories and responded to objectives that were far from irrational. By examining the temporalities, reasons, modalities, and aims of the attitude towards *mors* in the Occident during the Middle Ages, the present study aims to enliven what constitutes a dead zone in the historiography of death.

A sentiment of the Late Middle Ages?

“There are two things with kings that we often contest: their birth and their death. We don’t want one to be legitimate and the other natural.” With this quote from

5 Augustin Cabanès, *Les morts mystérieuses de l’histoire* (Paris, 1901).

6 Marie-Christine Pouchelle, “La prise en charge de la mort: médecine, médecins et chirurgiens devant les problèmes liés à la mort à la fin du Moyen Âge,” *Archives européennes de sociologie* 17 (1976): 249–278; *A réveiller les morts: La mort au quotidien dans l’Occident médiéval*, ed. Cécile Treffort and Danièle Alexandre-Bidon (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1993); *Il cadavere*, *Micrologus* 7 (1999); Peter Dinzelbacher, “Die Präsenz des Todes in der spätmittelalterlichen Mentalität,” in *Der Tod des Mächtigen, Kult und Kultur des Todes spätmittelalterlicher Herrscher*, ed. Lothar Kolmer (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1997), 27–58. In *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara J. Gusik (New York: P. Lang, 1999), the introduction summarizes the bibliography of the subject without offering any reflections on the interrogation in terms of the causes of death: see also the recent work by Sara M. Butler, *Forensic Medicine and Death Investigation in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

7 Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

8 See respectively Emilio Mitre Fernández, “Muerte y memoria del rey en la Castilla bajomedieval,” in *La idea y el sentimiento de la muerte en la historia y en el arte de la Edad Media* (St-James of Compostella: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1992), 17–26; Iona McCleery, “Medical Emplotment and Plotting Medicine: Health and Disease in Late Medieval Portuguese Chronicles,” *Social History of Medicine* 24.1 (2011): 125–141; and David Green, “Masculinity and Medicine: Thomas Walsingham and the Death of the Black Prince,” *Journal of Medieval History* 3 (2009): 34–51.

Alfred de Vigny, the physician Cabanès articulated what he believed was a timeless law of collective psychology, limited solely to those whose deaths were of great consequence.⁹ It is important to revisit this notion by examining whether this sentiment of suspicion varied by epoch and if it only referred to those in power. Invariably, the inquiry is heavily influenced by parameters of documentation, which differ significantly depending on whether the era is that of Grégoire de Tours or of Philippe de Commines. After 1200, the multiplication and diversification of written sources as well as the increase in institutions producing discourse boost the number of opportunities for identifying phenomena that were previously less visible, though not necessarily non-existent. It is nonetheless worthwhile to identify developments, or at the very least impressions of such developments.

At the end of the twelfth century, the author of *Miracles de Notre-Dame de Rocamadour* ridiculed the villagers of Saint-Sever for wanting to explain a spike in deaths by something other than the original sin that had rendered humans mortal.¹⁰ During what was already a rather advanced period of the Middle Ages, he illustrates the notion that it was vain to discuss death in any terms other than spiritual ones. The monopoly of clerics on the production of documentation during the High Middle Ages suggests that they rather broadly neglected to raise questions about the material and corporeal dimensions of *obitus*. They insisted that the end of earthly existence was a manifestation of the will Most High without attributing much importance to the circumstances of its occurrence or the reactions it produced. Admittedly, Grégoire de Tours was not indifferent to sickness and described, for example, the final illness of Felix de Nantes.¹¹ Yet when rulers perished, this led most commonly to vague and stereotypical remarks, possibly inspired by the hagiographic production that assigned exemplary narrative schemas to saints' deaths.¹² During the Early Middle Ages, the "Death of the Greats" did not offer much room for suspicious speculation.¹³ Hack's exhaustive survey of the deaths of Carolingian princes demonstrates how little attention hagiographic resources devoted to reasons for death.¹⁴ In his *Annales*, a genre that does not loan itself to this kind of detail, Flodoard de Reims briefly mentions the death of the Archbishop of Reims Seulfé (925), which he relates with greater precision in his *Historia*.¹⁵ Richer de Saint-Remi de Reims liked to brandish his medical science¹⁶ and was

9 Cabanès, *Les morts mystérieuses*, XIV.

10 *Miracles de Notre-Dame de Rocamadour au XII^e siècle*, ed. and trans. E. Albe (Paris, 1907, repr. Toulouse: Le Pérégrinateur, 1996), 276.

11 Grégoire de Tours, *Historia Francorum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH, Scriptores rerum merovingicarum*, I, Hanover, 1951, book VI, ch. 15.

12 See the study by Pietro Boglioni, "La scène de la mort dans les premières hagiographies latines," in *Le sentiment de la mort*, 183–210.

13 See the special number of the journal *Médiévales*, fall 1996.

14 Achim Th. Hack, *Alter, Krankheit, Tod und Herrschaft im frühen Mittelalter: das Beispiel der Karolinger* (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 2009), 68–89.

15 Flodoard, *Histoire de l'Église de Reims*, ed. et trans. M. Lejeune (Reims, 1854), vol. 2, 518, et *Annales de l'an 919 à l'an 976*, ed. abbé Bandeville (Reims, 1855), 32.

16 Hack, *Alter, Krankheit, Tod*, 86.

thus not opposed to taking an interest in the causes for princes' deaths. Nonetheless, he scarcely addressed the interrogations they led to, focusing rather on peremptory diagnostics such as with the case of Hugues Capet.¹⁷ The *opinio incerta* that appeared after the passing of Richard III of Normandy in 1028 does indeed attest to the existence of a collective discourse about the prince's death, but in a manner that remains very allusive.¹⁸ Orderic Vital conveyed the rumors spread throughout Normandy about the disappearance of certain figures such as the count and countess of Le Mans, but he related a high number of deaths without providing any commentary whatsoever.¹⁹ The same applies for the abbot Suger.

The cultural revolution of the twelfth century is characterized by the florescence of a natural philosophy dedicated to earthly creatures and by the appearance of a medical science that aimed to understand and heal diseases in accordance with rational principles. The progressive development of professions in health responded to an early social demand in Mediterranean Europe. These factors fostered a desire to better understand and indicate specific causes of death. The *Chroniques des comtes d'Anjou et des seigneurs d'Amboise* abound in details on the subject.²⁰ In addition, the growing powers of the princes meant that their passing elicited greater drama, now with stronger implications and a more significant impact in a world with improved circulation of information. In 1152, Conrad III fell ill and then died *non sine suspicione*, as did William of York in 1154.²¹ According to Matthieu Paris, Louis VIII's passing in 1226 caused a stir.²² Though the monk Saint-Albans fails to mention the comments prompted by the numerous death notices given in his account, he presents the deaths of four monks from Durham, who had come to the Pope in order to defend their abbot's interests from the king Henry III, as strange; likewise, he willingly adds to theories regarding other problematical deaths.²³ Though Guillaume de Puylaurens collected references to sudden deaths, as in the case of the count of Toulouse Raymond VI and the count of Foix, he did so without evoking any affiliated suspicions. In his discussion of Louis VIII, he only mentions that a

17 Richer de Saint-Remi, *Historia Francorum*, ed. and trans. R. Latouche (Paris, 1930), II, 331. See Bernhard Blumenkrantz, "Où est mort Hugues Capet?" *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 115 (1957): 168–171 and Laurent Theis, "La mort très obscure d'un roi de peu, Hugues Capet, 996," in *Les derniers jours des rois*, ed. Patrice Gueniffey (Paris: Perrin-Pocket, 2014), 50–64.

18 Guillaume de Malmesbury, *De gestis regum Anglorum*, ed. W. Stubb (London, 1887), vol. 1, 211.

19 Orderic Vital, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. A. Le Prévost et L. Delisle (Paris, 1840), vol. 2, 101.

20 *Chroniques des comtes d'Anjou et des seigneurs d'Amboise*, ed. L. Halphen et R. Poupardin (Paris, 1913).

21 See Otton de Freising, *Gesta Friderici imperatoris*, MGH SS (see above) (Hanover, 1868), 389; and David Knowles, "The Case of Saint William of York," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 5 (1936): 162–177.

22 Matthieu Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. H. R. Luard (London, 1876), vol. 3, 107 and 116, from Roger of Wendover (*Flores historiarum*, ed. H. Hewlett [London, 1887], vol. 2, 313).

23 Paris, *Chronica majora*, IV, 61.

mysterious disease had taken his life.²⁴ For the multiple death notices contained in his chronicle, Bernard Itier, monk of Saint-Martial de Limoges († 1224), only indicates suspicion for three cases.²⁵

There was a change in the period from 1300 to 1330, as noted by Michelet, who saw the beginning of the fourteenth century as nothing but a long trial and an “epidemic of crime.”²⁶ Many princely deaths fomented doubt. Gilles li Musit’s *Fuit mala suspicio* discussed the death of Louis X (1316).²⁷ Jean de Saint-Victor indicated the upheaval caused by the deaths of Philippe IV and his successor, as well as the *suspicio exorta* following the death of the queen Jeanne de Navarre and the suspicions associated with the passing of Philippe V.²⁸ When Louis de Nevers, son of the Count of Flanders, died in 1322, speculations led some to believe that the prince had been poisoned.²⁹ Similar questioning arose with the death of Pope Benedict XI in 1304.³⁰ The days when Pierre Damien affirmed that pontiffs only expired by divine will were well over. In his opusculum about papal longevity, written around 1065 – a time when the bishops of Rome were actually dying at a quick pace – he wrote without hesitation that a pope’s life ended only by natural means. The prevailing sentiment for Christians was not to be suspicion but fear, since a pope’s death was a direct manifestation of divine will.³¹ Around 1300, the death of another pillar of Christianity, the emperor, was not experienced with the same certitude. Albertino Mussato’s text speculates about the reasons for Henry VII’s demise in 1313.³² Ptolemy of Lucca emphasized the *varia relatio*: “he died on August 24 of natural causes, though some, out of malice, have said that he was given poison with his Eucharist.”³³

Around the middle of the century, there continued to be numerous cases, both in Aragon (the suspicious death in November 1347 of the infante Jaume, third son of Alfonso III, in Barcelona) and the Germanic empire, as with Ludwig of Bavaria.³⁴ Froissart believes that the death in 1324 of Marie de Luxembourg, wife

24 Guillaume de Puylaurens, *Chronique*, ed. and trans. J. Duvernoy (Paris: CNRS, 1976), 122–123.

25 Bernard Itier, *Chronique*, ed. and trans. J.-L. Lemaître (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998).

26 Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), vol. 5, 135.

27 Gilles li Muisit, *Chronique et annales*, ed. H. Lemaître (Paris, 1906), 91.

28 See respectively, *Chronique anonyme de Caen, Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France* (henceforth *RHGF*), vol. 22 (Paris, 1865), 26; and Jean de Saint-Victor, *Memoriale historianum*, *RHGF*, vol. 21 (Paris, 1855), 652 and 674.

29 Saint-Victor, *Memoriale historianum*, 677.

30 *Processus Bernardi Delitiosi*, ed. A. Friedlander (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996): 39.

31 Pierre Damien, *Opusculum de brevitae vitae pontificum romanorum et divina providentia*, ed. Migne, *Patrologie latine (PL)*, 145 (Paris, 1853), 471–480, here 474. However, it is important to note that the death of Victor III (1086) generated rumors. See for example Malmesbury, *De gestis regum Anglorum*, book III, ch. 266, II, 326.

32 Albertino Mussato, *De gestis Henrici VII. Caesaris, ou Historia augusta*, ed. Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* (henceforth *RIS*), X (Milan, 1727), 568: he lists three pathological causes.

33 Ptolemy of Lucca, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. Muratori, *RIS*, XI (Milan, 1728), 1239–1240.

34 Jean de Hocsem, *Chronique*, ed. G. Kurth (Brussels, 1927), 368; Michael McVaugh, *Medicine before the Plague: Practitioners and their Patients in the Crown of Aragon, 1285–1345* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 156.

of Charles IV of France, occurred “suspiciously.”³⁵ He reported the suspicion that arose among the Ghents in 1379 upon the death of the oppositional leader Jehan Lyon.³⁶ The Monk of Saint-Denis was not the last to communicate people’s reactions to news of deaths, such as that of the cardinal of Laon in 1388.³⁷ The ailments and deaths of the powerful became systematically subject to “wild imaginings,” as Honorat Bovet lamented circa 1390.³⁸ The demise of Michelle de France, Duchess of Burgundy, in 1422 illustrates this phenomenon: “yet there were various murmurings throughout Gand about what had caused her death... for some said that the princess fell into a languor from the melancholy of what had happened (the murder of her father-in-law, John the Fearless, attributed to her brother the dauphin), fearing that her husband would now only look at her with regret, and this meant that her death could be natural; this appeared to be true. Others considered the matter with greater suspicion and maintained that she had been poisoned.”³⁹ When the duke of Brabant met his end in 1430, the sentiment was very much the same,⁴⁰ as with the case of the duke of Gloucester in 1447.⁴¹ Charles VII’s death “did not pass without the suspicion of poisoning,” and this was entertained “with no little belief,” says Thomas Basin, because of the attitude of the heir to the throne upon learning of his father’s death.⁴² It is easy to add further examples, especially from Italy. Sources mention the rumors that accompanied the afflictions and deaths of powerful figures such as Bianca Maria Visconti (1468).⁴³ Gian Galeazzo Sforza expired in 1494, “not without some suspicion,” according to the Milanese chronicler Bernardino Corio.⁴⁴

Raising questions about the deaths of individuals, including women – even if narrators rarely mention the causes of death for queens of England – is not only a

35 Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. S. Luce, G. Raynaud and L. Mirot (Paris: Société de l’Histoire de France, 1869) I, 83.

36 *Ibid.*, ed. J. A. Buchon (Paris, 1837), II, 56.

37 *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis*, ed. L.-F. Bellaguet (Paris, 1839), vol. 1, 563. Jean Juvénal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI*, ed. J. A. Buchon (Paris, 1843), 364. Strangely, this problem of suspicious death is not among the elements addressed by Bernard Guenée, *L’opinion publique à la fin du Moyen Âge d’après la Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis* (Paris: Perrin, 2002).

38 Honorat Bovet, *L’apparicion de Jehan de Meun*, ed. J. Pichon (Paris, 1845), 11.

39 Georges Chastellain, *Chronique*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels, 1863), vol. 1, 341; the same tone is evident in Enguerrand de Monstrelet, *Chronique*, ed. L. Douet d’Arcq (Paris, 1860), vol. 4, 118.

40 Chastellain, *Chronique*, book II, ch. 25–26, II, 72 et seq.; Monstrelet, *Chronique*, IV, 399–400; Edmond de Dynter, *Chronica ducum Lotharingiae et Brabantiae*, ed. P. F. X. de Ram (Brussels, 1860), book VI, ch. 236–237, vol. 3, 497 et seq.

41 Mathieu d’Escouchy, *Chronique*, ed. G. Du Fresne de Beaucourt (Paris, 1863), vol. 1, 114.

42 Thomas Basin, *Historia Karoli septimi*, ed. and tr. Ch. Samaran (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1944), book V, ch. 21, vol. 2, 276.

43 See Marilyn Nicoud, “Expérience de la maladie et échange épistolaire. Les derniers moments de Bianca Maria Visconti (mai–octobre 1468),” *Mélanges de l’Ecole Française de Rome, Moyen Âge* 112–1 (2000): 311–458.

44 Bernardino Corio, *Storia di Milano*, ed. E. de Magri (Milan, 1857), vol. 3, 574.

psychosocial phenomenon.⁴⁵ It is also a legal phenomenon that first burgeoned in northern Italy and in Provence (end of the thirteenth century), then in France over the course of the fourteenth century, fostering the development of the inquisitorial procedure that meant a simple suspicion could set the legal machine in motion so as to ensure that a possible crime did not go unpunished: it was in 1286 when Salimbene, in Cremona, reported that a male cadaver had been opened in order to determine the cause of death.⁴⁶ Such investigations were not reserved for the dominant milieus. In 1312, the bailiff of Orléans had Jeanne, the dame de la Chome and widow of Guillaume d'Aguilli imprisoned, "suspected for the death of her husband, without any accuser or denouncer coming forward."⁴⁷ In Reims, a man was suspected in 1348 of having poisoned his wife in order to marry another.⁴⁸ Significantly, death was interrogated by experts acting as "mires jurés" (physicians having taken a professional or legal oath), as in the criminal register of Saint-Martin-des-Champs from the fourteenth century: a fur trader, Lorin de Nanthuelg, was a suspect in the death of Jehannin de Troies, whose body was

45 Michael Evans, *The Death of Kings: Royal Deaths in Medieval England* (London, New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 213.

46 Enzo Cotturi, "L'insegnamento dell'anatomia nelle università medioevali," in *Universita e società nei secoli XII-XVI* (Pistoia, 1982), 131–145, here 135. For the case of the Parlement de Paris, see Louis de Carbonnières, *La procédure devant la chambre criminelle du parlement de Paris au XIV^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2004), 514–537. For the medical point of view, see Danielle Jacquart, *Le milieu médical en France du XII^e au XV^e siècles* (Genève: Droz, 1981), 291–293. Regarding the question of the recourse of the law to physicians, see in particular Joseph Shatzmiller, *Médecine et justice en Provence médiévale* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1989); likewise, "The Jurisprudence of the Dead Body. Medical Practitioners at the Service of Civic and Legal Authorities," in *Il cadavere, Micrologus* 7 (1999): 223–230; Katherine Park, "The Criminal and the Sainly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Medieval Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): 1–33; Andrée Courtemanche, "The Judge, the Doctor and the Poisoner: Medical Expertise in Manuscript Judicial Rituals at the End of the 14th Century," in *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan*, ed. J. Rollo-Koster (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 105–123; Franck Collard, "Ouvrir pour découvrir. Réflexions sur les expertises de cadavres empoisonnés à l'époque médiévale," in *Le corps à l'épreuve*, ed. Danièle Quéruel, Evelyne Samama, and Franck Collard (Langres: Guéniot, 2002), 177–190; *Id.*, "Secundum artem et peritiam medicina. Les expertises dans les affaires d'empoisonnement à la fin du Moyen Âge," in *Expertise et conseil au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012), 161–173; and Joël Chandelier and Marilyn Nicoud, "Entre droit et médecine: Les origines de la médecine légale en Italie," in *Les frontières des savoirs en Italie à l'époque des premières universités (XIIIe-XVe siècles)*, ed. J. Chandelier and A. Robert (Rome: EFR, 2015), 233–293.

47 *Les Olim*, ed. A. Beugnot (Paris, 1848), vol. 3–2, 748.

48 *Archives administratives de la ville de Reims*, ed. P. Varin (Paris, 3 vol., 1843), vol. 2–2, 1186, plea from January 31, 1349 (stylus novus): "regarding the suspicion of having previously poisoned his wife because he wanted to marry the widow of Drouynet Buiron afterwards; his wife died from the poisoning, as became known to the lieutenant" ("sur le soupçon d'avoir empoisonné jadis sa femme parce qu'il voulait, après la mort de celle-ci, se marier avec la femme de feu Drouynet Buiron; de cet empoisonnement, sa femme était décédée ainsi que cela était venu à la connaissance dudit lieutenant").

found in the *hôtel* where they had lived together; the next day, August 25, 1332, a surgeon examined the corpse and found nothing broken or wounded, nor any evidence of a blow that could have led to death or injury. He had died from the brain disorder known as apoplexy, which had led to an effusion of the brain through the nostrils, ears, and mouth.⁴⁹ The registers of the Parlement de Paris also contain *pro suspicione mortis* investigations.⁵⁰ There are archives in Bologna that document growing numbers of reports for autopsies conducted by legally mandated physicians, either at the request of one party or on a voluntary basis, in order to examine the causes for death.⁵¹ As early as 1302, the authorities ordered the autopsy of one Azzelino, whose death had seemed suspect.⁵² Including all types of crime, the legal archives of Bologna have 19 expert reports for the year 130 and almost seven times as many for 1359.⁵³ In Milan, the evaluations abound in the vocabulary of suspicion.⁵⁴ Smaller towns such as Reggio Emilia took the same steps.⁵⁵ In England, despite differences in the legal procedure, an identical system for examining suspicious deaths developed after 1200. Investigations were superficial and the reasons were primarily fiscal.⁵⁶

By order of both religious and secular authorities, the epidemic of 1348 led to professional interrogations that resulted in the *Pestschriften* edited by K. Sudhoff.⁵⁷ This intellectual position differs radically from the reception of the Plague of Justinian, undoubtedly because the providential dimension accorded to the latter sufficed to

49 *Registre criminel de Saint-Martin des Champs au XIV^e siècle*, ed. L. Tanon (Paris, 1877), 20–21; other exams to see if the death was “natural”: 29, 46, 109.

50 Example, French National Archives, *Parlement criminel*, X²a 10, f. 90, Jehan Rose imprisoned at Châtelet de Paris under suspicion for the death of the deceased Jehan de Verruyes (1378); X²a 14, 93v, suspicious death of Jehan Guevaut, draper. Preparatory interrogations were made against his widow Jehanne and her new husband, Robin Calet (December 13 and 14, 1402).

51 Eugenio Dall’Osso, *L’organizzazione medico-legale a Bologna e a Venezia nei secoli XII–XIV* (Cesena, 1956); Ludwig Münster, “La medicina legale in Bologna da suoi albori fino alla fine del secolo XIV,” *Bolletino dell’Accademia medica pistoiese Filippo Pancini* 26 (1955): 257–271, here 259.

52 Gunther Wolff, “Leichen-besichtigung und – untersuchung bis zur *Karolina* als Vorstufe Gerichtlicher Sektion,” *Janus* 42 (1938): 225–286, here 254.

53 Edgardo Ortalli, “La perizia medica a Bologna nei secoli XIII e XIV. Normativa e pratica di un Istituto giudiziario,” *Deputazione di Storia patria per le provincie di Romagna, Atti et memorie*, nova serie 17–19 (1965–1968): 223–259.

54 Marilyn Nicoud, *Le prince et les médecins. Pensée, cultures et pratiques médicales à la cour des Visconti et des Sforza (1402–1476)* (Rome: EFR, 2014), ch. 4; here, the suspected cause of death is the plague.

55 Joanna Carraway Vitiello, “Forensic Evidence, Lay Witnesses and Medical Expertise in the Criminal Courts of Late Medieval Italy,” in *Medicine and the Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy J. Turner and Sara M. Butler (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 133–156.

56 Butler, *Forensic Medicine and Death Investigation*.

57 *Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des schwarzen Todes*, *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 2 (1909) to 17 (1925). The bibliography for the plague and perceptions of it is vast. One of the most comprehensive studies is that conducted by Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1975–6).

squelch suspicious sentiments.⁵⁸ It's clear that in the mid-fourteenth century, the ultimate origin of epidemics remained associated with the heavens, but this transcendent causality did not eliminate the desire for understanding, intensified by the surge in medical knowledge as well as a growing fear of hidden evil and occult forces.⁵⁹

The development observed vis-à-vis the plague did not occur simply because documentation became more visible. It proceeded from a general change in approaches to death that is apparent when comparing individual cases from one era to the next. During the Carolingian period and into the eleventh century, the deaths of powerful figures who had consumed inappropriate or incorrect dosages of potions were not subject to suspicion, except in the controversial instance of Charles the Bald.⁶⁰ Sturmii, abbot of Fulda, died in 779 after ingesting a medicine prescribed by a physician whom Charlemagne had recommended. No suspicions arose,⁶¹ nor when the king of France Henri I died after taking the improper dosage of a remedy.⁶² Yet in 1391, the death of Amédée VII de Savoie under similar circumstances inspired a strong sense of suspicion.⁶³ Research into the human causality of death, based on a naturalist approach developed after 1100, thus increasingly challenged Biblical evidence of individual finitude and the invocation of providential action, which of course maintained its role; Richard Lescot provided no alternative explanation for the sudden demise of an arrogant man in the middle of the fourteenth century.⁶⁴ In his diary, Jaccopo Volterra relates the death of the abbot Ferry de Cluny on October 7, 1483: he cheerfully went home following a ceremony, ate, suffered from cardiac pains, and then died within the hour. There isn't the slightest indication of suspicion.⁶⁵ Such cases, however, now seemed to be rare. People wanted to get answers, minimize the unknown, and reveal what was hidden: "many die without scholars knowing what the cause was," remarked Pietro Carrario in 1476 in a *quaestio* that completed Pietro d'Abano's treaty on poison.⁶⁶ There is thus evidence of suspicion; the question remains as to what forms of expression it took.

58 Voir Jean-Noël Biraben, Jacques Le Goff, "La peste dans le haut Moyen Âge," *Annales ESC* 24 (1969): 1484–1510.

59 This is the origin of the obsession with *occultum* as successfully identified by Jacques Chiffolleau. See Dominique Barthélémy and Jacques Chiffolleau, "Les sources cléricales et la notion de clandestinité au Moyen Âge (France, XI^e-XIV^e)," in *Histoire et clandestinité du Moyen Âge à la première guerre mondiale*, special edition of the *Revue du Vivarais* (1979): 19–39.

60 Janet Nelson, "La mort de Charles le Chauve," *Médiévales* 31 (fall 1996): 53–66.

61 *Vita Sturmii*, *RHGF*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1744), 448.

62 Vital, *Historia ecclesiastica*, II, 74.

63 A significant part of the legal documentation for this very rich affair was assembled as supporting documents by Giovanni Carbonelli, *Gli ultimi giorni del conte rosso e i processi per la sua morte* (Pinerolo, 1912). See Franck Collard, "Perfidus physicus ou inexpertus medicus. Le cas Jean de Grandville, médecin du comte Amédée VII de Savoie," in *Mires, barbiers, physiciens et charlatans: les marges de la médecine de l'Antiquité au XVI^e siècle*, ed. Franck Collard and Evelyne Samama (Langres: Guéniot, 2004), 133–149.

64 Richard Lescot, *Chronique*, ed. J. Lemoine (Paris, 1896), 10.

65 Jacoppo Volterra, *Diarium romanum*, *RIS* (Citta di Castello, 1904), 123.

66 Petrus Carrarius, *Questio de venenis ad terminum*, Venice, 1566, 269.

Expressions of suspicion

The formulas encountered in the sources time and again, *ut dicitur* and *ut ferebatur* (“as is said” and “as is reported”) indicate the sentiment of suspicion. The discourse, however, can take several forms, from collective rumors that approximate the whisperings of gossip to individual, well-justified statements sometimes written down in libelles and letters.⁶⁷ Dynter and Chastellain present two degrees of the phenomenon in regards to the death of the duke of Brabant. The first designates rumor as indistinct and general talk (*rumor inter populares*).⁶⁸ Without assigning it a specific origin, the second presents it as a constructed, accusative discourse.⁶⁹ Speech served to fill in the void left both by the mystery of death and the vacuum of authority.

To signify Parisians’ reaction to the death of the royal heir in 1276, Guillaume de Nangis used the term *murmurabant*.⁷⁰ *Hystriones* (in the sense of street singers) spread the news of the suspicious death of the duke of Bavaria and his wife.⁷¹ Following the death of Amédée VII de Savoie, the entire county resounded with the *rumor populi*, as indicated in a document from August 1392.⁷² A *rumor scandalosus* spread like wildfire about the suspicious death of a Cistercian monk in 1461 at the Montpeyroux monastery, with an adjective indicating the detriment that it caused to the monastic community.⁷³ In regards to the death of Michelle de France, Chastellain opined that “there has never been so much whispering about town than this.”⁷⁴ The unbridled rumors of collective talk took the place of the ritualized, seemingly words of mourning, and could turn into “belief.” Gian Galeazzo Sforza’s death, which took place shortly after Charles VIII’s visit, led “all of Italy” to the conviction that there was nothing natural about it.⁷⁵

The sentiment of suspicious death often integrated a causality that was criminal and, where necessary, also accusatory. Commynes referred to the comments elicited by the death of Charles de Guyenne in 1472 as “strange words.”⁷⁶ The Latin effectively conveys this reality that constructs *suspicio* with a genitive that refers back to its object: *suspicio veneni*. The *veneficium* is frequently invoked, with its double

67 For a topic that has received a great deal of attention recently, see in particular *La rumeur au Moyen Âge, du mépris à la manipulation (V^e-XV^e siècle)*, ed. Maïté Billoré and Myriam Soria (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011), with the very illuminating introduction by Claude Gauvard.

68 Dynter, *Chronica*, VI, 236.

69 Chastellain, *Chronique*, II, 26.

70 Guillaume de Nangis, *Vita Philippi tertii*, *RHGF*, vol. 20 (Paris, 1840), 503.

71 Mathias von Neuenburg, *Cronica*, ed. A. Hofmeister (Berlin, 1924), *MGH, Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum Scholarum* (henceforth *MGH ss rr g. in us. sch.*), n. s. (4), 160.

72 Carbonelli, *Gli ultimi giorni*, 254.

73 *Statuta capitulorum generalium ordinis cisterciensis*, ed. J. Canivez (Louvain, 8 vol., 1937), vol. 5, 96.

74 Chastellain, *Chronique*, I, 341.

75 Guichardin, *Storia d'Italia*, ed. S. Seidel Menchi (Turin, 1971), vol. 1, 13.

76 Philippe de Commynes, *Mémoires*, ed. J. Blanchard (Paris: Librairie générale française, 2001), book III, ch. 9, 215–216.

meaning of poisoning and bewitchment. Suspicion and *veneficia* are linked because, as with bewitchment, the concealed workings of the *venenum* are invisible to the eye and complicate the matter of understanding the reasons for death, unless it borrows from signs for maladies such as dysentery or malaria.⁷⁷ “Speculations of evil” (as Froissart said of Charles VI’s sickness) did not just call the death of the deceased into question, but also implicated the alleged perpetrators.⁷⁸ During the same period (in 1276 and 1278), the vicious gossip circulating in the streets of Paris and of Prague targeted the queen of France and of Bohemia following the death of and serious risk of death to two young princes.⁷⁹ According to Pierre de Fénin, the residents of Ghent designated those responsible for the duchess Michelle’s death in 1422: “and weighed heavy accusations on some rulers who were in the service of the duke Philip...”⁸⁰

Reputation (or *fama*, rumor) “is not born of true science,” as said by one of the parties involved in a case opened in the French Parlement at the beginning of the fifteenth century after the suspicious death of an elderly woman who had, according to some, died of natural causes, while others contended that she had been poisoned.⁸¹ However, it’s necessary to refrain from opposing an ignorant mass culture that generates suspicion with an elite, educated culture that was the domain of those in the legal and medical professions. The sentiment of suspicious death intermingles both the voices of the elite and of the commoners. Did Commynes not make suspicion the signature malady of princes?⁸² The sentiment of suspicious death was one that was shared.

Triggers of suspicion

A discussion of the elements that generated this sentiment will advance our understanding of this phenomenon. Several factors of the questioning of death come into play and are, in part, essentially “deviations from the norm.” Below is a brief presentation of such deviations, bearing in mind that this norm is “natural” death. During the Middle Ages, there was no definition for this concept, which finds itself at the intersection of several domains.⁸³

Bède distinguishes natural death, with no other origin than divine will, from criminal death, which presumes external intervention.⁸⁴ In the voluminous

77 For further reading, see the present author’s *The Crime of Poison*.

78 Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Buchon, IV, 279.

79 Julien de Gaulle, “Pièces sur Pierre de la Brosse,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de France*, 1844, 87–100, see 88 and 98, letter from Marie de Brabant to the pope summarizing the condemnations to which she had been subject. *Cronica de gestis principum a tempore Rudolphi regis usque ad tempora Ludowici imperatoris*, ed. G. Leidinger, *MGH ss rr g. in us. sch.* (Hanover-Leipzig, 1918), 36.

80 Pierre de Fénin, *Mémoires*, ed. Dupont (Paris, 1837), 182.

81 National Archives of France, X²a 14, 217.

82 Commynes, *Mémoires*, book VIII, ch. 20, 643.

83 Butler, *Forensic medicine*, 177–181 and 271.

84 Bède, *Pénitentiel*, ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben, *Die Bussordnungen der abendländischen Kirche* (Halle, 1851), *De occisione*.

chronicle of Spain that he wrote in the thirteenth century, the Castilian Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada distinguishes *mors propria*, or natural death, from other types.⁸⁵ The medical literature essentially endeavored to outline the processes leading to and the means for prognosticating death.⁸⁶ Jean de Saint-Amand wrote: “death is considered violent when its agent is not natural and when this violent death proceeds from three causes: the first is that which is contrary to life, the second the suppression of natural moisture, and the third is the decrease in natural heat.”⁸⁷ Elements that would lead to doubts about the natural character of a death are nowhere to be found. Texts about poisons, which started to proliferate at the end of the thirteenth century, focused less on criteria for suspicious deaths than on *signa mortui ex veneno* that allowed for the accurate identification of causes for death without raising suspicions about the responsible agent. By making a comparison with death due to poison, Gui de Chauliac negatively defined death by natural causes: “The signs that somebody has died from poisoning are in Galen, in the sixth book of the *Curatio Morborum Internorum*, where he writes: ‘When somebody abounding with good humors and with a good diet becomes pale or blackish, or turns different colors, or weak, as generally results from some noxious – that is, poisonous – drug, this signifies that this person has been poisoned. Otherwise, death has been the result of corruptions from the body itself.’”⁸⁸ This presents several elements that could trigger suspicion.

The first does not appear above and is quantitative: even when attributed to divine vengeance, deaths that are on a massive, epidemic, or epizootic scale lead to suspicions about a terrestrial agent. This was true at the time of Grégoire de Tours, when an outbreak of dysentery resulted in unrivaled devastation and led to the belief that it was a *pestilentia manufacta*, a sickness provoked by humans.⁸⁹ In Saint-Sever, there were deaths among inhabitants that were too close together to not appear suspect.⁹⁰ In 1258, suspicions abounded in England after several barons grew ill and died.⁹¹ In 1348, the *universalis decessus* raised a *vehemens suspicio*.⁹² For, as Guillaume de Machaut wrote, “there wasn’t a single doctor or healer who could state the cause, the provenance, the nature [of the epidemic].”⁹³ For Alphonse de

85 Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada, *Historia de rebus Hispanie sive historia gothica*, ed. J. Fernandez Valverde (Turnhout: Brepols, 1987), 57 and 122.

86 Danielle Jacquart, “Le difficile pronostic de mort (XIV^e-XV^e siècles),” *Médiévales* 46 (2004): 11–22.

87 Jean de Saint-Amand, *Concordancie*, ed. J. Pagel (Berlin, 1992), 197 et seq.

88 Gui de Chauliac, *La grande chirurgie*, ed. E. Nicaise (Paris, 1890), 434; ed. M. Mc Vaugh under the title *Inventarium sive chirurgica magna* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 305–306.

89 Grégoire de Tours, *Historia Francorum*, V, 34: *a multis autem adserebatur venenum occultum esse* (“many believed that there had been a hidden poison”).

90 *Miracles de Notre-Dame de Rocamadour*, 276: “family and friends were dying in an untimely manner” (“des proches ou des amis décédaient de façon inopinée”).

91 Paris, *Chronica majora*, V, 702.

92 Muisit, *Chronique et annales*, 223.

93 Guillaume de Machaut, *Jugement du roi de Navarre*, in *Œuvres*, ed. P. Tarbé (Reims-Paris, 1849, repr. Geneva, Slatkine, 1977), 73: “There was no doctor who knew the cause of

Cordoue, the causes were not natural.⁹⁴ Although medical science had achieved high etiologi- cal and nosological standards – at least in the opinion of its practitioners – it wasn’t able to explain the plague with humoral theories. This led people to attribute it to outside sources.⁹⁵ On a lesser scale, repeated deaths likewise fostered the senti- ment of suspicious death. Rumors followed the simultaneous deaths of the duchess of Austria and her son in 1305, the consecutive deaths of the duke of Bavaria and his wife in 1340, and the deaths of the duke of Austria’s two sons in late 1344–early 1345.⁹⁶ Pierre de Fénin demonstrates that the quick succession of deaths of Louis de Guyenne followed by Jean de Touraine and then his father-in-law Guillaume de Hollande (December 1415, April and May 1417) fostered suspicion among “many people.”⁹⁷

The individual parameters of death that triggered suspicion are not surprising. The first element is the age of the deceased. For Isidore of Seville, “there are three types of death: immature, early, and natural. The first happens during childhood, the second in youth, and the last is natural and comes during old age.”⁹⁸ Césaire de Heisterbach distinguishes *mors immatura* (in children), *mors acerba* (for people in their prime) and appropriate or natural death that occurs in the winter of life.⁹⁹ Nicolas de Lyre wrote that those with a good constitution could live to be 80 years old.¹⁰⁰ Based on Scripture, writings on medicine and health determined the natural age for death.¹⁰¹ For Aldobrandino of Sienna, nature had chosen 70 as the age for death.¹⁰² Dying before this age provided an instance of

the illness, its origins, or what it was” (“Ne fusicien n’estoit ni mire / Qui bien sceust la cause dire / Dont ce venoit, ne que c’estoit”).

94 Alphonse de Cordoue, *Epistola et regimen de pestilentia*, ed. K. Sudhoff, in *Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren*, III, 224. “the cause is something other than natural... Experience has shown that the origins of this epidemic are not some constellation and thus there was no natural infection of the elements, but the cause rather comes from the depths of a malice of profound iniquity invented through the artifice of the most adept; this is why recommendations from knowledgeable physicians is unable to bring any relief to those afflicted by this cruel, pernicious, and worst evil” (“la cause est autre que naturel- le... L’expérience a montré que cette épidémie ne provient pas de quelque constella- tion et par conséquent il n’y a eu aucune infection naturelle des éléments, mais elle provient des tréfonds d’une malice de profonde iniquité inventée par un artifice des plus subtils, d’où le fait que le conseil des médecins savants ne puisse apporter nulle aide aux malades atteints de ce mal cruel et pernicieux, le pire qui soit”).

95 Michel Hébert, “La mort: impact réel et choc psychologique,” in *Le sentiment de la mort au Moyen Age*, 17–31.

96 See respectively, Saint-Victor, *Memoriale historiarum*, 644; Neuenburg, *Cronica*, 160; and Jean De Winthertur, *Chronica*, ed. F. Baethgen (Berlin, 1923), *MGH ss rr g. in us. sch.*, n. s. (3), 251.

97 Fénin, *Mémoires*, 70: “[these matters] occurred in a short period of time” (“[ces affaires] advindrent toutes en peu d’espace”).

98 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum libri XX*, ed. F. V. Otto (Leipzig, 1833), XI, 2, 32.

99 Césaire de Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange (Cologne, 1851), Distinction XI.

100 Cited by Rolf Sprandel, “Alter und Todesfurcht nach der spätmittelalterlichen Bibe- lexegese” in *Death in the Middle Ages*, ed. Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke (Louvain: Leuven University Press), 1983, 107–116, here 115 n. 36.

101 Ps. 89:10.

102 “Mors natureuz si est en LXX ans par nature”; cited by Pouchelle, “La prise en charge de la mort,” 274. Also see “Vita longa.” *Vecchiaia e durata della vita*, Marie-Thérèse

*mors abbreviata*¹⁰³ or *mors immature*, which strikes at an inappropriate time following the survival of the perils associated with childhood.¹⁰⁴ When Henry VII met his demise at the age of 35, suspicions arose because he had been in his prime, and at what should have been the middle of his life.¹⁰⁵ The death of Lionel de Clarence appeared to have occurred “rather astonishingly” (Froissart), for he was a “young knight, strong and very adept.”¹⁰⁶ The dauphins Louis de Guyenne and Jean de Touraine both died young, at 20 and 17 years of age, respectively (1415 and 1417), which contributed considerably to suspicions about their deaths.¹⁰⁷ The early, quick death of Ladislas of Hungary, who was only 18, loomed large in the *suspicio post mortem* that arose in 1457.¹⁰⁸ The same was the case for the 25-year-old duke of Brabant, who had been young and full of life (*juvenis strenuus*), and whom his entourage had believed was destined for “longevity and a lengthy reign,” perhaps based on a horoscope.¹⁰⁹ For Yves de Chartres around 1100, the *immatura mors* far from concealing some mystery, was a punishment for wickedness: “A premature death takes those who, instead of converting repentantly, continue to live in malice.”¹¹⁰ In the final centuries of the Middle Ages, early deaths fostered doubt and questioning.

The circumstances surrounding such deaths also came into play, though the alternatives ended up generalizing suspicion. “Evil death” or sudden death, which was so dreaded because it put the soul at risk, no longer came down to an indication of divine punishment; it could be attributed to numerous causes,¹¹¹ and for this reason generated doubt. The *inopinatus transitus* of the archbishop of York in 1154 seemed suspect, explained William of Newburgh, because it had been so unexpected.¹¹² The *mors inopinata* of Guillaume de Valence in Viterbe (1239) was suspicious for this reason, according to Matthieu Paris.¹¹³ When death did not announce itself with warning

Lorcin, “Vieillesse et vieillissement vus par les médecins du Moyen Age,” *Bulletin du centre d'histoire économique et sociale de la région lyonnaise* 4 (1983): 5–22.

103 Jacquart, “Le difficile pronostic,” 10.

104 Norbert Ohler, *Sterben und Tod im Mittelalter* (Munich: Artemis, 1990), dedicates chapter VI to premature death without presenting any reflections on how it was perceived.

105 Pierre de Zittau, *Chronique de Königsalle*, ed. J. Loserth (Vienna, 1875), 351.

106 Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. by the SHF, VII, 83–84: “Of which people were quite stunned...” (“Dont ses gens furent très ébahis...”). Note that the *Chronicon Anglie, 1328–1388*, ed. Edward M. Thompson (London, 1874), 61, deems the duke’s death unexpected and sudden but without drawing any conclusions about its causes.

107 Clément de Fauquembergue, *Journal*, ed. A. Tuetey (Paris, 1910), vol. 2, 32.

108 See Gerold Hayer, “Krankheit, Sterben und Tod eines Fürsten. Eine Augenzeugenbericht über die letzten Lebenstage Herzog Albrechts VI. von Österreich,” in “*Du quoter tôt.*” *Sterben im Mittelalter. Ideal und Realität*, ed. Markus J. Wenninger (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1998), 31–50.

109 Chastellain, *Chronique*, II, 25. The moment of *mors fatalis* is determined according to the position of stars at birth: see Giovanni Balbi, *Catholicon* (Mayence, 1460, identical reprint in 1971), *sv mors*.

110 Cited by Sprandel, “Alter und Todesfurch,” 109 n. 9.

111 Vincent de Beauvais enumerates them in *Speculum naturale* (Douai, 1624), book XXIV, ch. 54: these included good humor and corpulence.

112 William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum anglicarum*, ed. H. C. Hamilton (London, 1856), I, 71.

113 Paris, *Chronica majora*, III, 623.

signs, it aroused suspicion. Henry VII was described at the moment of his death as *corpore sanus*, showing no trace of imbalance in temperament (*distemperantiae vestigium*).¹¹⁴ The count of Guritia died without warning in 1323, the night following a joyous banquet, and thus surely not of natural causes.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the duchess of Bar met an untimely – and thus not natural – death in 1404, the night following a wedding.¹¹⁶ Henry V's sudden death likewise seemed suspect.¹¹⁷

However, debilitation that lasted for months, as was the case for Philip V, also led to questioning. Slow declines and states of constant frailty frustrated physicians, who therefore preferred to identify pathogenic agents that were unnatural. In his treatise on poison from around 1425, Sante Ardoini de Pesaro maintained that a person afflicted by an ailment that did not respond to the appropriate remedies aroused suspicion of poisoning.¹¹⁸

Sometimes, different sources report sudden death or ongoing debilitation for the same person. The young and vigorous duke of Brabant had thus been debilitated for a relatively long time, and there are accounts that report on the longevity of the duke's malady.¹¹⁹ Some believe that Louis XI's brother, Charles de Guyenne, deceased at the age of 27, was sick for an extended period, while others believe that physicians had expected him to live for a long time.¹²⁰

Patients' appearance, both pre- and post-mortem, as well as their words and behavior, served as grounds for suspicion. Neither Amédée de Savoie, who suffered from a locked jaw due to tetanus (an unfamiliar ailment in 1390), nor Charles VII, afflicted with an oral ulcer, would or could open their mouths to eat: this sufficed to lead to speculations that their deaths resulted from murderous plots that had made them wary of all food.¹²¹ The physical discoloration described by Girolamo

114 Zittau, *Chronique de Königsale*, 351.

115 Giovanni Villani, *Historie universali de suoi tempi*, Venice, 1559, book IX, ch. 199, I, 409.

116 *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis*, III, 210.

117 Monstrelet, *Chronique*, I, 95: "In the month of April prior to Easter in the year 1442, the king of England was struck by an apoplexy of which he died suddenly. Nobody said that he had been poisoned" ("Ou moys d'avril avant Pasques l'an IIII^e XX et deux, le roy d'Angleterre fut frappé d'une appoplecie [apoplexie] dont il mourut sans parler, soudainement. Aucuns disoient qu'il fut empoisonné").

118 Sante Ardoini de Pesaro, *Opus de venenis*, Basel, 1562, 100: "it's useful for a physician to suspect poisoning upon observing that the patient's condition does not improve despite the administration of the appropriate, logically-chosen remedies" ("il est utile au médecin de soupçonner un empoisonnement lorsqu'il voit que l'état du malade ne s'améliore pas malgré l'administration de remèdes appropriés, choisis par la raison").

119 Paul Bonenfant, *Philippe le Bon, sa politique, son action* (Brussels: De Boeck, 1996), 47.

120 Jean de Roye, *Chronique scandaleuse*, ed. B. de Mandrot (Paris, 1896), vol. 2, 285: "expected by all physicians to have a long life" ("extimé de tous medecins de longue vie").

121 For the Amédée VII affair, see Nadia Pollini, *La mort du Prince. Rituels funéraires de la Maison de Savoie (1343–1451)* (Lausanne: Cahiers lausannois d'histoire médiévale 9, 1994) et *cad.*, "La morte dei conti e duchi di Savoia fra tre et quattrocento. Discontinuità naturale e continuità dinastica," in *I re nudi. Congiure, assassini, tracolli e altri imprevisti nella storia del potere*, ed. Glauco Maria Cantarella and Francesco Santi, (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1996), 127–141. On the death of Charles VII, Jean Chartier, *Chronique de Charles VII*, ed. A. Vallet de Viriville (Paris, 1858), vol. 3, 112 et seq.

della Torre around 1490 in a work dedicated to the king of Poland was a source of concern.¹²² This was also the case for the swelling of the cadaver: Philippe Mousket indicated that in 1234, Philippe Hurepel, the illegitimate son of Philippe Auguste, was taken by a disease “that caused so much swelling that it was said he had been poisoned.”¹²³ Froissart applied the same explanation for Jehan Lyon in 1379: “During this visit, Jean Lyon was afflicted quite suddenly by an ailment that caused him to swell up.”¹²⁴ A Burgundian libelle on the death of the dauphin Jean de Touraine in 1417 reports that he “passed from life to death with swelling in the jaws, the lower lip, and the throat, with protruding, bulging eyes, which was a shame to see since this kind of death is one of the ways in which those who have been poisoned [often] die.”¹²⁵ In November 1423, physicians considered dehydration of the victim while still alive, followed by the swelling of the corpse, as signs of poisoning.¹²⁶ However, perfectly natural ailments could lead to the same phenomenon: a defendant in a 1404 trial at the Parlement de Paris argued that “many people who have not been poisoned have swelling when they die.”¹²⁷ However, the very equivocity of such signs fueled the discourse of suspicion.

Other factors for suspicion include details regarding the circumstances under which a death occurred. The chronicle of Gilles li Muisit explains that the death of a guest of King Louis X, followed by that of a dog that had licked the cloths used during the evisceration of the monarch’s corpse, had fomented *mala suspicio*.¹²⁸ The recommendations of Ladislas of Hungary’s physician in 1457 to bury the prince’s body deep into the ground after having disposed of his clothes led many to believe that the cadaver was considered toxic.¹²⁹ The quick removal of the dying person or their remains from view was also suspect. When the duke Thomas of Gloucester died in prison in 1397, this inspired all kinds of suppositions.¹³⁰ In 1450, the death

122 Girolamo della Torre, *De venenis eorumque natura et remediis*, Vatican, BAV, ms. Barb. lat. 229, 26v, ch. on the signs making it possible to know that an individual’s death was the result of poisoning (*Signa quibus scitur mortuum ex potu veneni defecisse*).

123 Philippe Mousket, *Chroniques*, ed. F. de Reiffenberg (Brussels, 1845), vol. 2, 582, v. 28127–8: “which had caused him so much swelling that one would say he had been poisoned” (“dont il fu durement emflés, / Si c’on dist qu’il fu enierbés”).

124 Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Buchon II, 56.

125 Cited by Yann Grandeau, “Le dauphin Jean de Touraine (1398–1417),” *Bulletin philologique et historique* 2 (1968): 665–722, here 721.

126 French national archives, X²a 18, 11v.

127 French national archives, X²a 14, 216v.

128 Muisit, *Chronique et annales*, 91: “the body was opened, as it were, and his heart covered with a shroud; but a dog that licked this cloth died immediately; also, a friend of said king ate from a dish from which the king had eaten and died right away; it’s because of this that many were suspicious” (“corps fut ouvert, comme il se disoit, et son coeur recouvert d’un linceul; mais un chien qui lécha ce linge mourut aussitôt; il se trouve aussi qu’un familier du dit roi mangea d’un plat dont le roi avoit mangé et mourut sur le champ; ce à cause de quoi pesa un mauvais soupçon sur beaucoup”).

129 Hayer, “Krankheit, Sterben und Tod,” 48.

130 *Chronographia regum Francorum*, ed. H. Moranvillé (Paris, 1897), vol. 3, 144: “some say that he was administered a poison that hit and killed him” (“certains disent qu’un poison lui fut administré, dont il fut atteint et mourut”).

of the duke's brother, Gilles de Bretagne, was viewed as suspect.¹³¹ The speedy burial of the victim at a time of prolonged funerary rituals could have come across as a desire to hide a cadaver from prying stares. Louis de France, interred quickly in 1276, provides a case in point,¹³² as does Michelle de France, who was put into the ground the very day that she died, on July 8, 1422.¹³³

Finally, the attitude of those close to the deceased at the time of death was likewise important: the hasty departure of the physician of Amédée VII and that of the confessor of Henry VII, who had given communion to the king, played a decisive role in the formation of suspicions.¹³⁴ This also applies in the case of a nobleman who opposed the Austrian archduke Albert VI and fled Vienna the day after the latter's death in 1463.¹³⁵

A constructed and instrumentalized sentiment

While multiple elements generated suspicion, the sentiment of suspicious deaths was not the spontaneous product of the collective psyche. Broadly, it was generated with specific aims, and it needed incubators and obeyed mechanisms in which manipulation and instrumentalization fully played part.

The absence of systematic suspicion in the presence of the aforementioned parameters provides initial evidence, *a contrario*, that there was a deliberate will to instrumentalize certain deaths. Social variables and political context played a major role, and the fates of the lowborn did not inspire concern. In response to the sudden deaths of low-status individuals such as barbers, painters, potters, and winemakers, Philippe de Vigneulles wrote, "And thus we observe that in one year, men's bodies are exposed to grave dangers more than in another."¹³⁶ When a death was from the upper classes, however, the death was subject to suspicion. A Germanic chronicle maintained that the kings of Bohemia rarely died of natural causes.¹³⁷ Yet even in the world of the elite, sparks of suspicion did not come out

131 See Franck Collard, "Et est ce tout notoire encores a present audit pais'. Le crime, la mémoire du crime et l'histoire, du meurtre de Gilles de Bretagne au procès du maréchal de Gié (1450–1505)," in *Le prince, l'argent, les hommes au Moyen Âge*, Mélanges offerts à Jean Kerhervé (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 133–143.

132 *Chronique anonyme des rois de France finissant en 1286*, excerpts, *RHGF*, vol. 21 (Paris, 1855), 94: "and was interred very quickly. And the people said he had been poisoned, and likewise the king was highly suspicious" ("et fu en mout briés temps enseveliz. Et distrent les gens qu'il avoit esté empuisonné. Et mesmement estoit li roi en grant soupeçon").

133 Chastellain, *Chronique*, I, 341.

134 Carbonelli, *Gli ultimi giorni*, 252; Franck Collard, "Jacobita secundus Judas. L'honneur perdu des Prêcheurs après la mort d'Henri VII," in *Religions et mentalités au Moyen Âge*, Mélanges Hervé Martin (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003), 221–235.

135 Hayer, "Krankheit, Sterben und Tod."

136 Philippe de Vigneulles, *Chroniques de Lorraine*, ed. Ch. Bruneau (Besançon-Metz, 1932), vol. 3, 363: "And thus great dangers appeared... for humans' bodies more in one year than in another" ("Et ainsy apert les grant dangiers... qui adviengne a corps humains plus en une année que en une aultre").

137 *Cronica de gestis principum a tempore Rudolphi*, 57.

of nowhere. Sometimes they were squelched for reasons of honor or rank. Death was to reflect one's earthly existence: for a good life, there was a good death.¹³⁸ Suggesting that a powerful person died amidst discord in an unclear and unforeseen way was an attack on their honor. For this reason, raising suspicions about a death in the reigning family was widely unknown in the world of the Carolingian annalists, for this would have risked tarnishing the glory of the regime. Leaders were supposed to have "good deaths" even if they were only 20 years old, like Charlemagne's brother Carloman or Charles the Bald's son, Louis III.¹³⁹

Subsequently, notwithstanding the general development observed above, such a "naturalization" of the death of the powerful was still widespread. Significantly, Veronese sources affirm that despite the troubling conditions of his death (violent stomach pain and vomiting), the lord of Verona Cangrande della Scala died in Treviso *sua propria morte* or *morte naturali*.¹⁴⁰ Charles V's thurifer, Christine de Pizan, carefully purged his *Livre des faits et bonnes mœurs* of all unpleasant allusions to the monarch's end, which was met "due to natural death."¹⁴¹ However, there were rumors to the contrary, especially outside the kingdom.¹⁴² The same phenomenon can be observed with the death of the Black Prince in 1376: Walsingham endeavored to attribute it to a proper and edifying death involving no poison or betrayal.¹⁴³ The Monk of Saint-Denis reports that in June 1399, a count died at the duke of Berry's residence, the Hôtel de Nesle, from a sudden onset of apoplexy (*morbo qui apoplexia vocatur repente percussus*). Duke John thought he was asleep with his head resting on his bent arm, and poked fun at him until he realized that he was dead. The duke had just bought his seigneuries, the usufruct of which he had left to the victim for the rest of his life. These circumstances were thus highly suspect. Yet the Monk of Saint-Denis doesn't make the slightest mention of any suspicion

138 See Daniel Schäfer, *Texte vom Tod. Zur Darstellung und Sinngebung des Todes im Spätmittelalter* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1995), 55–59: sermon on Luke 7:11 by a preacher from the Black Forest interested in the four dimensions of death; Patrick Geary, "Death and Funeral of the Carolingians," in *Death at court*, ed. Karl-Heinz Spiess and Immo Warntjes (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 9–19. The author recalls the words of Saint Augustine: *non potest male mori qui bene vixerit*.

139 Hack, *Alter, Krankheit, Tod*, 102–111.

140 Gian Maria Varanini, "La morte di Cangrande della Scala. Strategie di comunicazione intorno al cadaver," in *Cangrande Della Scala. La Morte e il corredo funebre di un principe nel medioevo*, ed. Paola Marini, Ettore Napione, Gian Maria Varanini (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2004), 11–21.

141 Christine de Pizan, *Livre des faits et bonnes mœurs du sage roy Charles V*, ed. S. Solente (Paris, 1940), tr. E. Hicks and T. Moreau (Paris: Stock, 1997), ch. 15, 141.

142 Thomas Walsingham, *Chronica anglicana*, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1863), vol. 1, 340–341; Cornelius Zantfliet, *Chronique*, ed. Martène et Durand, *Veterum scriptorum... amplissima collectio*, v. 5 (Paris, 1729), 288–289; Jacques d'Esch, *Die Metzzer Chronik über die Kaiser und Könige aus dem Luxemburger Hause*, ed. G. Wolfram (Metz, 1906), 314: "And likewise the said duke of Anjou laid his brother the king of France into the ground beneath the grass..." ("Item le dit duc d'Anjois [Anjou] enherbait le roy de France son frere...") See Philippe Contamine, "Roi jusqu'au bout. La mort de Charles V, 16 septembre 1380," in *Les derniers jours des rois*, 95–110, here 103.

143 Green, "Masculinity and Medicine," Conclusion.

whatsoever.¹⁴⁴ Here, it is less a question of the victim's honor than that of the duke, his illustrious host. Although she fell victim to a "swift illness," Philip the Bold's widow died without arousing any potentially inappropriate suspicions.¹⁴⁵ According to Cabaret d'Orville, the passing of Louis de Bourbon's second son triggered no suspicion, even though it occurred "at a young age."¹⁴⁶ Pierre de Fénin reported soberly that in the case of the count of Saint-Pol (1415), "he fell ill to a sickness that took his life."¹⁴⁷ In the original part of Héraut Berry's chronicles, there is no mention of rumors about suspicious deaths, as if this *roi d'armes* refused to attribute importance to matters that had nothing to do with the chivalric world. In the chronicle of the papal curia, the same omission implies a similar dynamic, in spite of what was really happening. Burchard, addressing the death of a Genoese merchant who was husband to Innocent VIII's daughter, wrote only: "the day before, he was in good health and cheerful and had dined with the right reverend Cardinal Benventano, and was found today in his bed, dead from apoplexy." As for the physician Theodoric de Coclighain, he briefly notes: "in good health and cheerful the day before, he went to sleep in his bed and was struck suddenly and unexpectedly by an attack of paralysis and was found dead in the morning."¹⁴⁸

For suspicions to arise and then surge along with their accompanying rumors, there needs to be a particular context as well as underlying motives.¹⁴⁹ The political divides and factional strife at the end of the Middle Ages were very accommodating to suppositions that slandered their targets. The sentiment of suspicious death would suggest itself, take shape, spread, and foment by way of communication activities that were daunting because the masses adhered instinctively to the *fama publica*. In 1254, Conrad of Swabia, descendant of Frederick II, deplored this phenomenon when confronted by the germs of suspicion sown by ill-intentioned parties (the papacy in this instance) following the deaths of his young brother Henry and his nephew Frederick.¹⁵⁰

Suspicion entered into perfectly coherent, deliberate procedures for eliminating or discrediting adversaries who were presented as presumed murderers. The death of Louis de France, heir to Philippe III, provided the occasion, following a first round of accusations against his stepmother, the queen Marie de Brabant, for a campaign of suspicion against the royal chamberlain Pierre de la Broce, whose overly high position appalled the barons who succeeded in his undoing.¹⁵¹ The

144 *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denis*, livre XX, ch. 22, II, 750.

145 Monstrelet, *Chronique*, I, 393.

146 Jean Cabaret d'Orville, *Chronique du bon duc Louis de Bourbon*, ed. A.-M. Chazaud (Paris, 1876), 274.

147 Fénin, *Mémoires*, 56.

148 Burchard, *Diarium*, ed. L. Thuasne (Paris, 3 vol., 1884), vol. 2, 507 and 561.

149 For a general view, see Gilles and Elodie Lecuppre, "La rumeur: un instrument de la compétition politique au service des princes de la fin du Moyen Âge," in *La rumeur au Moyen Âge*, 149–175.

150 Matthieu Paris, *Chronica majora*, VI, 302.

151 William C. Jordan, "The Struggle for Influence at the Court of Philip III: Pierre de la Broce and the French Aristocracy," *French Historical Studies* 24 (2001): 439–468; Xavier

same mechanisms were at work in the court of Charles VII, eighteen months after the death of Agnès Sorel. The enemies of Jacques Cœur cast suspicion on the death of the Dame de Beauté so the king would be as “inflamed” as possible against the man in his service.¹⁵² Thomas Basin successfully dismantles the mechanism that was at work to undo the financier.¹⁵³

Suspicious death has also been a remarkable propaganda tool.¹⁵⁴ The conflict between the partisans of the duke of Orléans and those of the duke of Burgundy drew considerably on a widespread sentiment in Paris of the suspicious nature of various deaths. Referring to the “form which [their] deaths took,” the duke John the Fearless used letters (April 1417) to spread the idea that the Armagnac faction had advanced the premature deaths of the two dauphins Louis de Guyenne and Jean de Touraine.¹⁵⁵ When word got out that the duke of Brabant had not died naturally, the duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, was the target. Citing *cui prodest*, certain ill-intentioned people spread the news of a death that had been “hastened” to allow the Burgundian duke to appropriate the duchy neighboring his states. Chastellain indicates that agents of the countess Marguerite de Hainaut, the duke’s rival for the Brabançon inheritance, had spread “various secret rumors.”¹⁵⁶ Louis XI’s enemies also circulated letters suggesting that the brother of the king had “assisted” with the latter’s death at the hands of henchmen.¹⁵⁷

It was a very complicated matter to clear away this kind of collective sentiment. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, political discourse still sufficed; Philippe V himself came to Parlement to pronounce the act of October 9, 1317 and announced that his brother had died of natural causes.¹⁵⁸ In 1346, the son of Henri de Luxembourg, Jean de Bohême, was solicited by the Dominican order to

Hélary, “Trahison et échec militaire: le cas Pierre de la Broce (1278)”, in *La trahison au Moyen âge. De la monstruosité au crime politique (Ve-XVe siècle)*, ed. Maïté Billoré et Myriam Soria (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes), 2009, 185–195.

152 Escouchy, *Chronique*, II, 284: “he [Charles VIII] was told another reason to be angered with the aforementioned Cœur... he was told that Jacques Cœur had poisoned the said Demoiselle, or had her poisoned, which had led her from life into death” (“encore lui fut dite une autre raison pour le [Charles VII] plus enflammer contre ledit Cœur... lui fut dit que Jacques Cœur avait empoisonné ou fait empoisonner la dite Demoiselle, duquel empoisonnement elle alla de vie à trepas”).

153 Basin, *Historia Karoli septimi*, II, 287: “very real charges made by envious people... The only thing that inflamed the king against the financier was that the very nasty informers had whispered into the royal ears that the beautiful Agnès had been poisoned” (“charges constituées par des envieux plus que réelles... La seule chose qui enflammait le roi contre l’argentier était que des délateurs très méchants avaient sussuré aux oreilles royales que la dite belle Agnès avait été empoisonnée”).

154 Schäfer, *Texte vom Tod*, 443.

155 Fauquembergue, *Journal*, I, 32.

156 Chastellain, *Chronique*, II, 82.

157 Commynes, *Mémoires*, 257. Appeal published in *Preuves des mémoires de Philippe de Comines*, ed. Lenglet du Fresnoy (Paris, 1747), 199–200.

158 Marquis de Godefroy Ménilglaize, “Mahaut, comtesse d’Artois,” *Mémoire de la société des antiquaires de France* 28 (1864): 181–230, here 208: the king’s death was natural, and not a violent one that would have been caused by external force or a poison.

produce an official statement clearing Bernardin de Montepulciano and his brethren of all suspicion.¹⁵⁹ The physician Bartolemeo de Varignana's deposition before the papacy in 1313 had failed in this regard.¹⁶⁰ The various declarations from the sovereign's entourage had not been any more effective.¹⁶¹ In June 1374, at the request of Charles II de Navarre, the pope Gregory XI published a letter claiming that he knew of no cause other than a natural one for the death of the cardinal Gui de Boulogne, which had transpired just as it did for everybody else.¹⁶² The argument for natural causes countered the suspicions about the Navarrian, who was reputed to have an inclination for using poison. In 1417, a counter-campaign of "detoxification" of opinion was organized by the Armagnacs who were in power at the time. It endeavored to dissipate the rumors that had arisen about the dauphins' deaths. In the Parlement, the libelles of John the Fearless were solemnly refuted on the basis of medical arguments.¹⁶³ Chastellain revived the efforts of Ladislas of Hungary's entourage to squelch suspicion (which in reality also weighed against his master, the duke of Burgundy, hence his insistence), "so that his death not be attributed to human malice but rather just the corruption of his nature due to a pestilential air."¹⁶⁴

These operations, however, did not always sufficiently calm imaginations, since they reduced the matters to banal causes. It was therefore necessary to show that there was nothing hiding behind a suspicious death. This is what Gian Maria Varanini has called "communication about the cadaver."¹⁶⁵ As with Edward II, the remains of Richard II were exposed in London, with the primary aim of having the masses observe the deceased with their own eyes.¹⁶⁶ In 1410, the body of Alexander V

159 *Johannis regis testimonium de morte Heinrici VII. imperatoris*, ed. Zeumer et Salomon, *MGH, Leges*, VIII, *Constitutiones et acta publica imperatorum et regum* (Hanover, 1910–1926), 58.

160 Jean de Saint-Victor, *Memoriale historiarum*, 657; *Chronique d'un dominicain de Parme*, abridged edition L. Delisle, *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale* 35 (1896): 64–65: it was established solemnly before the pope that the emperor Henri VII had not been poisoned but had succumbed to a tumor or anthrax. Jean de Saint-Victor, *Prima vita Clementis V*, ed. E. Baluze, *Vitae paparum avinionensium*, Paris, 1914, I, 22: the rumor persisted "even though the physicians had said before the pope that he had not been poisoned" ("quoique les médecins aient dit devant le pape qu'il n'avait pas été empoisonné").

161 Hermann Kerner, *Chronica novella*, ed. J. Schwalm (Göttingen, 1895), 39–40: the sons, brothers to the emperor Henry VII and the prelates of Milan, Genoa, Perugia, Pisa, Lucca, and Strasbourg certified that he had not died due to external violence or deceit, but of a death caused by an internal deficiency.

162 Grégoire XI, *Lettres secrètes relatives à la France*, ed. L. Mirot and H. Jassemin (Paris, 1935), n°3439, 1098.

163 Fauquembergue, *Journal*, I, 32: decree of the royal procurer against the duke of Burgundy's libelles, which were ripped up in public on July 21.

164 Chastellain, *Chronique*, III, 386: "so that his death not be attributed to human wrongdoing but only to nature being corrupted by a pestilential air" ("adfin que l'on n'attribuast sa mort a mauvaisté d'homme mais tant seulement a œuvre de nature corrompue de mauvais aer").

165 Varanini, "La morte." The author is not referring to the exhibition of the cadaver but rather the strategy of retaining information about the death of the lord of Verona.

166 Evans, *Death of kings*, 127.

was on display for nine days as rumors of poisoning ran rampant after his sudden passing.¹⁶⁷ The very prolonged exhibition of the body of Philippe de Brabant in 1430 was to prove that there was nothing to hide. Suspicions raised about his demise were dispelled by evidence of a death from internal and natural causes. The chronicler Edmond de Dynter indicated that this took place in two stages, as the first medical exam had not been sufficiently convincing. He provides a detailed report on the conclusions made available to the public from the first and the second evaluations.¹⁶⁸ The second, with the opened body in front of the people, demonstrated the desire for publicity essential to the demonstration. The medical experts' formal oath stood in contrast to the less substantial words of the people, and the dissemination of the conclusions throughout Christendom aimed to silence the rumors. The physician's word played an increasingly important role, as noted in 1408 by Cousinot, the detractor of the tyrannicide apologist Jean Petit. For him, the schools of medicine were deserving of more faith than those of theology when determining the cause of death.¹⁶⁹ In this particular domain, death was on the path toward secularization.

Conclusion

According to Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the word *mors* comes from *mordere*, both because human mortality was the consequence of Adam biting the apple and because death ends life like a bite.¹⁷⁰ It is possible to expand on this image by considering that death gets its teeth not only into the deceased and their loved ones, but gnaws at others' curiosity by eliciting doubts, interrogations, assumptions, and speculations when it affects a person in power and constitutes an especially disturbing event. Suspicion, an integral part of the "sentiment of death" in the Christian Occident – some sources from the Crusades era tend to view the phenomenon as being less pronounced in the Arab-Muslim world – proceeded from a social and cultural development that meant that beginning in the twelfth century and with a clear subsequent escalation, death became subject to interrogations that did not replace but rather added to inquiries into final ends.¹⁷¹ It was no longer a question of obvious divine will, but the malignant, concealed will of humans; this led to a certain criminalization of suspicious death, to the point that the German physician Conrad Vendl, who wrote a treatise on poisons and the plague, claimed

167 Pietro d'Argelata, *Chirurgiae libri sex* (Bologne, 1520), book V, treatise 12, ch. 3, 102v.

168 Dynter, *Chronica ducum Lotharingiae et Brabantiae*, III, 497–8. The Latin text is in the present author's article in *historique* cité n. 1.

169 Master Guillaume Cousinot's response to Jean Petit, cited in Monstrelet, *Chronique*, I, 320.

170 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum libri XX*, XI, 2, 31.

171 Based on the Arab chroniclers assembled in the *Recueil des historiens des croisades* from the nineteenth century, it seems that here natural pathological explanations played a more significant role, and this may be attributed to the more advanced medicalization of Islamic society; this could be a rich subject for a specific study.

to have written his work (1463) to prevent unjust accusations against servants who were slaves to appearance after the passing of their masters.¹⁷²

In the manner of the count of Foix, Gaston Phoebus, many were “quite imaginative,” easily entering “into suspicion” with “great imagination.”¹⁷³ They became more and more inclined to speculate and even create their own stories.¹⁷⁴ Now people were ready to believe that there was “no disclosure of the actual truth” of deaths.¹⁷⁵ The incubators of this sentiment were the cities and courts.¹⁷⁶ It flourished especially during the Late Middle Ages, when there were many who believed that evil, occult forces were undermining society. Far from being instinctive and rash, this sentiment is associated with an interest in understanding and giving a human sense to things in a society saturated with scholastic rationality. Likewise, it is linked to the formation of a public opinion that reacted or was made to react to significant events. Couched in profuse and accusatory terms, suspicion ran counter to the peace in which the dead were to rest, and to the ritual words that were to accompany them. The “joy” of the subjects of the deceased duke Philippe de Brabant reflects their relief upon learning that he had not perished from an “evil death” but a “real natural death.”¹⁷⁷ The natural order was thus frequently invoked for political matters.¹⁷⁸

The liveliness of the sentiment of suspicious death also relates, paradoxically, to the “medicalization” of death, or the increased presence of physicians by deathbeds at the end of the Middle Ages. They added an intellectual treatment to the physical and spiritual treatments of the death being examined; they did not, however, supplant the clerics. While giving rise to thriving suspicions, death also generated an abundance of religious sentiment, with its testamentary, funerary, and artistic displays attesting to a spiritual unease, whereas suspicions reflected worldly concerns and a lively disquiet. The supreme origin remained divine, but its meaning became more complex and matters became murky as new hypotheses suddenly appeared, enriched by medical knowledge and the emergence of opinion that in this way appropriated the death of the Greats.¹⁷⁹

172 Conrad Vendl, *De pestilentia et venenis resistendis*, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. 2304, 25: he speaks of venomous creatures: “there were deaths and numerous infirmities and, unfortunately, suspicions against of honest and trustworthy people, and what was worse was that such cruel deaths were imputed to these innocent people” (“il s’ensuit mort ou autres infirmités multiples et hélas des suspicions contre des gens honnête et dignes de foi, et, chose plus grave encore, on impute à ces innocents une telle mort cruelle”).

173 Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. by the SHF, XII, 83–84.

174 The title of Emilio Mitre Fernández’s book, *Fantasmas de la sociedad medieval: enfermedad, peste, muerte* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2004) evokes fantasies, though he fails to study the fantasies of suspicion.

175 Escouchy, *Chronique*, I, 114.

176 Nonetheless, *Death at court* does not consider the question at hand.

177 Chastellain, *Chronique*, II, 72.

178 See Jacques Krynen’s reflections on this subject in “Naturel. Essai sur l’argument de la nature dans la pensée politique française à la fin du Moyen Age,” *Journal des Savants* 2 (1982): 169–190.

179 Schäfer, *Texte vom Tod*, Conclusion, attributes these developments to the plague and the great schism, which in some ways destabilized approaches to death; however, these are not structural causes.