

Shakespeare and Pandemic: COVID-19 Is and Isn't Like the Plague in Shakespeare's England

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As a scholar of Shakespeare, this period of pandemic-related social distancing is something I am already familiar with in more theoretical terms. During Shakespeare's lifetime, plague—the Black Death of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—was a regular enough occurrence that there were quarantine protocols in effect in most European and Middle Eastern countries. It was a global pandemic that—like COVID-19—has its origins in China.¹ It was virulent, with a 40-60% death-rate in the first years it hit Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in the 1300s.² COVID-19 is not (thankfully!) as deadly as the plague that shaped social and mercantile interactions in Shakespeare's England; but the plague, like COVID-19, created disruptions to the social and economic patterns that made up everyday life for the people who wrote, worked on, and went to his plays.

The plague first came to England in 1348, and its pattern of infection is disturbingly similar to the pattern we see with COVID-19: “elderly adults faced higher risks of death compared to their younger peers during times of both catastrophic Black Death mortality and under normal medieval mortality conditions.”³ In the absence of an understanding of germ theory, basic hygiene, and anatomy, plague was devastating to the populations with which it came into contact. In the first century, it killed nearly half of Mediterranean, European, African, and Middle Eastern communities, and it lingered until the early eighteenth century.⁴ It still exists on every continent in the world—although it is now easily treated thanks to antibiotics—except Australia.⁵ COVID-19, although it targets the same populations, has a mortality rate that is substantially lower (around 3%, according to the World Health Organization), and global travel (airline and cruise ship) has enabled its entrée into Australia and New Zealand, as well as across the rest of the world.

Plague was also a good deal nastier than COVID-19. Symptoms included swollen buboes around the lymph nodes (hence “bubonic plague”), fever (sometimes to the point of delirium), muscle aches, nausea and vomiting, and pneumonic bleeding. Medical professionals (called “plague doctors”) lacked the basic ability to understand the disease, attributing it to a scourge from God, a sign of vice, a sexually-transmitted illness, foreign corruption (ascribed specifically to the Middle East by ignorant Londoners), and imbalances in the “humors” (four substances which made up the body, including blood,



1 Plague Doctor

¹ Monica H. Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously: Making the Black Death Global,” in *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica H. Green, The Medieval Globe 1 (Kalamazoo: ARC Medieval Press, 2015), 37.

² Monica H. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*,” in *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica H. Green, The Medieval Globe 1 (Kalamazoo: ARC Medieval Press, 2015), 9.

³ Sharon N. DeWitte, “The Anthropology of Plague: Insights from Bioarcheological Analyses of Epidemic Cemeteries,” in *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica H. Green, The Medieval Globe 1 (Kalamazoo: ARC Medieval Press, 2015), 112.

⁴ Green, “Editor’s Introduction to *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*,” 14.

⁵ Michelle Ziegler, “The Black Death and the Future of the Plague,” in *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica H. Green, The Medieval Globe 1 (Kalamazoo: ARC Medieval Press, 2015), 259.

black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm).⁶ It was common for plague doctors to bleed their patients or fill their rooms with the smoke of pungent herbs, neither of which was much help. Plague is also the apocryphal source of the children’s nursery rhyme “Ring around the Rosy,” which describes, metaphorically, the “roses” or buboes of plague and the burning of plague victims, their clothing, and even their homes (“ashes, ashes, we all fall down”).⁷

In Shakespeare’s London, some two-hundred and fifty years after plague first struck, the Privy Council (and their arm, the Office of the Revels) were in charge of determining when to institute social distancing, although of course they didn’t use that term. They also didn’t understand germ theory, and had very little idea of what was causing the plague, although they absolutely understood that if you touched someone with the plague you were likely to contract it.

Plague led the Privy Council to close down public gatherings, including the open-air theatres (such as Shakespeare’s Globe) multiple times during the playwright’s career, including in 1593 right as he was becoming popular, in 1603 immediately following the death of the Queen (who did not, for what it is worth, die from plague), and again in 1608. These closures, despite the lack of understanding behind them, actually did work, and were instituted to varying degrees based on the number of plague deaths in the city on any given day.

Shakespeare himself had suffered personal losses as a result of plague: his sisters Joan, Margaret, and Anne had died of it as children, his brother Edmund as a young man, and his only son, Hamnet, succumbed at age 11 (most likely inducing Shakespeare to write *Hamlet* in the years following). He lost friends and colleagues (possibly including Will Kempe, the company clown, who died in 1603). He was forced, during the closures in 1593 and 1594, to turn for his living away from the theatres and to poetry, writing *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* for wealthy patrons as a way to make a living.

Plague changed Shakespeare’s life, but it didn’t stop him. Certainly, we should be cognizant that Shakespeare—for all his literary brilliance—was not the most engaged of parental figures, leaving his wife and children in Stratford-Upon-Avon to largely fend for themselves, although he did provide financially for them (and, one might argue, by keeping away he may have been practicing a bit of social distancing of his own... although he was rarely in Stratford even when the risk of plague was low). It also helped to shape the plays he wrote when the theatres were open. Mercutio’s dying line, “a plague o’ both your houses,” from *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most-quoted lines in Shakespeare, and contains a lesson about the dangers of partisanship even as it reminds the play’s original audience of the virulence of plague (which decimated or destroyed entire families).

In the days ahead, we will find ourselves having to figure out—as Shakespeare and his contemporaries must have—how to live with COVID-19, not just how to avoid it. While we are fortunate that our “plague” does not have the virulence or mortality of the Black Death and our medical system has a much better understanding of how to treat illness, we do need to remember the lessons that Shakespeare encoded in his plays about working together, holding one another accountable, and not giving in to partisanship, ambition, or foolishness. We find these lessons alongside references to plague in *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and many more... several of which contain speeches that take the requisite 20 seconds to recite for those who need hand-washing timers, including Juliet’s “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” as well as Hamlet’s “To be or not to be,” Richard III’s “Now is the winter of our discontent,” and my personal favorite, Lady Macbeth’s “Out, out damned spot.”

⁶ Nükhet Varlik, “New Science and Old Sources: Why the Ottoman Experience of Plague Matters,” in *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, ed. Monica H. Green, The Medieval Globe 1 (Kalamazoo: ARC Medieval Press, 2015), 204.

⁷ We don’t actually know where this rhyme came from or when, but this seems as likely an origin as any.