

THE NEW YORKER

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What Shakespeare Actually Wrote About the Plague

By [Stephen Greenblatt](#)

May 7, 2020

Shakespeare lived his entire life in the shadow of bubonic plague. On April 26, 1564, in the parish register of Holy Trinity Church, in Stratford-upon-Avon, the vicar, John Bretchgirdle, recorded the baptism of one “*Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakspere.*” A few months later, in the same register, the vicar noted the death of Oliver Gunne, an apprentice weaver, and in the margins next to that entry scribbled the words “*hic incipit pestis*” (here begins the plague). On that occasion, the epidemic took the lives of around a fifth of the town’s population. By good fortune, it spared the life of the infant William Shakespeare and his family.

Such outbreaks did not rage on forever. With the help of strict quarantines and a change in the weather, the epidemic would slowly wane, as it did in Stratford, and life would resume its normal course. But, after an interval of a few years, in cities and towns throughout the realm, the plague would return. It generally appeared on the scene with little or no warning, and it was terrifyingly contagious. Victims would awaken with fever and chills. A feeling of extreme weakness or exhaustion would give way to diarrhea, vomiting, bleeding from the mouth, nose, or rectum, and telltale buboes, or swollen lymph nodes, in the groin or armpit. Death, often in great agony, would almost inevitably follow.

Innumerable preventive measures were proposed, most of which were useless—or, in the case of the killing of dogs and cats, worse than useless, since the disease was in fact spread by rat-borne fleas. The smoke of dried rosemary, frankincense, or bay leaves burning in a chafing dish was thought to help clear the air of infection, and, if those ingredients were not readily available, physicians recommended burning old shoes. In the streets, people walked about sniffing oranges stuffed with cloves. Pressed firmly enough against the nose, perhaps these functioned as a kind of mask.

It was early recognized that the rate of infection was far higher in densely populated cities than in the country; those with the means to do so escaped to rural retreats, though they often brought infection with them. Civic officials, realizing that crowds heightened contagion, took measures to institute what we now call social distancing. Collecting data from parish registers, they carefully tracked weekly plague-related deaths. When those deaths surpassed thirty, they banned assemblies, feasts, archery contests, and other forms of mass gathering. Since it was believed that it was impossible to become infected during the act of worship, church services were not included in the ban, though the infected were not permitted to attend. **But the public theatres in London, which routinely brought together two or three thousand people in an enclosed space, were ordered shut. It could take many months before the death rate came down sufficiently for the authorities to allow theatres to reopen.**

As a shareholder and sometime actor in his playing company, as well as its principal playwright, Shakespeare had to grapple throughout his career with these repeated, economically devastating closings. **There were particularly severe outbreaks of plague in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, and 1608-09.** The theatre historian J. Leeds Barroll III, who carefully sifted through the surviving records, concluded that in the years between 1606 and 1610—the period in which Shakespeare wrote and produced some of his greatest plays, from “Macbeth” and “Antony and Cleopatra” to “The Winter’s Tale” and “The Tempest”—the London playhouses were not likely to have been open for more than a total of nine months.

It is all the more striking, then, that **in his plays and poems Shakespeare almost never directly represents the plague.** He did not write anything remotely like, let alone as powerful as, his contemporary Thomas Nashe’s haunting “A Litany in Time of Plague”:

Rich men, trust not in wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade.
All things to end are made,
The plague full swift goes by;
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Beauty is but a flower
Which wrinkles will devour;
Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair;
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die.
 Lord, have mercy on us!

In Shakespeare, epidemic disease is present for the most part as a steady, low-level undertone, surfacing in his characters' speeches most vividly in metaphorical expressions of rage and disgust. Mortally wounded in the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, **Mercutio calls down "A plague on both your houses."** "Thou art a boil," Lear tells his daughter Goneril, **"A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood."** "Here's gold," the misanthropic Timon of Athens offers his visitor. **"Be as a planetary plague, when Jove / Will o'er some high-iced city hang his poison / In the sick air."** **"All the contagion of the south light on you / You shames of Rome,"** Coriolanus spits at the plebeians:

You herd of—Boils and plagues
Plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorred
Farther than seen, and one infect another
Against the wind a mile!

Plague constantly appears throughout Shakespeare's works in the form of everyday exclamations: "a plague upon it when thieves cannot be true to one another"; "a plague of sighing and grief! It blows a man up like a bladder"; "a plague upon this howling"; "a plague of these pickle-herring!" But this is a sign less of existential horror than of deep familiarity, the acceptance of plague as an inescapable feature of ordinary life. As such, it can be turned to comic effect, as when Beatrice mocks what it is to be befriended by Benedict:

O Lord! He will hang upon him like a disease. He is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad. God help the noble Claudio. If he have caught the Benedict it will cost him a thousand pound ere 'a be cured.

It can even be used with something like cheerful resignation, as when the countess Olivia in "Twelfth Night" marvels at the speed with which she has fallen in love:

How now?
Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
With an invisible and subtle stealth
To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be.

The contagion that continued to take so many lives has morphed into a happy image of lovesickness: "Well, let it be."

The plague as an actual event figures prominently in only one of Shakespeare's plays. Friar Laurence in "Romeo and Juliet" has asked a fellow friar to deliver a crucial message to the exiled Romeo in Mantua, informing him about the clever drug that is going to make Juliet appear to have died. In a few lines, the messenger conveys a wealth of information, far more than seems strictly necessary for the requirements of the plot:

Going to find a barefoot brother out,
One of our order, to associate me,
Here in this city visiting the sick,
And finding him, the searchers of the town,
Suspecting that we both were in a house
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth,
So that my speed to Mantua there was stayed.

Franciscans, who as a discolored order went either barefoot or in sandals, were required by their rules to travel in pairs. Hence the messenger had to locate another Franciscan in Verona ("in this city") to accompany him ("one of our order, to associate me"). He found this intended companion visiting the sick, and both were therefore suspected of having been exposed to the disease. As a result, they were put into quarantine. "The searchers of the town"—that is, the public-health officers—literally locked them in by nailing the doors shut. The quarantine has evidently only just ended. Friar Laurence returns to the key question—"Who bare my letter, then, to Romeo?"—and receives a dismaying answer:

I could not send it—here it is again—
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,
So fearful were they of infection.

Not only did the message never reach Romeo in Mantua but the confined friar could not get anyone even to return the undelivered letter to Friar Laurence and warn him of the problem. The crucial interval of time has now been lost, and the despairing Romeo will not receive word that Juliet is not dead but only sleeping. This tangle of unfortunate circumstances leads to the suicides of both Romeo and Juliet. The plague, which is hardly represented in the play, does not cause their deaths, but the profound social disruption it brings in its wake—conveyed in the rush of seemingly irrelevant details—plays an oddly significant role. The ill-timed quarantine is an agent of the star-crossed lovers' tragic fate.

There is one passage in Shakespeare's work that vividly conveys what it must have felt like when the whole population of a city or a country fell into the iron grip of plague. It comes in "**Macbeth**," which was probably first performed in the spring of 1606. (In the summer of that year, the plague erupted and forced the theatres to close for seven or eight months.) Memories were still fresh of the horrendous **epidemic of 1603-04**, which began around the time that Elizabeth I died, and which led her successor, the Scottish King James, to delay entering London and to postpone the public festivities planned for his coronation.

Shakespeare's lines conjure up a country so traumatized that it no longer recognizes itself, where the only smiles are on the faces of those who have somehow not followed the news, and where grief is so nearly universal that it scarcely is registered:

*Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken. (Act IV, sc. 3)*

In Shakespeare's English, the word "modern" meant something like trivial, as when a character in "All's Well That Ends Well" muses that "They say

miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.” “Ecstasy” meant any extreme degree of feeling, the state of being beside oneself. So, for a people afflicted by the plague, violent sorrow comes to seem a commonplace emotion, a “modern ecstasy.” Extreme suffering has become so familiar that it is banal—precisely the accommodation to the recurrent epidemics that we have noted through much of Shakespeare’s work.

The words, then, perfectly capture the experience of living in the inescapable presence of an epidemic disease and hearing constantly the ominous tolling of the church bells. But the strange thing about these lines from “Macbeth” is that they are not intended as a description of a country in the grip of a vicious plague. Instead, they describe a country in the grip of a vicious ruler. The character who speaks them, Ross, has been asked how Scotland fares under Macbeth, who is nominally the country’s legitimate king. But everyone suspects what is the case, that he has come by his exalted position through underhand means: “I fear / Thou play’dst most foully for’t.”

The results have borne out the worst suspicions. In office, Macbeth has ruthlessly pursued his enemies and betrayed his friends. Egged on by his “fiend-like” wife, he will do anything to make himself feel perfectly secure—“Whole as the marble, founded as the rock.” But, though he always finds people willing to carry out his criminal orders, he only ever feels more anxious: “cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears.” And, under increasing pressure, calculation gives way to raw impulse, the reckless confidence that his instincts are always right: “From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand.”

Shakespeare seems to have shared Nashe’s skepticism that there would ever be a medical solution to the plague—“Physic himself must fade”—and, from what we know of the science of his time, this pessimism was justified. He focussed his attention instead on a different plague, the plague of being governed by a mendacious, morally bankrupt, incompetent, blood-soaked, and ultimately self-destructive leader.