

The Black Death
Shakespeare and the Plague
by
Jerry James

*... the Plague doth rage
(With unappeased furie) more and more,
Making our Troy-novant a tragicke Stage
Whereon to shew Death's power, with slaughters sore.*

— John Davies, *The Triumph of Death*, 1603



Title Artwork for "A Rod for Run-Awayes," by Thomas Dekker, 1625

John and Mary were terrified. Once again, the Black Death, the plague that had taken their first two children, had come to Henley Street, Now, to protect their three-month-old son, they chose to seal themselves in their house, nailing shut the doors and windows until the pestilence had run its course.

Their gamble paid off. Although a third of the young children in the area died, William Shakespeare (and his parents) survived.

Shakespeare would live through five more major outbreaks of bubonic plague. Each of these would kill perhaps a quarter of the population of London. Despite this carnage, James Shapiro notes a singular oddity in Shakespeare's plays. "Nobody ever dies of plague. It's just taboo."

In this time of pandemic, it seems fitting to examine Shakespeare's relationship to the plague. What exactly was it, and what effect did it have, not only on England but on his career?

Bubonic Plague



Medieval Depiction of Plague Victims

The first appearance of bubonic plague (1347-51) would later come to be called the Black Death. Eventually, it would kill perhaps 20 million people, including half the population of Europe—the deadliest outbreak in human history. This pestilence would then become endemic, arising periodically for the next 300 years.

The plague began in Mongolia in 1346. It rapidly progressed through the Black Sea to Italy, and from there, throughout Europe, reaching England in June 1348. There were five million English. Two million would die.

Bubonic plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, carried by flea-infested rats. "Chief among its symptoms," writes John Seven, "are painfully swollen lymph glands that form pus-filled boils called buboes [which may eventually burst]. Sufferers also face fever, chills, headaches, shortness of breath, hemorrhaging, bloody sputum, vomiting and delirium, and if it goes untreated, a survival rate of 50 percent." Others put the survival rate as low as 30 percent. Death usually came between two and seven days after infection.



Buboes

As we have recently seen, when a novel disease is introduced into a population, hardly anyone knows anything. Many among the Medieval English reasoned the plague had been sent by God to punish them, so they, perforce, must drive out Satan and his messengers. These messengers included cats (and dogs, just to be sure), the very creatures that might have killed the rats that carried the fleas that carried the plague.

In reality, only cold weather stopped the pestilence. Time would allow experience to discover other methods that had some efficacy. But always, there would be death.

Shakespeare of Stratford



A Performance in an Inn Yard

Two hundred years later, the plague made its first appearance in the life of William Shakespeare. Perhaps the Shakespeares had sealed themselves up for the traditional forty days, a remedy imported from Italy. The English called this “quarantine,” from *quaranta*, the Italian word for forty.

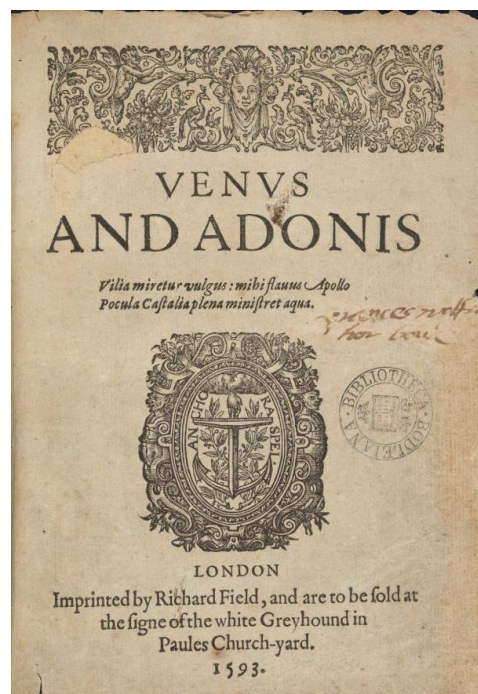
It is a verifiable fact that Shakespeare was born during a plague. Would that his life offered more verifiable facts! Born 1564, Stratford-upon-Avon. Married Anne Hathaway. Fathered three children.

Adding to the mystery are Shakespeare’s “lost years,” between the 1585 christening of his twins and what the Shakespeare Trust calls “his apparent arrival on the London theatre scene in 1592.” London? How did this nobody get to London?

One tempting possibility involves the regular tours of London’s theatre troupes, especially during the plague. Often, they would set up a temporary stage in an inn yard (as seen above). In 1587, the Queen’s Men were scheduled to perform in Stratford, a regular stop on their touring schedule, when one of their actors was killed in a knife fight. Had they met a talented amateur on their previous visits, one whom they were able to entice into first stepping into the dead man’s shoes and then continuing on with them to London?

Perhaps. But we have no facts. We do know that soon after his arrival, another plague would place Shakespeare’s budding career in grave danger.

Plague, 1592



The Only Surviving Copy of the First Edition

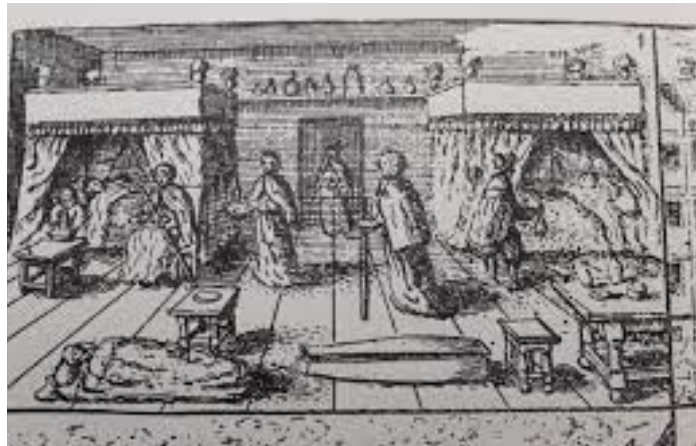
When Shakespeare reappeared in 1593, he had become a playwright prominent enough to be blasted in a pamphlet as, “an upstart Crow... that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde...*

is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.”

The reference is to Queen Margaret, the “tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide” of *Henry VI, Pt. 3*. Shakespeare had enjoyed a major success with *Henry VI* and its two sequels. But by the time the pamphlet was published, Shakespeare’s triumphs were history. In 1592, the plague had returned, virtually closing the London theatres from June 1592 to May 1594.

Shakespeare, however, had not made his way to London from a provincial backwater only to slink back there. Somehow, he connected with the Earl of Southampton, who became his patron. This fiduciary relationship led to the first publication of Shakespeare’s works, the long poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). But as soon as the theatres reopened, Shakespeare abandoned long-form poetry.

Romeo and Juliet



Searchers of the Dead Enter a Home

In the reshuffling of theatre companies that followed the 1592-94 plague, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, not only as a playwright, but as a sharer, one of those who divided the company’s income among them. He would write an average of two plays a year for this group for almost twenty years. One of them was the only play he ever wrote that used the plague as a plot point.

The Lord Mayor of the City of London required each parish to appoint two “honest and discreet matrons” to enter houses to view the dead and determine if they had died of the plague. These searchers of the dead were paid between four and six pence for each body so reported.

As so often happens with dangerous jobs, the honest and discreet were also the old and poor—i.e., the most disposable members of the community. But the searchers, living apart and walking the streets carrying their white rods of authority, were also empowered. They could have any house and those within it quarantined, with a red cross painted on the sealed-up door. (Of course, this did nothing to keep out the rats or the fleas.) Enter Shakespeare, who had witnessed it all.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the success of Friar Lawrence’s plan to have Juliet appear to be dead relies on letting Romeo in on it. To that end, Friar Lawrence gives Friar John a letter to deliver to

Romeo in Mantua, where he's been banished. But as a Franciscan, Friar John can only travel with another Franciscan. And in seeking one, he has bad luck.

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...

Thus, through the actions of the searchers of the dead, Romeo doesn't get the message, and catastrophe ensues. Shakespeare's embellishment of the original tale has been box-office magic ever since.

In 1599, Shakespeare and Co. opened the Globe Theatre. He was solidly established and well on his way to becoming a man of means. But then, like Friar John's, his luck went sour. But Shakespeare would not end up like Romeo and Juliet. Instead, he would use the circumstances of the next decade to write some of his greatest plays.

Plague, 1603-1610



A Plague Doctor

In 1603, Queen Elizabeth died, and the plague returned. Although there were three separate outbreaks between 1603 and 1610, to Shakespeare it might well have seemed like one long plague. Between 1606 and 1610, for instance, it's likely the playhouses weren't open for more than a total of nine months.

When the daily number of plague deaths reached thirty, the theatres would close, although some would stretch that number to forty. Also closed were bear-baiting arenas, archery ranges and anywhere else crowds might gather—except churches. Churches were exempt, because what pestilence would dare face off with God? Not helping at all was the attitude of a famous preacher, “The cause of plagues is sin, and the cause of sin is plays.”

The King’s Men (for so Shakespeare’s company was now called, under the patronage of James I) probably took to the road as much as possible. Shakespeare, having given up acting around 1603, would not have gone with them. Perhaps he spent some time in Stratford, but it seems more likely that he remained in his rented rooms in London, writing.

He would have seen plague doctors walking about in costumes like the one seen above. This medical garb, including gloves, covered the doctor from head to toe. Its purpose was to fend off miasma, that rotten corruption of the air thought to bring on plague. (That it helped keep fleas off the doctor was something noticed only centuries later.) With a mask filled with a mixture of herbs thought to be efficacious against the plague, the doctor would make his way to tend the victims.

Somehow, with the streets patrolled by these figures straight out of Hieronymus Bosch, Shakespeare continued to write. It is believed that *Hamlet* was written after his only son, Hamnet, died of the plague in 1596. During the 1603 outbreak, Shakespeare probably completed *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. During the later, more terrible, outbreak of 1606, he would somehow write *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*. It is an astonishing feat.

And because the 1606 plague wiped out the companies of boy players at the Blackfriars Theatre, an indoor theatre space, Shakespeare was also able to write intimate dramas for a more discerning audience—*Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*.

The plays he wrote during the plague ensured that when Shakespeare died in 1616, he was both wealthy and entitled to call himself a gentleman. Pestilence would regularly return to London until the Great Plague of London (1664-66), which climaxed in the Great Fire of London. Whether it was this apocalyptic event or the achievement of herd immunity that spared England afterwards is unknown.

On average, seven cases of bubonic plague are reported in the USA every year. It can now be treated with antibiotics. But be warned. The CDC says, “Plague is most common in the southwestern states, particularly New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado.”

(Hat Tip: Winding Road Theatre Ensemble)

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty-five years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.