

What Shakespeare teaches us about living with pandemics

Twitter has been **taunting** us: When he was in quarantine from the plague, William Shakespeare wrote “King Lear.”

taunt 嘲笑; 讥讽

He had an advantage, of sorts: Shakespeare’s life was marked by plague. Just weeks after his **baptism** at **Holy Trinity** Church in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the register read, “Hic inceptit pestis” (Here begins the plague). Shakespeare, the son of the town’s glover, survived it and many further outbreaks. Much of his work was composed, if not in lockdown, then in the shadow of a highly infectious disease without a known cure.

baptism 洗礼

holy trinity 三位一体

Men and women, to be sure, die in any number of **inventive** ways in Shakespeare's plays. In “Othello,” Desdemona is **smothered** in her bed. John of Gaunt dies of old age **exacerbated** by the absence of his **exiled** son in “Richard II.” In “Hamlet,” Ophelia **drowns**. But no one in Shakespeare’s plays dies of the plague.

inventive 发明的; 善于创造的

smother 窒息; 闷死

exacerbate 使加剧; 使恶化

exile 放逐; 流放

drown 溺水

René Girard, the French critic, wrote in a famous essay that “the distinctiveness of the plague is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness.” Plague was indifferent to the boundaries **erected** by society, and its appetite was **ravenous**. Thousands of husbands, wives and children were led to the grave.

erect 竖立; 笔直的

ravenous 贪婪的; 渴望的

Shakespeare's response to plague is not to deny mortality but rather to emphasize people's unique and inerasable difference. Elaborate plots, motives, interactions and obscurities focus our attention on human beings. No one in Shakespeare's plays dies quickly and obscurely. Rather, last words are given full hearing, *epitaphs* are soberly delivered, bodies taken offstage respectfully.

epitaph 碑文; 墓志铭

Shakespeare is not interested in the statistics — what in his time were called the bills of mortality. Maybe, like Shakespeare, we should focus not on statistics but on the wonderfully, weirdly, cussedly, irredeemably individual.