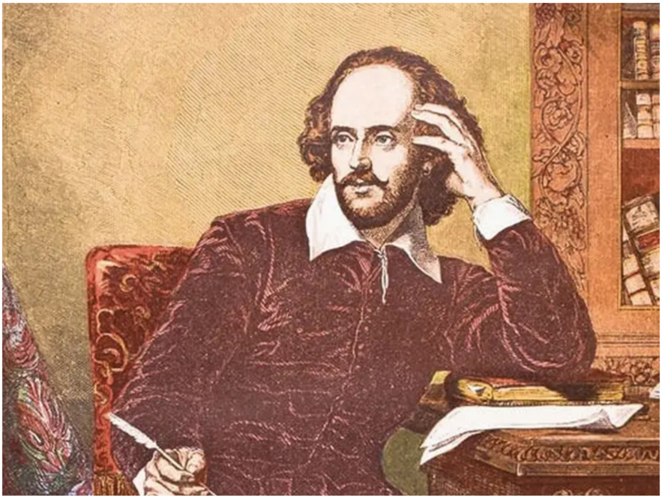
The greatest plays in the English language were written during a pandemic — and wouldn't have been possible without it

Drew Lichtenberg Aug 22, 2020, 7:48 AM



The bard. via The Telegraph

For nine years I've worked at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC, but like most "theater people" I've been reading and performing Shakespeare's plays and poems for most of my life.

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So far, 2020 has shown me that I've underrated maybe the defining fact of Shakesepare's life: he lived during a time of pandemic.

There were periodic closures of theatres throughout Shakespeare's career due to the bubonic plague, and it's now become clear to me that living through a pandemic had a major impact on the plays by the recognized GOAT of English-language drama.

Here's how.

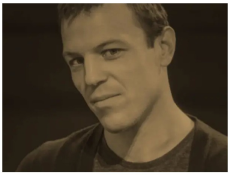
1. The need for patronage from new sources — and the emergence of a recognizably 'Shakespearean' style

In the years before 1592, Shakespeare was highly successful but somewhat derivative, kind of like an action-movie director pumping out superhero blockbusters. His most popular plays were the bloody trilogy of "Henry VI" plays, written with a series of co-authors.

When an outbreak closed the theaters between 1592 and 1594, a number of theatre companies were wiped out. Shakespeare likely sought out aristocratic patrons and began a different kind of writing — Sonnets and epic poetry.

When the theaters reopened, Shakespeare was a shareholder in a newly formed company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and his plays were suddenly more sonnet-like. The lyrically virtuosic works he began writing include "Romeo and Juliet," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Richard II," and "The Merchant of Venice" — essentially what we start to recognize as a classically Shakespearean style.

2. Shakespeare's likely quarantine in the country contributed to the trademark length of his plays



Drew Lichtenberg. Courtesy of Drew Lichtenberg

Shakespeare was also personally affected by pandemic while quarantining in the country.

His son, Hamnet, died at the age of 11 in 1596, probably from the plague. "Hamlet" was Shakespeare's resulting exploration of fathers and sons, death and grief.

There are multiple versions of the play, and all of them are long. It's almost as if Shakespeare was working through something so traumatic that he couldn't leave well enough alone.

The so-called "good Quarto" of "Hamlet," which most of us are taught in high school, first appeared in 1604, another year of plague closures that marked a major leap forward in Shakespeare's style.

3. The pandemic led to theatre privatization, directly leading to modern-day enclosed performance

There was a third outbreak late in Shakespeare's career, and when the theaters reopened in 1609, his company started performing in the Blackfriars Theatre, purchased the year before.

Unlike the Globe, a large, open-air theatre on the South Bank of the Thames, the Blackfriars was a smaller and indoor venue with artificial lighting. It had higher ticket prices, essentially assuring a more upper class and aristocratic audience than the Globe's "groundlings." In short, the Blackfriars was the beginning of the transformation of the theatre into the boutique art form it is today, one pitched toward a cosmopolitan elite rather than the masses.

4. Shakespeare took advantage of a marketplace that pandemic created

The biggest effect of the plague on Shakespeare's career, however, was the fact that he had a career in the first place.

By some estimates, London lost more than 50% of its population during the 16th century, depriving thousands in the countryside, including Shakespeare, from making a living in their parent's trade (Shakespeare's father was a glovemaker). Many of these moved to London to make their own way. It was the creation of the secular theatrical marketplace.

One generation prior, when most people remained tied to the land of their parents' birthplace, theater was confined to small groups of traveling players, revelry on feast days, and private celebrations sponsored by aristocrats in the great manor homes.

It was a pandemic, yes, but it was also, to quote Shakespeare, a "brave new world." Or to quote another famous English writer, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Drew Lichtenberg is the Resident Dramaturg and Literary Manager at the Shakespeare Theatre Company. He holds a Doctorate in Fine Arts from Yale School of Drama.

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