Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

15

Shakespeare and Adaptation: Reading the Plague

Dr. Rohal S. Raval

Assistant Professor and Head,

Department of English,

Government Arts and Commerce College (GACC), Ghogha, Bhavnagar.

Fromer Teaching Assistant and Research Scholar,

Department of Languages (English),

Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7252-7309

Abstract:

The present paper analyzes Shakespeare's reading of the contemporary social reality of England, especially London, as a (source) text troubled with plague outbreaks, contagion, dissemination, and enforced quarantines. The numerous references to plague in the language and narrative of the plays reflect how the playwright adapts the traumatic experiences associated with it through allusion, dialogue, metaphor, plot device, and conflation with storytelling itself. From an Adaptation Studies perspective, these references and allusions reveal Shakespeare as a master adapter of not only prior written texts, but also of contemporary events that had a significant impact on the lives of the Elizabethan populace.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies. Plague. Shakespeare.

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

Introduction

A reciprocal relationship exists between literature and history; each influences the other. Often, literature faithfully reflects conditions that exist during a particular historical epoch. The many references to plague in Shakespeare's works attest to the fact that apart from literary and/or historical texts, the genius playwright also relied upon the specific social conditions of his time, marked by numerous plague outbreaks, from which to draw raw material for his creative endeavors. Moreover, these references can also be understood as a response to the trauma of having witnessed large-scale, horrific deaths due to the disease and the grave fear of contracting it.

Milan Pribisic distinguishes between traditional and contemporary adaptation studies – the former is concerned with the "transfer of a literary work into a film medium" and the latter expanding this "narrow notion to include new models of adaptation, including nonliterary sources as well as all other sources beyond the source text (e.g., social sources, history, genre, performance, marketing, media, and media literacy)" (148).

Similarly, Shakespeare adapts his contemporary social reality, weaving it within the rich tapestry of his language through allusion, dialogue, metaphor, plot device, and conflation with storytelling itself, obliquely or directly referring and recalling the plague and its painful, trauma-inducing experiences.

Indeed, Anne Goarzin defines trauma as "an original inner catastrophe, as an experience of excess which overwhelms the subject symbolically and/or physically and is not accessible to him . . . [as] the pain experienced by the subject is forcefully relocated into the subconscious" (par. 1). Literature, as a sort of cathartic vehicle, provides an outlet for the expression of these buried experiences.

Theater in Shakespeare's time, though a popular medium for public entertainment, shared an uneasy relationship with secular and religious officialdom, not least for its potential to inspire political subversion:

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

> The very idea of theater, its physical, social, and architectural embodiments, enjoyed an ill-conceived yet widespread reputation as hotbeds for the proliferation of *actual* diseases such as syphilis or the bubonic plague, as well as a corrupting force against morality. (Bernard 214, emphasis original)

As a result, "playhouses were invariably the first to close" (Dickson) during plague outbreaks. Andrew Dickson states that during Shakespeare's lifetime "plague presented both a professional and existential threat. . . . Between 1603 and 1613, when Shakespeare's powers as a writer were at their height, the Globe and other London playhouses were shut for an astonishing total of 78 months – more than 60% of the time" (Dickson).

Shakespeare is believed to have written his narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* when theatres were shut for almost two years, from 1592 to 1594, as a result of the plague outbreak and the playwright might have been "desperate for a more reliable source of income" (Dickson). Shakespeare may have been in quarantine when he wrote *King Lear*, probably between 1605 and 1606, as the play appears to be influenced either by the 1603-04 outbreak of plague or the subsequent one in the summer of 1606.

According to theater historian James Shapiro

> Biographers like to attribute the turns in Shakespeare's career to his psychological state (so he must have been in and out of love when writing comedies and sonnets, depressed when he wrote tragedies, and in mourning when he wrote Hamlet). While his personal life must have powerfully informed what he wrote, we have no idea what he was feeling at any point during the quarter-century that he was writing – other than, in circular fashion, extrapolating this from his works (which largely steered clear of plague, no matter how profoundly he may have experienced its impact). (Shapiro)

Despite this last assertion, J. F. Bernard counts at least a hundred and twenty instances of the use of the word "plague" by Shakespeare (217), suggesting that the influence of the disease runs deep into his works.

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

Given the fact that Shakespeare had been witness to the loss of human life from plague for a greater part of his life, including the death of his landlady Marie Mountjoy probably from the disease, it can be argued that his literary works "express whatever kind of memory the traumatic event allows" mostly "through figurative language" (Goarzin, par. 2).

Adapting the Plague: Allusion, Dialogue, Metaphor, Plot Device, and Storytelling

Shakespeare's contemporary Thomas Nashe overtly referred to the devastating effects and power of the plague in his *A Litany in the Time of Plague* (1592). As opposed to the secularized Europe of today, people in Shakespeare's time relied on astronomy – what today we call astrology – to predict plagues, droughts, and seasonal conditions. Shakespeare contrasts himself from other astronomers of his time, indulged in similar activities, in Sonnet 14, which begins thus:

> Not from the stars do I my judgement pluck;
>
> And yet methinks I have Astronomy,
>
> But not to tell of good or evil luck,
>
> Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality. (lines 1-4)

Given the fact that Shakespeare does not set the action of most of his plays in the London of his time, the genius playwright nevertheless adapts the contemporary social, physical, and mental experiences of the plague, which often devastated England, especially London, in the speeches and varied conditions of his characters as they curse, complain, or vent their anger; poke fun; or fall in love

For instance, an enraged Lear compares his cunning daughter Goneril to a disease in his "corrupted blood": "a boil / A plague-sore or embossed carbuncle" (*Lr.* 2.2. 368-70).

As Emma Smith, professor of Shakespeare Studies at Oxford, explains:

> "Plague-sore" refers to the inflamed lymph glands that were such a feared symptom of the disease — it's not something any parent should wish on their child. Perhaps the

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

> play's particular violence on the younger generation allegorizes that of the plague itself: The disease was most rampant among those in their 20s and 30s. (Smith)

Coriolanus curses the Romans that they be infected with the plague, that "Boils and plagues / Plaster you o'er" (*Cor.* 1.5. 2-3). In *Romeo and Juliet* (), a dying Mercutio curses the Capulet and Montague families with "A plague o' both your houses" (*Rom.* 3.1. 89-90).

Several other major and minor characters in Shakespeare – including Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part I* (*1H4* 2.2. 21), the Boatswain in *The Tempest* (*Tmp.* 1.1. 31), Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night* (*TN* 1.5. 97) – refer to the plague to curse and/or complain. According to Greenblatt, such references to the plague in everyday language suggests a "deep familiarity, the acceptance of plague as an inescapable feature of ordinary life" (Greenblatt).

On the other hand, Beatrice jokes that being befriended by Benedict is akin to having caught a plague – indeed, Benedict latches on to his victims even more quickly than the actual plague and soon drives them mad (*Ado* 1.1. 62-65).

In *Twelfth Night* (c. 1599-1602), Olivia humorously compares the speed with which she has fallen in love to how quickly one might catch the infectious plague:

> 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. (*TN* 2.1. 248-52)

In *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1591-97), the plague moves from the metaphorical to the real, adapted to function as a plot device that seals the tragic fate of the star-crossed lovers – belonging to the Franciscans, a discalced order, whose Friars always went barefoot or in sandals and were mandated to travel in pairs, Friar John required to take along one other Friar

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

with him before he could go deliver a crucial message to Romeo. He finds the other Friar in the city, on a visit to the house of someone who had been infected with the plague but having recovered since then. The city officials, however, suspecting the two Friars might have been infected, quarantined them inside the same house and the message to Romeo could not be delivered – a failure which would contribute to the tragic ending of the play (*Rom.* 5.2. 5-20).

Moreover, the role of fate in the play – Romeo lands up at the wrong party, encouraged by his friend Benvolio to seek a new love to forget his previous crush Rosalind; he kills Juliet's cousin in a street quarrel; Friar John fails to deliver a crucial message to Romeo – is "typical of literature written in times of infectious epidemic . . . [as it] dwells heavily on the role of luck in infection and survival, and on the nature of survivor's guilt" (Maltby). Indeed, Romeo, assuming that Juliet is dead, ends up killing himself.

At other places, Shakespeare alludes to the plague in an "obscure, or heavily coded" (Maltby) manner. For instance, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, probably first written and performed in 1606, alludes to the devastation the plague had wrecked in England some two years back. In Act 4, Scene 3, when Ross is replying to Macduff's question regarding Scotland's condition under the rule of Macbeth, it also, accurately, "conjure[s] up a country [England] so traumatized [by the plague] 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" (Greenblatt). Earlier in the play, unsure of whether or not to kill Duncan, Macbeth overtly compares the likely consequences of the act to being infected with the plague (*Mac.* 1.7. 10).

Through verbal and visual metaphors, Shakespeare conjures up different aspects of the plague epidemic: the experience of being quarantined and how, as Vanessa Harding points out, those dead were buried only in bloodied sheets due to the rising prices of a coffin burial for instance, Romeo, with Rosaline still on his mind, feels like he is "bound more than a mad man is: / Shut up in prison. . ." (*Rom.* 1.2. 51-52); Romeo tellingly spots and refers to Tybalt's body wrapped in a "bloody sheet" (*Rom.* 5.3. 97) in the Capulet mausoleum.

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

Moreover, because some editions of the play emend Mercutio's "A plague o' [over] both your houses" to "a plague on both your houses" the actual connotation for "both Montague and Capulet households to be marked, as the doors of quarantined households were in plague, with a visible symbol that warned others of infectious danger" (Maltby) is lost. What Mercutio is implying is that the feud between the two warring families end up destroying (innocent) lives, including his own, and hence their houses should be marked, as those of people infected with plague are, as a dire warning about them.

In the diegetic world of *King Lear* (c. 1605-06), Gloucester's speech (mistakenly) anticipates a betrayal from his son Edgar, it nevertheless evokes and alludes to the terrifying picture of friends, family members, and public turning on each other over fear of being infected during plague outbreas: "love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; . . . [in] palaces, treason, the bond cracked between son and father. . ." (*Lr.* 1.2. 92-94).

In *Hamlet* (c. 1600-02 or 1603-04), Shakespeare metaphorically "conflates Hamlet with contagion and the spatial and disseminative anxieties it fosters" (Bernard 221), infected as he is with the knowledge the ghost provides him regarding Claudius – what if Hamlet, just as a contagion might, disseminates this knowledge that bodes ill for Claudius' political 'health'.

Moreover, the ending of the play conflates contagion, dissemination, and storytelling, as it suggests that spectators would have caught the 'infection' of Hamlet's appeal to disseminate his story from Horatio – the patient zero – and will eventually 'spread' to "the homes of unsuspecting relatives who fall victim to the invisible narratives that theatergoers carried home with them" (Bernard 225).

Conclusion

The various examples discussed above demonstrate that Shakespeare reads his contemporary social reality as a (source) text troubled with plague outbreaks, contagion, dissemination, and enforced quarantines. The playwright adapts these traumatic experiences, whether individual or collective, in his works through allusion, dialogue, metaphor, plot device, and conflation with storytelling itself. Even when his plays are not set in the London of his times, through the many references and allusions to the plague, Shakespeare reminds of the trauma and

Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596
An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal
www.vidhyayanaejournal.org
Indexed in: Crossref, ROAD & Google Scholar

devastation plague repeatedly brought upon the country. Thus, from an Adaptation Studies perspective, because these references and allusions are grounded in actual historical events, they reveal Shakespeare as a master adapter of not only prior written texts, literary and/or historical, but also of contemporary events that had a significant impact on the lives of the Elizabethan populace.

Works Cited

Bernard, J. F. "Hamlet's Story/Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare's Theater, the Plague, and Contagious Storytelling." *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, edited by Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 213-32.

Dickson, Andrew. "Shakespeare in Lockdown: Did He Write King Lear in Plague Quarantine?" *The Guardian*, 22 Mar. 2020, www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/mar/-22/shakespeare-in-lockdown-did-he-write-king-lear-in-plague-quarantine. Accessed 09 May 2020.

Goarzin, Anne. "Articulating Trauma." *Études Irlandaises*, no. 36-1, 2011, pp. 11–22., doi:10.4000/etudesirlandaises.2116

Greenblatt, Stephen. "What Shakespeare Actually Wrote About the Plague." *newyorker.com*, 07 May 2020, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-shakespeare-actually-wrote-about-the-plague. Accessed 09 May 2020.

Harding, Vanessa. "Burial of the Plague Dead in Early Modern London." *archives.history.ac.uk*, n.d., archives.history.ac.uk/cmh/epiharding.html. Accessed 09 May 2020.

Maltby, Kate. "What Shakespeare Can -- and Can't -- Teach us about Covid-19." *edition.cnn.com*, 08 Apr. 2020, edition.cnn.com/2020/04/08/opinions/covid-19-and-plague-literature-maltby/index.html. Accessed 10 May 2020.

Pribisic, Milan. "The Pleasures of "Theater Film": Stage to Film Adaptation." *Redefining Adaptation Studies*, edited by Dennis Cutchins et al., Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2010, pp. 147-59.

Shakespeare, William. "Not From the Stars Do I My Judgement Pluck (Sonnet 14)." *The Sonnets: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*, edited by John Dover Wilson, vol. 31, Cambridge UP, 2009, p. 9.

Shakespeare, William. *The New Oxford Shakespeare*. Edited by Gary Taylor et al., Oxford University Press, 2016.

Shapiro, James. "How Shakespeare's Great Escape from the Plague Changed Theatre." *The Guardian*, 24. Sep. 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/24/shakespeares-great-escape-plague-1606--james-shapiro. Accessed 09 May 2020.

Smith, Emma. "What Shakespeare Teaches Us About Living with Pandemics." *nytimes.com*, 28 Mar. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/opinion/coronavirus-shakespeare.html. Accessed 10 May 2020.