

‘By Time’s fell hand’: Shakespeare and Emotional Lockdown

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William Shakespeare’s life, like our lives perhaps, was defined by the plague. Shakespeare experienced his first lockdown in 1564, the year of his birth, when one quarter of the population died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. Throughout his illustrious career as a playwright, London experienced repeated and devastating outbreaks of plague which forced the city’s theatres to close their doors to the paying public. Shakespeare’s family may have been touched directly by the plague’s indiscriminate violence when his only son, Hamnet, died in the midsummer of 1596 when he was eleven years old. Hamnet’s twin sister, Judith, survived. While the theatres were closed, and London’s citizens were sheltering in place, Shakespeare turned to poetry. His *Sonnets*, a collection of 154 poems, offer a unique and unsparing account of human suffering. To those of us confronting the modern plague of Covid-19 in every work shift, the grief and loss of control can feel overwhelming. Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* articulate parallel experiences of suffering, and offer us compassion and perhaps even hope.

The *Sonnets* are remembered above all for their anatomization of desire, but the shock of plague was never far from Shakespeare’s mind. In Sonnet 14 he describes its visitations as difficult to foresee, and unstoppably devastating, like ‘evil luck’ itself.¹ In Sonnet 111, which is sometimes considered the closest thing we have to Shakespeare’s autobiography, a life ruined by mistakes is compared to a life struck down by ‘strong infection’. The bitter remedy offered to this ‘willing

patient' is a draught of vinegar, thought at the time to offer some protection against the plague – although Shakespeare hints that the remedy was ineffective.

Other sonnets make clear that Shakespeare, like us, had witnessed human suffering on a vast scale. Many such as Sonnet 19 deal with the merciless ravages of time which cannot be undone, no matter how dire the consequences, as the 'earth devour[s] her own sweet brood'. Illness and death are ever-present in these poems, their relentless movement like the rhythm of the tides:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

Here in Sonnet 60, Shakespeare expresses what healthcare workers and carers are currently confronting every day. Never has it been clearer that life can hasten swiftly and unpredictably towards an abrupt and unprepared-for end, and that death is as unstoppable – and disease as brutally unconcerned – as the turning of the tides.² Such is the scale of the task before us, and the seeming inadequacy of our resources to contend with it, that we may feel powerless to respond. Later the sonnet recognizes the particular vulnerability of the elderly who are exposed for no reason other than that their lives have been lived for longer. Four hundred years later, these patients again seem suddenly diminished, and painfully defined, by a disease which is devastating their

generation.³ Whatever gifts time bestows upon the world, time snatches away: ‘Time that gave doth now his gift confound.’

The *Sonnets* also offer a remarkably prescient account of how it feels to be forcibly separated from others. One particularly distressing aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the rifts caused by the isolation and quarantine measures needed to control the disease in the community as well as the infection control requirements in healthcare facilities. Families have been divided, often leaving vulnerable members to fend for themselves and making previously manageable distances impossible to navigate. Many healthcare workers are living apart from their loved ones, self-isolating in order to protect their families and control the spread of the disease.⁴ People have tragically died in hospitals and care homes without the comfort of family members at their bedside. At work we are experiencing a new and unfamiliar sense of separation from our patients, and from each other, behind the barriers of personal protective equipment whose protection comes at the cost of meaningful communication. All over the world, face masks have become a starkly visible reminder of the need to keep apart. For all of us, in different ways, physical and emotional lockdown has become the new norm.

Sonnet 98 describes how it feels to be sequestered from a loved one, but also captures more generally the psychological and emotional burden of quarantine:

From you have I been absent in the spring,
When proud-pied April (dress'd in all his trim)

Hath put a spirit of youth in every thing,
That heavy Saturn laughed and leapt with him.

...

Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose,
They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.

The spring Shakespeare here describes, like the spring of 2020, may be more vibrantly alive than ever – but it is scored over with a palpable sense of loss. Whatever is beautiful in the world is like a shadow of former intimacy, calling others to mind but also reminding us that we can no longer see, hear or touch them in person. All of nature's exquisite things are still around us: the sun, birds, colour. But such pleasures reflect back to us the closeness we have lost: 'They were sweet, but... / Drawn after you'. Something is missing, even as the world keeps turning, as though we have been locked out of our ability to feel easy in ourselves. The thing that is missing is easeful contact with one another.

Yet Shakespeare offers something more, and more precious, than tired resignation in the face of the way things are. Loss, suffering and a sense of absence are inevitable in the current crisis as life's former routines feel more and more impossibly remote from our present realities. There is no easy comfort. Nevertheless the same rhythms of time described in Sonnet 60 offer the promise of change and restoration. If the pandemic, its chaotic aftermath, and mortality itself are overwhelming and unalterable, there are still things we can do. The crisis moves forward

relentlessly, but time in our own healthcare settings moves forward too, in a series of shifts ‘each changing place with that which goes before’. We change places with others more rested than ourselves, who keep giving care. If Shakespeare’s minutes ‘toil forwards’, so do the caregivers.² *All forwards, all together*. As long as the minutes roll forward, there is movement and change – and, with them, the prospect of recovery. It is this sense of renewed purpose and agency that the sonnet concludes by celebrating:

And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

Shakespeare recognizes the difficulty of holding on to what is worthwhile – our care for the sick and the dying, and for our loved ones – as time marches inexorably forward. And it registers the particular importance of recording and remembering such things for posterity. In due course, there will be time to reflect on and to process some of the cruelty and senselessness of what has happened, and perhaps to recognize, for ourselves and for each other, the things we got right: ‘praising thy worth’. In this way the sonnet looks forward to the future, with hope.

References

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