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Spring 2021

## Sonnets in Viral Times

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### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Sarah Kate. "Sonnets in Viral Times." *Pandemic Pandemonium*, 2021. doi:10.31979/PP.2021.001.

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**Pandemic Pandemonium - Spring 2021**  
**Student Winner based on Assignment**

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Semester taught assignment: Fall 2020  
Course Title: Advanced Acting  
Assignment Title: Sonnets in Viral Times  
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Sonnets in Viral Times

To illuminate our personal experiences during this time of sheltering-in, we will continue our investigation of sonnets as performance texts by writing and acting in our own creations. Held by the structure of the verse, we will create and perform sonnets that communicate our thoughts and feelings about life, loss, survival, resilience, and love during these unprecedented times. We will continue to lend our voices to the verse with specific concentration on embodiment, clarity, personal connection, and the merging of the emotional and intellectual through-line. This collaborative assignment has two parts: a creative writing component, and a skilled performance component.

PART ONE--Writing the sonnets

These sonnets will be written from your point of view (you are the speaker). Use your creative abilities to communicate your personal experiences.

Each sonnet will

- A. be written in iambic pentameter. As we have learned, when the rules of this rhythm are broken, it is for a purposeful and specific reason. You may break the meter, but do your best to trust the form.

- B. employ the abab-cdcd-efef-gg rhyme scheme.
- C. include a *volta* (between lines 8 and 9 or between lines 12 and 13).
- D. highlight at least 5 of the following 9 rhetorical devices:
1. repetition of sounds (alliteration, consonance, assonance, etc.)
  2. repetition of words (anaphora, antanaclasis, chiasmus, etc.)
  3. abutted consonants
  4. homophone, homonym
  5. onomatopoeia
  6. antithesis, oxymoron
  7. Metaphor, simile
  8. personification
  9. an honest question, hypophora, or rhetorical question

Examples of themes to explore:

Social justice, citizen's rights, and protesting (BLM, ICE detention facilities); the wildfires, climate change, and the environment; health and well-being (physical and mental health); death and sickness; isolation and the toll (or enjoyment) of socially distanced life; the Covid-19 virus itself and the violence it does to our economy, our society, and our bodies; relationships and the family in lockdown; Zooming and distance education; technology and media; politics; bravery and perseverance; truth and lies; hope; grief and uncertainty with theatres shut down; transformation (societal/personal)

Write about whatever you want! Remember, *sonnets are love poems*. Even when Shakespeare was writing about death it was still filtered through the speaker's

experience of love. Please write what you know and center your personal experiences in this work. Know that you may be addressing multiple topics in your sonnet, and that is great. We will write drafts and then rework the poems, resulting in a final collection.

### PART TWO--Performing the sonnets

Each student will be assigned a classmate's sonnet to perform. You will upload a video of your performance on Canvas. You will turn in a dress rehearsal, receive feedback, and then turn in a final project. The sonnet must be fully memorized and your performance must display what we have worked on in class (voice, presence, rhythm, structure, breath, clarity, personal connection). We aim to honor each other's creative expression and to highlight the human experience through performance. This is a theatre course: you must perform the sonnet in one continuous take with no edits.

### Notes on the relevance of this assignment

Since lockdown began last March, many artists are engaging with Shakespeare's 154 sonnets for comfort, as performance texts, or even as a daily practice to exercise their acting muscles. Sir Patrick Stewart is currently reading each of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets on Twitter, the Royal Shakespeare Company is facilitating a project called "Sonnets in Solitude," and Indigo Arts Collective organized a Shakespearean sonnet project entitled: "The Sonnet Response Series: A Collaborative Performance Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic." We will be joining these artists from across the world by utilizing the sonnet as a vehicle for our creative expression.

Links to Sonnet Projects Conducted During Lockdown from

Covid-19: ● SirPatrick Stewart #ASonnetADay

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/hear-daily-shakespeare-sonnets-sir-patrick-stewart-180974616/>

- Revolution Shakespeare “154 Revisited”

Playwrights and actors working through this Philadelphia creative community interpreting Shakespeare’s 154 Sonnets while in lockdown

September 10-October 4

<https://www.revolutionshakespeare.org/>

- Shakespeare’s Globe *Such Stuff* Podcast

Season 5 Episode 3 “Love in Isolation”

A discussion with Michelle Terry and Peter Brook about sonnets during this time (performances by Kathryn Hunter).

<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2020/04/21/such-stuff-s5-e2/>

- Royal Shakespeare Company “Sonnets in Solitude”

Shakespeare’s Sonnets performed in lockdown by RSC actors

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLSIxo\\_5qCKQjrXHGJvVQ7ppaBkH5D8P2b](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLSIxo_5qCKQjrXHGJvVQ7ppaBkH5D8P2b)

- Indigo Arts Collective “The Sonnet Response Series: A Collaborative Performance Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic”

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/sonnetresponseseries>

<https://www.sheadonovan.org/indigo-arts-collective>

- Shotgun Players “A Sonnet A Day”

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLXJqiJ\\_Shwbl91tgLdQqjU5w5XWIEynz](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLXJqiJ_Shwbl91tgLdQqjU5w5XWIEynz)

- Old Globe “Thinking Shakespeare: Sonnets!”

Barry Edlestein, Artistic Director of The Old Globe Theatre shifted his Summer lecture series during the pandemic to focus on the sonnets. This 8 part series can be found at the company’s YouTube page.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheOldGlobe>

Some say Shakespeare wrote his sonnet sequence when the London theatres were shut down because of the plague. In her book *Women of Will: The Remarkable Evolution of Shakespeare’s Female Characters*, the founding artistic director of Shakespeare & Company, Tina Packer, makes reference to Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence as an integral part of his development as a writer, noting that in “1591-92 the plague struck London. The theatres were closed in 1593 and reopened in 1594. It is believed that this was the time when Shakespeare began to write his sonnets although they were not published until 1609” (70). There was another outbreak of the plague in 1603 that shut down the theatres in London for a year (and killed a lot of people).

There is no evidence that confirms exactly when Shakespeare began his sequence, but it is quite intriguing to think of Shakespeare spending his days in social isolation

writing sonnets! Shortly after the shutdown of 1593-94, his bestselling epyllion poem, “Venus and Adonis,” and the narrative poem “The Rape of Lucrece” were published so he was indeed creating non-theatrical texts during that period. Further evidence to suggest at least some sonnets were written during lockdown is that after the theatres opened back up in London, Shakespeare likely premiered *Romeo and Juliet* (a play that contains 3 sonnets), and *Love's Labour's Lost* (a play containing 5 sonnets and the characters themselves are writing sonnets). So, he did indeed have sonnets on his brain!

#### Works Cited

Packer, Tina. *Women of Will: The Remarkable Evolution of Shakespeare's Female Characters*. Vintage Books, 2016.

#### Assignment Timeline:

##### Part One

10/2 Rough Draft of Sonnet

10/7 Sonnet Discussion Responses

10/9 In-Class work

10/14 Final Sonnet Due

##### Part Two

10/14 Performance Sonnets Assigned

10/16 In-Class Rehearsal

10/23 Video Plan Draft Due

10/30 Dress Rehearsal Due

11/6 Final Performance Video Due