



Melodies and maladies: reflections on Shakespeare and his portrayal of disease and death

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Abstract

Shakespeare has long been acknowledged to be a pioneer in understanding the functions and dysfunctions of the human mind. However, very little discussion has centered on his knowledge of the physical science of medicine. In this article the authors reflect on Shakespeare's portrayal of diseases and death in his work and conclude that he had significant knowledge of the contemporary medical sciences.

Keywords: Humanities, Literature, William Shakespeare

*"All the infections that the sun sucks up
From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make
him*

By inch-meal, a disease."

– The Tempest, Act ii, Scene 2

The Bard of Avon has always been recognized as a genius when it comes to understanding the functions and dysfunctions of the human mind. The hesitancy of Hamlet, the jealousy of Othello, the unbridled ambition of Lady Macbeth, the repentance of Lord Macbeth, the vagaries of the mind of King Lear, all formed elements of brilliant

dramatic portrayal of mental disequilibrium. One aspect of Shakespearean literature that has received comparatively less attention is his portrayal of medical conditions, especially death.

Even a brief foray into Shakespeare's works shows his extraordinary knowledge of contemporary medical sciences. One has to keep in mind the fact that he wrote in the infancy of medical science, when it was emerging from the Dark Ages, from the clutches of the church, and entering the domains of a secular

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science. Shakespeare was generally generous in his portrayal of physicians (aside from the vitriolic Dr. Caius in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and showed an inordinate amount of acquaintance with the current medical knowledge. An oft-quoted example is Leonato's words from *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Don Pedro: What! Sigh for a toothache?
Leonato: Where is but a humour or a worm.
– Act iii, Scene 2.

While it may seem ridiculous to us that “a humour or a worm” causes toothache, Simpson states that this was the accepted wisdom as professed by John of Gatisden in 1595 in his book *De Corriosone Dentium*.^[1]

Shakespearean England was a time of conflicting medical ideologies. The followers of Galen were receding while Paracelsus, the Father of Pharmacology, was gaining ground. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the conversation about the King's malady discloses this very conflict – clear evidence of Shakespeare's awareness of the emerging philosophies in medicine. Shakespeare knew about goiter and its higher prevalence in mountain-dwellers; this is evident in Gonzalo's reminiscences in *The Tempest*:

When we were boys,
Who would believe that there were mountaineers
Dewlapped like bulls, whose throats had
hanging at 'em
Wallets of flesh...
– Act iii, Scene 3

Interestingly, Shakespeare shows an intricate knowledge of anatomy when he mentions pia mater in *Troilus and Cressida*:

I will buy nine sparrows for a penny, and his pia
mater is not worth the ninth part of a sparrow.
– Act ii, Scene 1

Shakespeare mentions the pia mater in two other places (*Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labour's Lost*). There have been efforts to identify whether Shakespeare chanced upon this knowledge thanks to his publisher, Jaggard, who also published Helkiah Crooke's anatomy books; however, the timeline suggests that this was unlikely.^[2] This further bolsters the assumption that Shakespeare actually took the effort to study anatomy and medicine to portray his characters and weave his words with scientific accuracy.

In one of the landmark books on Shakespeare's medical knowledge, Bucknill makes a startling claim: that Shakespeare knew about the circulation of blood well before William Harvey explained it in 1616.^[3] In *Julius Caesar*, conventionally believed to be written in 1603, Brutus tells Portia:

You are my true and honourable wife, as dear to
me as are those ruddy drops that visit my sad
heart.
– Act ii, Scene 1

Bucknill feels convinced that this visitation of the heart by “those ruddy drops” is a clear indication that Shakespeare had some idea about the circulation of blood.

Environmental conditions have a large role to play in modulating health. Shakespeare's fascination with water, slime, moulds, floods, and swell also point to the fact that he was aware of the importance of environmental sanitation. In several of his works, including *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* he uses the word “slime” in a pejorative sense conveying them as environmental feculence.

Mental diseases find a prominent place in Shakespearean works. Lady Macbeth's

hysterical somnambulism, and her obsessive-compulsive need to keep washing hands (“A little water clears us of this deed” Act II, Scene 2) are described with clinical precision. At a time when mental illnesses were poorly understood, and almost universally believed to be a female affliction, Shakespeare had the clinical insight to portray King Lear, a male character, in the throes of disinhibited hysteria, suffering from a fugue state, which eventually decomposed into a disorganized psychotic state compounded by senile dementia.[4]

*Does any here know me? This is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his
eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied – Ha! waking? ‘tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?*

– Act I, Scene 1

There are examples galore in the Shakespearean treasure trove of extraordinary scientific knowledge amalgamated with literary genius. These show that his remarkable knowledge was not just a mere reproduction of prevalent general wisdom but the result of close studying. Students of medicine who have a fascination for the Bard’s work should keep an eye out for the next medical musing he may have surreptitiously planted in his narratives.

*Who worse than a physician
Would this report become? But I consider,
By medicine life may be prolong’d, yet death
Will seize the doctor too.*

– Cymbeline, Act v, Scene 5

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