

HIS 383W/483
Disease and Society from Antiquity to the Present



Spring 2025
Mondays and Wednesdays,
3:25-4:40 p.m.
Rush Rhees 305

Professor Laura A. Smoller

office: Rush Rhees 369A
student drop-in hours: Tuesdays, 1-
2, Thursdays, 3-4, and by
appointment

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Illustration: Richard Tennant Cooper, "Pulmonary Tuberculosis," c. 1912
Source: Wellcome Collection, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vk-tusgk3/items?canvas=2>



January 22. Introduction to the course and assignments; ways of thinking about disease and society

Please note that there are typically assignments and/or readings to complete before class meets. All deadlines are indicated in **boldface** type readings followed by (BB) can be found on Blackboard.

January 24. Finding a topic; beginning research; introduction to the history of medicine

Reading:

William Bynum, *The History of Medicine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 1-42



January 27. Locating and working with primary sources (with Anna Smith, Miner Library, URM)

Class will meet in the Rare Books room at the Miner Library, URM.

January 29. Disease as an agent of historical change

Readings:

William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1998; originally published 1976), 19-32 (BB);

Christian W. McMillen, *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-30

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on January 28.**



February 3. Social and cultural historical approaches to epidemics

Readings:

McMillen, *Pandemics*, 103-18;

Charles Rosenberg, "What Is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 94, no. 4 (2020): 563-577 (originally published in 1989) (BB)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on February 2.**

February 5. Identifying secondary sources through specialized databases (with Lara Nicosia, history resource specialist)

Research assignment: **Submit on Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on February 4 a brief (1-2 sentence) description of a potential research topic.** For example: "I would like to study the experience of those living under public health measures during the Plague of London in 1665-66," or "I would like to see how physicians' interpretations of chronic fatigue syndrome have changed in the last thirty years." (Your thoughts can be quite vague at this point, but a preliminary sense of your interests will help Lara Nicosia to tailor her demonstration to your research interests.)



February 10. Cultural approaches/framing disease: systemic lupus erythematosus

Readings:

Mike Winstead, "'A Person Like Me': Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, Gender, and Racial Immunity in the Twentieth-Century United States," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 98, no. 1 (2024): 122-163 (BB);

J. E. Groves, "Taking Care of the Hateful Patient," *New England Journal of Medicine* 298, no. 16 (April 20, 1978): 883-87 (BB).

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on February 9.**

February 12. Initial presentations: scholarly encyclopedia article/book chapter, primary source

Make a brief (3 minute) presentation in which you share with the class a primary source on which you hope to work, as well as a potential research question drawn from your reading of a scholarly encyclopedia article or book chapter.

Research assignment: Submit the following on Blackboard by 11:59 pm on February 11:

- 1) a properly formatted bibliography entry (Chicago “Notes and Bibliography”/Humanities/Turabian style) for a chapter or scholarly encyclopedia article relating to a potential research topic,
- 2) a possible research question suggested by your reading of that chapter or article,
- 3) at least one primary source mentioned in that chapter or article (or that you have located in some other way) that is relevant to your topic. If that source is written in a language you do not read, please note whether the author of your chapter or article mentions a translation into a language you can read.



February 17. Hippocratic understandings of disease; the problem of retrospective diagnosis

Reading for discussion:

- Bynum, *History of Medicine*, 1-18 (if you have not already read it);
- Hippocrates, *Epidemics*, 1.1-10 (BB);
- Joanne Edge, “Diagnosing the Past,” Wellcome Collection, Stories, <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/W5D4eR4AACIArLL8> (BB)

Discussion assignment: All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on February 16.

February 19. Diagramming one’s research for creative brainstorming, I

Research assignment: Make a presentation (5 minutes) to the class in which you share a diagram or mind-map of your research project as it stands thus far. (These presentations will take place this week and next week, so as to allow ample time for questions and discussion.)

Diagrams (hand drawn is fine!) should be posted on Blackboard by 9:00 a.m. on February 19, no matter which week you are presenting. If you wish to present a diagram in the format of a mind-map, there are several free applications available to help you do so, e.g., <https://app.mindmup.com/map/new/1596730702594>.



February 24. Leprosy in the medieval world: historical interpretations and modern myths

Reading for discussion:

- Bynum, *History of Medicine*, 19-42 (if you have not already read it);
- “Ritual of Separation of a Leper” (BB);
- Kathleen Vongsathorn and Magnus Vollset, ““Our Loathsome Ancestors’: Reinventing Medieval Leprosy for the Modern World, 1850–1950,” In *Leprosy and Identity in the Middle Ages: From England to the Mediterranean*, ed. Elma Brenner and François-Olivier Touati (Manchester University Press, 2021), 347-382 (BB).

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on February 23.**

February 26. Diagramming one's research for creative brainstorming, II

Research assignment: Make a presentation (5 minutes) to the class in which you diagram your research project as it stands thus far (if you did not present on February 19).

Diagrams should have been posted on Blackboard by 9 a.m. on February 19.



March 3. Surviving plague in the early modern world; the question of resilience

Yoav Di-Capua and Wendy Warren, "Genealogies and Critiques of Resilience," *The American Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (2024): 1396-1400 (BB);

Rachel Anderson, "The Lancashire Plague Petitions: Life after the Plague in Early Modern England," *The American Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (2024): 1640-67 (BB).

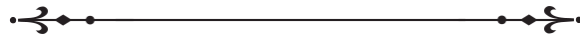
Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on March 3.**

March 5. Close readings of primary sources, I

Research assignment: Make a five-minute presentation (this week and March 26) offering a close reading of a key passage or passages from a primary source you are using in your research. **No matter which week you are presenting, post a copy of your passage on Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on March 4.**



Spring Break, March 8-16



March 17. Experiencing syphilis in the early modern world

Reading for discussion (please read in the order listed):

Girolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, trans. James Gardner (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2013), book 1 (BB);

Cristian Berco, *From Body to Community: Venereal Disease and Society in Baroque Spain* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 3-37 (BB)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on March 16.**

March 19. No class. Research project work day

Prospectus for the research paper must be submitted to Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on March 20. (See instructions posted on Blackboard under Assignments and Papers).



March 24. Tuberculosis in the age of microbiology

McMillen, *Pandemics*, 73-88;
Heini Hakasolo, “Lust for Life: Coping with Tuberculosis in Late Nineteenth-century Europe,” *Medical History* 64, no. 4 (2020): 516-32 (BB)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on March 23.**

March 26. Close readings of primary sources, II

Research assignment: Make a five-minute presentation (continuing from March 5) offering a close reading of a key passage or passages from a primary source you are using in your research. **No matter which week you are presenting, have you should posted a copy of your passage on Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on March 4.**



March 31. Photographing disease: the third plague pandemic

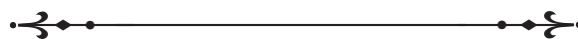
Reading for discussion:

Bynum, *History of Medicine*, 91-117;
Christos Lynteris, *Visual Plague: The Emergence of Epidemic Photography* (MIT Press, 2022), 153-77 (Ch. 5: “Plague Masks”) (BB)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on March 30.**

April 2. Getting a handle on historiography, I

Research assignment: Submit on Blackboard a properly formatted bibliography listing the most important scholarship (secondary sources) on your topic. **All submissions are due by 9 a.m. on April 2.** Your bibliography should include at least seven entries at this point, of which at least two should be scholarly monographs (a book-length study published by an academic press, not a collection of essays by multiple authors) and at least three should be articles from peer-reviewed journals or edited volumes. Explain in a few sentences how your research will contribute to the scholarly conversation. (See “Getting a Handle on Historiography” posted on Blackboard under Papers and Assignments for more explanation.) You will make a five-minute presentation of your thoughts on the historiography on your topic to the class either April 2 or April 9.



April 7. AIDS: pariahs and possibilities

Reading for discussion:

McMillen, *Pandemics*, 103-18;
 Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988),
 pp. 1-26 (BB);

Chris Freeman, "Paul Monette's Borrowed Time Revisited," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 18, no. 4 (2011): 36-37 (BB)

Listening for discussion:

"Radiolab: Los Frikis" (podcast from March 24, 2015, ca. 35 minutes),
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/los-frikis> (how a group of 80's Cuban misfits found
 rock-and-roll and created a revolution within a revolution, going into exile without ever
 leaving home, by injecting themselves with HIV) (BB link)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on April 6.**

April 9. Getting a handle on historiography, II

Research assignment: Present your findings about the historiography on your topic to the
 class (if you did not do so last week). **You should have submitted a bibliography and
 explanation by 9 a.m. on April 2.**

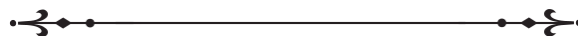


**Historiography paper must be submitted to Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on April
 13. See Assignments and Papers on Blackboard for detailed instructions.**



April 14. Writing an introduction to a scholarly paper (in-class workshop)

April 16. Work day for drafts



**Complete draft of your paper must be made available to your peer readers via
 Blackboard by April 18 at 11:59 pm.**



April 21. Legitimizing chronic suffering: Chronic Fatigue, ME, and Long COVID

Reading for discussion:

Felicity Callard, "Epidemic Time: Thinking from the Sickbed," *Bulletin of the History of
 Medicine* 94, no. 4 (2020): 727-43 (BB)

Discussion assignment: **All posts (detailed below) are due by 11:59 p.m. on April 20.**

April 23. Workshop on drafts

Today's class will be devoted to a peer-review workshop for your paper drafts. See Blackboard (Assignments and Papers) for detailed instructions.



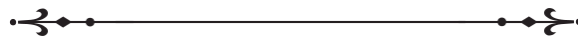
Students should schedule a brief individual conference with the instructor to discuss the paper draft at some time between the April 23 workshop and May 5.



April 28. Final presentations, I

Our final two classes are devoted to presentations of your research projects. See Blackboard (Assignments and Papers) for detailed instructions.

April 30. Final presentations, II



Final papers due on May 6 by 11:59 p.m., via Blackboard.

Undergraduate papers should be at least 5000 words in length (body only, not including notes and bibliography); graduate student papers should be of publishable length (6250-10,000 words) and quality. Papers should be submitted in Garamond, Times, or Times New Roman font, 12 point, double-spaced, with standard margins (1" top and bottom, 1.25" left and right). You may use footnotes or endnotes, but whichever you choose you **MUST** follow University of Chicago style (Turabian/Humanities/Notes and Bibliography style; 17th or 18th edition are both acceptable) for text and references. Include a bibliography, separated into primary and secondary sources, at the end of your paper. See Assignments and Papers on Blackboard for more details about the final paper.



Learning objectives: At the end of this course, students will be able to

- Read and understand primary sources as products of specific historical contexts
- Discuss ways in which scholars have written about diseases and sickness in the past
- Discuss ideas about disease and its treatment as products of specific historical and cultural contexts
- Identify the thesis and analyze the argument of secondary sources relating to the history of disease
- Present historical analysis and arguments in a clear written form, demonstrating the ability to construct an argument by marshaling evidence in an appropriate and logical fashion.
- Write a research paper that asks a significant historical question, situates it within a body of relevant scholarship, answers it with a clear thesis and a logical argument, supports it with both primary and secondary sources documented according to the standards of the Chicago Manual of Style, and articulates its points in clear and artful prose with the grammar and spelling associated with formal composition.

Books to purchase:

Bynum, William. *The History of Medicine: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-19-921543-0.

McMillen, Christian W. *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-19-934007-1

*Readings designated (BB) in the syllabus are linked through Blackboard.

The history department's Kelly Family Book Fund can assist students with financial need by purchasing materials for history courses. This fund was established to provide support for course materials for students in need who are pursuing an undergraduate degree in history. All students taking a history course may apply; preference will be given to those who are majoring in history. To apply for assistance in purchasing your textbooks, use the following link: <https://forms.gle/c2WArDa5g696oKeU6>.

Statement regarding credit hours: The College's credit hour policy on undergraduate courses is to award 4 credit hours for courses that meet for the equivalent of 3 periods of 50 minutes each week. Students enrolled in HIS 383W are expected to devote at least one hour each week to researching in depth the topics for their final papers. Graduate students receiving 5 units of credit are expected to devote at least two additional hours each week to researching in depth the topics for their final papers.

Course requirements:

Discussion postings----10%

Participation in discussions----10%

Research prospectus----10%

Research assignments/presentations----10%

Historiography paper----15%

Draft/workshop on drafts---5%

Final research paper----40%

Regarding the discussion postings: For each discussion, you must post on Blackboard a response to the readings that includes a quotation that you would like to discuss from **each of the assigned readings**, plus a sentence or two explaining why you have chosen that quotation. **Please do not quote from the editors' introductions to any primary texts we are discussing unless you are also quoting from the primary source itself;** the aim is to think about how historians can use primary sources as evidence to prove a point, so our discussions of primary sources will involve our analysis of the sources themselves, not their editors' comments on them. **All reading responses must be posted by 11:59 p.m. on the day before the discussion in order to receive credit. Because I use these postings and comments to structure our class discussions, I cannot give credit for late submissions and postings.**

Detailed descriptions of all other assignments can be found on Blackboard.

Reading assignments are to be completed before the day they appear in the lecture schedule.

Regarding the topic for the final paper, you may work on any topic you choose, provided it somehow deals with the relationship between disease and society. Keep in mind that you may find it difficult to locate historical scholarship about more recent diseases (although many historians weighed in on the COVID pandemic). In addition to the resources at Miner Library's and Rush Rhees's Rare Books and Special Collections rooms, there are fine collections of primary sources relating to the history of disease available online through Harvard University Libraries (<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/>), the National Library of Medicine (<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/index.html>), the Medical Heritage Library (<http://archive.org/details/medicalheritagelibrary>), the Wellcome Library (<https://wellcomelibrary.org/collections/digital-collections/>) and the University of Michigan (<http://www.influenzaarchive.org/>), to name a few.

This is a discussion-intensive course. Attendance at and active participation in all classes are both mandatory. Students are responsible for all material covered in and announcements made in class. **I reserve the right to impose a failing grade for the course after a student's absence from seven or more class periods.** (For the sake of accounting, three tardies will constitute one absence.)

Late work will be penalized 5% for each calendar day late. **Failure to post discussion assignments by the required time will result in a full loss of credit for that assignment.**

Grading scale:

A	100-93%
A-	92.9-90%
B+	89.9-87%
B	86.9-83%
B-	82.9-80%
C+	79.9-77%
C	76.9-73%
C-	72.9-70%
D+	69.9-67%
D	66.9-63%
D-	62.9-60%
F	Below 60%

In case of some mix-up, it is a good idea to save all returned work until you receive your grade at the end of the semester.

Students with disabilities: The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of disability, please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at:

disability@rochester.edu; (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me as well.

Classroom etiquette: Please turn off cell phones or set them to a silent alert. In the rare event you must enter late or leave class early, please let me know in advance. Students should disable or turn off all social media notifications during the class period.

Academic honesty: All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. Cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses and will be treated as such. Anyone who engages in such activities will be turned over to the College Board on Academic Honesty for disciplinary action, as outlined at <http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/>. Submitting as one's own any work produced by another, including by AI such as ChatGPT, constitutes plagiarism. Close paraphrasing of another's words is also plagiarism. For helpful discussions of plagiarism (including subtle, unintentional instances), see the American Historical Association's "Defining Plagiarism," <https://www.historians.org/resource/defining-plagiarism/>.

A note regarding the use of computers in the classroom: While I do not (yet) ban laptops, tablets, and cellphones from the classroom, there is a significant body of research that shows that people retain material more effectively when they take notes by hand rather than on a computer. (E.g., <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/>.) Needless to say, the opportunities for distraction are much greater if the Internet and the world of social media beckon. Similarly, while there are numerous readings posted on Blackboard for the class, researchers have demonstrated that reading a physical, hard copy of a text results in more focused and critical reading. (E.g., <https://newrepublic.com/article/135326/digital-reading-no-substitute-print>.) Ideally, you will print out readings that have been posted on Blackboard to read them. **At the very least, you should plan to bring some version of the text(s) under discussion to class (hard copy of digital) with you.**

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Disclaimer: The instructor reserves the right to change topics and assignments on the syllabus at any point in the semester. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.