

**Drama in Quarantine:  
Exploring the Traumatic Impact of  
Plague on William Shakespeare's  
*Romeo and Juliet***

دراما في الحجر الصحي: استكشاف تأثير الطاعون المؤلم على  
مسرحية "روميو وجولييت" لويليام شكسبير

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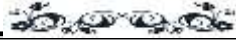
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## المستخلص:

إن القارئ المتأمل لتاريخ الأدب يَعي جيداً الدور الذي يلعبه الأدب في تصوير الكوارث الطبيعية والاجتماعية ضمن فروعها الرئيسية. ولعل أبرز ما يمثل تلك النوايب هي الحروب، والكوارث الطبيعية، والأمراض المعدية. ففي ظل تلك الظروف الحرجة، لم يقف رجال الأدب عامة وكتّاب المسرح خاصة مكتوفي الأيدي، يتابعون ما يجري حولهم في صمت؛ بل وجدوا أنفسهم متحمسين لتصوير مثل هذه النوايب في كتاباتهم. إن أفضل ما يمكن الاستشهاد به هنا هو ويليام شكسبير. فمما يثير الدهشة أن شكسبير قد قام بتأليف معظم أعماله الفنية خلال فترة الحجر الصحي التي فرضها وباء "الطاعون" أو "الموت الأسود"؛ الذي ضرب إنجلترا لقرابة ثلاثة قرون. ومن أبرز الأعمال التي كتبها شكسبير في الحجر الصحي مسرحية "روميو وجولييت"، و"هاملت"، و"حلم ليلة منتصف الصيف"، و"الملك لير"، وغيرها من المسرحيات التي تحمل بين طياتها بعض التلميحات المجازية، والتوريات الرمزية لمدى القلق والمخاوف المؤلمة التي سببها وباء الطاعون المتوطن في ذلك الوقت. تهدف الدراسة الحالية لاستكشاف تأثير الطاعون المؤلم على مسرحية "روميو وجولييت"؛ إذ تكشف القراءة المتأملّة لهذه المسرحية عن مدى تأثر كل جانب من جوانب عالمها الخيالي بالطاعون سواء على المستوى الحرفي أو المجازي. بالرغم من أن الطاعون لم يرد صراحة في مسرحية روميو وجولييت إلا في مشهدين اثنين فقط، إلا أن شكسبير أثبت براعته في تصوير موضوعات الطاعون والحجر الصحي من خلال توظيف لغة رمزية مشبعة بعناصر الطاعون المؤلمة من أجل تبرير النهايات المأساوية لشخصياته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطاعون، الموت الأسود، الحجر الصحي، مؤلمة، رمزية.



## Abstract

The contemplative reader of literature realizes that natural and social calamities, which inflict colossal sufferings on human beings, are best portrayed within its major genres. Examples of such calamities are wars, natural disasters and infectious diseases. In light of these critical circumstances, men of letters in general and playwrights in particular have not stood idly by. Rather, they found themselves more fervent to dramatize such calamities in their writings. William Shakespeare is the best to cite here. To everyone's surprise, Shakespeare composed most of his masterpieces during the quarantine period initiated by the "Plague" or "Black Death," which first struck England in the fourteenth century. Examples of Shakespeare's plague plays are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear*, besides many others. In one way or another, such plays bear some allusions to the traumatic anxieties and fears caused by the plague experience at that time. The present study is conducted to explore the traumatic impact of the Plague on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It seems that almost every aspect in the fictitious world of *Romeo and Juliet* has been touched by the plague, both literally and symbolically. Throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, the reader could encounter only two scenes that explicitly mention or dramatize the plague. However, Shakespeare proves to be a skillful master in blinding the plague and quarantine themes into several symbolic and figurative motifs. Shakespeare could achieve this through employing a symbolic language saturated with traumatic plague allusions to account for the tragic endings of his characters.

**Keywords:** Plague, Black Death, Quarantine, Traumatic, Symbolic.



## Introduction

Over the last four years, the whole world has witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic, which has touched almost every aspect of human life. Since that time, human beings all over the world have been experiencing a lifestyle that is completely different from what they had been used to before the advent of pandemic. In the Covid-19 world, there are some precautionary measures set in motion in an attempt to curb the spread of such a fatal disease. Examples of these preventive measures are social distancing, mask wearing, lockdowns, isolation, and quarantine protocols. Indeed, the authorities all over the world have forced closures of the places that witness any form of gatherings. Examples of such places are mosques, churches, schools, universities, cinemas, playhouses and theatres.

Despite theatre shutdowns, playwrights have not stood idly by, observing what has been happening around them in silence. Rather, they found themselves more zealous not only to dramatize those traumatic events in their writings, but also to suggest the remedy that can repair such traumas. Their role model in such critical circumstances is William Shakespeare and his likes. Strangely, Shakespeare composed most of his plays in quarantine, particularly during the plague that had struck England for about three centuries. In his plague plays, particularly *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare alludes, in one way or another, to the traumatic anxieties caused by the plague experience at that time.



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## An Introduction to the Plague or "Black Death":

The meditative reader of English literary history discerns well that the spread of infectious diseases (e.g. COVID-19) is not a novel occurrence. Rather, there had been a pandemic disease, named the "Plague" or "Black Death," which ravaged various parts of Europe, Asia, as well as the Middle East in the fourteenth century. It is worth noting that German novelists were the first to coin the term "Black Death," aiming to designate the extreme hazards of the plague. For three centuries, the plague caused the deaths of more than twenty million European people, which was almost a third of Europe's population at that time. What shows the prodigious interest of German scholars in the issue of the plague as well as its extreme dangers is the fact that Justus Hecker, a German physician and medical writer, penned a book entitled *Der schwarze Tod im vierzehnten Jahrhundert* (*The Black Death in the Fourteenth Century*) in 1832, particularly at the time of Cholera. This book provides, to a greater extent, a detailed account of the plague and its hazardous impact on the lifestyle experienced by European people during the fourteenth century.

Regarding the roots of the plague, it is astonishing to find out that the Black Death had first originated in China, the same habitat of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the Chinese plague researcher, Wu Lien-the, who first suggested, on epidemiological grounds, that *Yersinia Pestis* (the plague bacteria) had its origins within the boundaries of what we now call 'China':

But as a rule of thumb, the association of  
geography with subspecies diversification



generates valuable hypotheses. For *Y. Pestis*, the current hypothesis—first proposed on genetics grounds in 2004 and elaborated further since then—is that the organism took its origin in the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau, now a part of modern China. If this is true, then all narratives of plague's history must be connected to that place of origin. And if it is true, it resolves definitively the Africa vs. Asia dilemma of plague's origin. (qtd. in Green 37)

However, there are other assumptions mentioned by Monica H. Green in her article, "Taking Pandemic Seriously: Making the Black Death Global," regarding the place in which the Black Death had started. For her, some historians claimed that the Black Death had been initiated in Asia (India), whereas others assumed that it had started in some places in Africa before it reached the West and Europe. In this regard, Green argues:

The question of plague's geographic origins has long troubled historians. Oddly, the lines of argument have gone in different directions: for the Justinianic Plague, the standard argument had been to assume an African origin; for the Black Death, its genesis has been placed more or less vaguely in 'the East.' In 1976, McNeill, who placed the origins of *Y. Pestis* 'at some perhaps geologically ancient time,' chose to remain on the fence: 'There appears to be no basis for deciding which of these two natural reservoirs [Central Africa or northeastern India, i.e., the Himalayas] is the oldest'. (37)



Moreover, Kristin M. S. Bezio, a scholar of Shakespearean Drama, confirms the assumption that the Black Death began in China, when she argues in her article “Shakespeare and Pandemic: COVID-19 is and isn’t like the Plague in Shakespeare’s England” that

During Shakespeare’s lifetime, plague—the Black Death of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—was a regular enough occurrence that there were quarantine protocols in effect in most European and Middle Eastern countries. It was a global pandemic that—like COVID-19—has its origins in China.<sup>1</sup> It was virulent, with a 40-60% death-rate in the first years it hit Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in the 1300s. (1)

The above-mentioned quotation manifests the fact that the Plague or (Black Death) had ravaged Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century. However, it reached France, Spain, and England by 1348, a year after its outbreak in Egypt.

In England the plague lasted for about three centuries, i.e. from the mid-fourteenth century to the mid-seventeenth. Due to the lack of an understanding of “germ theory, basic hygiene, and anatomy; plague was devastating to the populations with which it came into contact” (Bezio 1). During the first years of its outbreak, the plague killed “nearly half of Mediterranean, European, African, and Middle Eastern communities, and it lingered until the early eighteenth century” (1). In comparison with the Covid-19 pandemic, the infectious patterns of the plague are typically the same as those of COVID-19. However, the virulence of COVID-19 is not

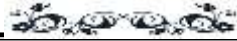


as fatal as that of the plague due to the great role played by the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as the people's commitment to applying the precautionary measures, which helped a lot in curbing the spread of COVID-19.

By comparison, the symptoms of the plague were nastier than those of the COVID-19 since they included swollen **buboes** around the lymph nodes, fever, muscle aches, nausea and vomiting, and pneumonic bleeding. Indeed, the '*bubonic*' plague was the most common type of plague as compared with the '*Septicemic*' and '*pneumonic*' plagues. It is called "bubonic" since it causes swollen and tender lymph nodes in the groin, armpits or neck. Those who got infected by the bubonic plague would awaken with fever and chills. A feeling of extreme weakness or exhaustion would give way to "diarrhea, vomiting, bleeding from the mouth, nose, or rectum, and telltale buboes, or swollen lymph nodes, in the groin or armpit" (Greenblatt, *The New Yorker*). Death, often in great agony, would almost inevitably follow. In his study "Invisible Tokens: Staging Cultural Anxieties about the Plague in the Plays of Shakespeare and Jonson," Matthew Michael Thiele expounds the major types of the plague and their fatal symptoms. In this regard, he argues:

We know that the plague is caused by the *bacillus Yersinia pestis*, which manifests as three distinct varieties depending on the bodily system affected. *Septicemic* plague attacks the circulatory system, infecting the blood; *pneumonic* plague attacks the respiratory system, infecting the lungs; *bubonic* plague





attacks the lymphatic system, infecting the lymph glands. The most common is bubonic plague; septicemic and pneumonic plagues are much rarer but also far deadlier than bubonic plague and they often appear as secondary infections resulting from an initial bubonic manifestation. (2)

During its first outbreak in the early fourteenth century, plague experts could not understand the cause of such a fatal disease, attributing it to “a scourge from God, a sign of vice, a sexually-transmitted illness, foreign corruption (ascribed specifically to the Middle East by ignorant Londoners), or imbalances in the ‘humors’ (four substances which made up the body, including blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm)” (Bezio1). However, the most likely assumption has been provided by Thiele, who argues that humans become infected with *Yersinia Pestis* most commonly from "a bite by a flea which has previously fed on another infected organism, although it is also possible to catch the plague from direct contact with the plague bacillus or by ingesting or inhaling it" (2).

### **The Plague at Shakespeare's Time:**

As mentioned before, the Black Death lasted in England from the mid-fourteenth century to the mid-seventeenth. This means that William Shakespeare who lived between 1564 and 1616 was a contemporary of the Black Death. In this regard, Stephen Greenblatt states that Shakespeare "lived his entire life in the shadow of bubonic plague" (*The New Yorker*). To his good fortune, the plague spared the life of Shakespeare and some members of his family. However, the plague cost the



'Bard' some personal losses, including his three sisters: Joan, Margaret, and Anne, who died of it at a very young age; his brother, Edmund, who also died very young; and his only son, Hamnet, who died at the age of eleven. It is said that the death of Hamnet had induced Shakespeare to write his great masterpiece *Hamlet* in the years following. Moreover, Shakespeare lost some of "his friends and colleagues (possibly including Will Kempe, the company clown, who died in 1603)" (Bezio 2).

During his life in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare experienced the traumatic anxieties of the plague the same way he had when he first moved to London in the years between 1582 and 1585. It should be noted that the outbreaks of the plague did not rage on forever. Rather, the strict quarantines as well as the changes in weather helped a lot in abating the plague, and then life would resume its normal course. However, at unexpected intervals of time, the plague would appear "on the scene with little or no warning, and it was terrifyingly contagious" (Greenblatt, *The New Yorker*). Fever and chills were the first symptoms to be experienced by the plague's victims. Then followed the other symptoms mentioned before. With regard to the mitigating measures taken during Shakespeare's time, Stephen Greenblatt writes:

Innumerable preventive measures were proposed, most of which were useless—or, in the case of the killing of dogs and cats, worse than useless, since the disease was in fact spread by rat-borne fleas. The smoke of dried rosemary, frankincense, or bay leaves burning



in a chafing dish was thought to help clear the air of infection, and, if those ingredients were not readily available, physicians recommended burning old shoes. In the streets, people walked about sniffing oranges stuffed with cloves. Pressed firmly enough against the nose, perhaps these functioned as a kind of mask. (*The New Yorker*)

Throughout his lifetime, Shakespeare went through a number of ravaging outbreaks of the plague. Perhaps the first devastating outbreak took place on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1564, just three months after the Bard's birth. Such an outbreak caused the deaths of a quarter of the people in England. Out of their fear over their only baby, Shakespeare's parents (John and Mary Shakespeare) "locked the family down, with sealed doors and windows and did everything they could to protect the baby, not allowing anyone or anything to come anywhere near him" (*No Sweat Shakespeare*). They were not ready to repeat the previous mistakes that had resulted in the death of Shakespeare's two elder sisters (Joan and Margaret Shakespeare) in previous outbreaks. The coming outbreaks occurred during Shakespeare's literary career in London, including those of 1582, 1592-93, 1601, 1603-04, 1606, 1608-09 and 1611. During those outbreaks, there were quarantine protocols in effect not only in England but in most European and Middle Eastern countries as well.

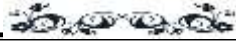
Regrettably, Shakespeare's literary career had been badly affected by the plague outbreaks. That was partly due to the theatre closures forced by the London authorities, particularly the Privy Council which was in charge of determining when to institute social



distancing. The virulence of the Plague led the Privy Council to force lockdowns on “assemblies, feasts, archery contests, and other forms of mass gathering” (Greenblatt, *The New Yorker*). The open-air theatres, such as Shakespeare’s *The Globe*, were shut multiple times during the playwright’s career, including “in 1593 right as he was becoming popular, in 1603 immediately following the death of the Queen (who did not, for what it is worth, die from plague), and again in 1608” (Bezio 2). It is important to note that Shakespeare’s *The Globe* and its likes could accommodate from two to three thousand people in an enclosed space, which was a big reason to be ordered shut. Once the death rates of the plague decreased, the authorities allowed such theatres to reopen.

Being a shareholder as well as an actor in the *Globe*’s company, the repeated closures of the theatre were economically devastating for Shakespeare and the other shareholders. However, the periods of quarantines that followed such closures did not stop Shakespeare’s writing career. Rather, they were the motive behind the birth of such dramatic works as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter’s Tale*, besides many others. The ardent reader of these plays discerns the tremendous effect exerted by the plague on the pessimistic themes they handle such as those of death, sickness, anxiety and fear. In this regard, Athira and Sowmiya argue:

The plague had tremendous impact on art and literature. The common frame of mind was one



of pessimism and a very dark representation of death as the theme to various works. The works that were produced during this time was a gentle reminder to the people how fragile was the life of human being in the contemporary world. The world that Shakespeare had lived was filled with extreme fear, anxiety and death. Shakespeare's everyday life was an inspiration to understand and analyse his works. Few of his writings were based on the themes like tragedy and death and also referred to the black plague. (745)

Having provided a brief account of the plague during Shakespeare's lifetime, an attempt is made to present a detailed exploration of its traumatic impact, both literal and symbolic, on his tragic masterpiece *Romeo and Juliet*.

### **Exploring the Traumatic Impact of Plague on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:**

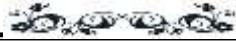
In point of fact, the plague is a prominent feature not only of Shakespeare's lifetime but also of the plays written during its ravaging outbreaks. In one way or another, those plays bear both literal and symbolic allusions to the traumatic anxieties initiated by the plague endemic experience at Shakespeare's time. Perhaps the reason why Shakespeare has employed a symbolic language saturated with traumatic plague signs is to account for the tragic endings of his characters. The careful reader of Shakespeare's plays realizes that *Romeo and Juliet* is the most play that deals with the plague as well as its traumatic experience, since it bears the most-quoted line said by Mercutio, "a plague o' both



your houses” (3.1.94). As Bezio states, "*Romeo and Juliet* contains a lesson about the dangers of partisanship even as it reminds the play's original audience of the virulence of plague (which decimated or destroyed entire families)" (2).

Historically speaking, Shakespeare wrote his tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* in 1594, just after the devastating outbreak of the plague that struck England in 1592-93. Commenting on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and its relevance to the plague, F. A. Connolly maintains, "The first performance of *Romeo and Juliet* took place in the autumn/winter of 1594, when the playhouses reopened for the first time after a sustained outbreak of the plague had forced the authorities to close all the playhouses in London in January 1593" (6). Then, Connolly elaborates on the Plague's casualties during the 1593 outbreak saying, "Over 10,000 people in London alone died from the disease, and Shakespeare emphasizes the relevance of the plague for his audience by using it in *Romeo and Juliet* to prevent Friar Laurence's message from reaching Romeo in Mantua" (6).

In brief, *Romeo and Juliet* is an Italian story about two rich noble families from Verona: the Montagues and Capulets. The two households got involved into an ancient grudge a long time ago. Contrary to the arrangements of the fate, Romeo, a member of the Montagues, fell in love with Juliet, a member of the Capulets. On their first dating, the two star-crossed lovers quickly decided that they wanted to be married. Indeed, Friar Lawrence agreed to marry Romeo and



Juliet in secret, hoping to end the rivalry between the two households. After coming back from his wedding, Romeo was forced to kill Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, who had slain Mercutio, the Prince's kinsman and Romeo's friend. Romeo was sentenced to be banished to Mantua.

Regrettably, Romeo's mother died of grief over him. Juliet was forced by her father to marry Count Paris, the Prince's kinsman. To avoid that marriage, Juliet took a potion, given to her by Friar Lawrence, which made her appear dead for forty-two hours. At the same time, Friar Lawrence sent Romeo word to be at Juliet's family tomb when she awoke. Due to the plague that struck the whole Verona, Lawrence's message did not reach Romeo. Instead, Balthasar, Romeo's servant, hurried to Romeo, telling him of Juliet's death. At once, Romeo rushed to Juliet's tomb where he killed himself. Juliet awoke, saw his body, and then committed suicide. Unfortunately, the two 'star-crossed' lovers faced a tragic end since they were found lying dead beside each other inside Juliet's tomb. Yet, Romeo and Juliet's death brought about a too late settlement between the two noble households.

It can be said that *Romeo and Juliet* is the best play that can illustrate the plague endemic experience at Shakespeare's time. Suppose you had been living in the Elizabethan age, and you did not like someone because he was aggressive to you. In case you wanted to curse him/her, then you could say "A plague on you." It seems in today's world as if you hope someone to be infected with COVID-19 or get cancer. Before his death, Mercutio uttered his last words "I am hurt. / A plague o' both houses! I am sped. / Is he gone and hath



nothing?” (3.1.93-95). Here, the dying Mercutio wished the plague to befall on both the two households since his murder was due to their enmity as well as their grudge. Mercutio did not find anything worse than the plague to befall upon his killers. Thus, it can be understood that the plague meant certain ‘death’ in the Elizabethan age. If someone caught it, he/she would for sure die at once.

Indeed, Mercutio’s repeated curse of the plague to befall upon his killers' houses came true at the end of the play when the great contagion struck Verona, the setting of the play. This can be illustrated in Act Five, Scene Two, when Friar Lawrence was waiting for Friar John to deliver his letter to Romeo who had been banished to Mantua. The content of Lawrence's letter said that Juliet was not dead but asleep in her tomb, awaiting Romeo's coming. To his bad fortune, Friar Lawrence’s letter did not reach Romeo because the authorities of Verona had prevented Friar John and his bare feet companion from leaving Verona. Instead, the authorities forced them into quarantine lest they could be infected with the plague and would, in return, infect others.

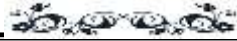
Indeed, the Verona officials imposed some quarantine measures on both Friar John and his companion after they were suspected to have visited a house of infected people. Accordingly, the searchers of the town sealed up the doors of the city gates, and then locked the two messengers, which is “the dramatic device that leads directly to the tragedy in which the two young people die” (*No Sweat Shakespeare*):

**FRIAR JOHN:** Going to find a bare-foot brother

out

20





One of our order, to associate me,  
 Here in this city visiting the sick,  
 And finding him, the searchers of  
 the town,  
 Suspecting that we both were in a  
 house  
 Where the infectious pestilence did  
 reign,  
 Seal'd up the doors, and would not  
 let us forth;  
 So that my speed to Mantua there  
 was stay'd. (5.2.5-12)

By Shakespeare's day, the Plague or (Black Death) had been a threatening life experience to all people. People would die of fear once they heard about its coming. Their real fear was stemming from the infection that would inevitably end in death. When Friar Lawrence asked Friar John about the bearer who was supposed to deliver his letter to Romeo, John replied, "I could not send it—here it is again— / Nor get a messenger to bring it thee, / So fearful were they of infection" (5.3.14-16). This assures the extent of terror and anxiety felt by people once they heard about the plague. Here, Shakespeare masterfully dramatizes the plague "to create a problem between the two lovers to ultimately show the two families the love they possessed for each other" (Athira and Sowmiya 746).

It was because the tragic deaths of the two lovers that the Montagues and Capulets became on good terms with each other at the end of the play. Thus, the plague served to bring out a decisive shift in the social relations



between the two households, i.e. from grudge and hatred to intimacy and love. Regrettably, that settlement occurred too late after the two lovers had lost their lives. The last speech of the play bears this settlement between Lord Montague and Lord Capulet in the presence of Escalus, the Prince of Verona:

**CAPULET:** O' brother Montague, give me thy  
hand.

This is my daughter's jointure, for no  
more

Can I demand?

**MONTAGUE:** But I can give thee more,

For I will ray her statue in pure gold,

That whiles Verona by that name is  
known,

There shall no figure at such rate be set

As that of true and faithful Juliet.

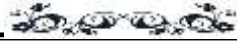
**CAPULET:** As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,  
Poor sacrifices of our enmity.

**PRINCE:** A glooming peace this morning with it  
brings.

The sun for sorrow will not show his  
head.

Go hence to have more talk of these  
sad things.

Some shall be pardoned, and some  
punishèd.



For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

(*All exit.*) (5.5. 306-321)

Although the Plague had not been the main cause behind the two lovers' death, but it did more than secure their tragic denouement. To illustrate, the plague acted as an obstacle that prevented the two messengers (Friar John and his companion) from delivering Lawrence's letter to Romeo. Thus, the plague, as Nichole DeWall argues, "does more than secure *Romeo and Juliet's* tragic denouement: it also forms a subtext throughout the entire play, placing it alongside Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* as one of the most prominent plague texts in the canon of early modern imaginative literature" (11). If it had not been for the Plague, *Romeo and Juliet* would not have been classified as a tragic play. Perhaps, the two lovers would have met and led a happy life with each other. However, Shakespeare created the plague dilemma to bring about a too-late but eternal settlement between the Montagues and Capulets.

### **Shakespeare's Mastery of Blinding the Plague into some Symbolic Motifs:**

Roughly speaking, a careful reading of Shakespeare's plays reveals that there is an intentional avoidance by the author to explicitly dramatize the Plague in most of his plays despite their composition during the heyday of the Black Death. Indeed, the audience of Shakespeare's plays had never confronted the plagued bodies that they were encountering on their way to the theatre. Rather, they could already encounter other types of diseased bodies such as "Othello [who]



suffers an epileptic fit; the King of France's fistula [that] is nearly fatal in *All's Well*; Lear [who] descends into madness before our eyes" (DeWall 23.) However, the plague has already been portrayed by Shakespeare through some figurative images that can function as symbolic allusions to the Black Death in the author's time.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be classified as a "plague play" since it is saturated with a great deal of plague imagery, both literally and symbolically. Literally, the word "**plague**" has been explicitly mentioned three times on the tongue of the dying Mercutio, particularly during his last speech with Romeo and Benvolio:

**MERCUTIO** I am hurt.

A **plague** o' both houses! I am sped.

Is he gone and hath nothing?

**BENVOLIO** What, art thou hurt?

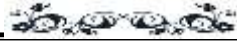
**MERCUTIO** Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch. Marry, 'tis enough.

Where is my page?—Go, villain, fetch surgeon.

**ROMEO** Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.

**MERCUTIO** No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide

as a church door, but 'tis enough. 'Twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A



**plague** o' both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic! Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.

**ROMEO** I thought all for the best.

**MERCUTIO** Help me into some house, Benvolio,

Or I shall faint. A **plague** o' both your houses!

They have made worms' meat of me.

I have it, and soundly, too. Your houses! (3.1.93-113)

Here, Shakespeare masterfully dramatizes the scene of Mercutio's death to accentuate the significance of his curse, which works to foreshadow the tragic end of the play (represented in the suicide of both Romeo and Juliet). Indeed, the plague wished by Mercutio caused the death of the Montagues and Capulets' only offspring (Romeo and Juliet) as it prevented Lawrence's letter from reaching Romeo, while instead, enabled Balthasar to reach Romeo, telling him of Juliet's death.

Mercutio's resonating curse of the plague serves as a prelude to the turning point of the play. To clarify, it has already paved the way for the plague to befall not only on the houses of the two households but on the whole Verona, which was a major cause of the tragic end of the play. In this regard, Begley, Coe and Palmer argue:

Mercutio's resonating curse serves as a prelude to the turning point of the play

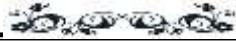


(Romeo's slaying of Tybalt), and is taken to be the cause of its remaining events. While the remainder of the events do stem from Mercutio's death, they nevertheless fit within the larger framework of the traditional feud (the actions of ancestral Montague and Capulet and their descendants) that serves as the ultimate cause of all of the negative consequences in the play. At this point the play undergoes a tonal change. (11)

The same plague that Mercutio wished can be symbolically seen at the end of the play, particularly in Act Five Scene Three. In this scene, Prince Escalus blames both Lord Capulet and Lord Montague, telling them that it is due to their rivalry and hatred that a scourge has been laid upon them. For him, that scourge is like the 'plague' that killed their joys with love (Romeo and Juliet), which might be the Heaven's justice after all:

**PRINCE** Where be these enemies?—Capulet,  
 Montague,  
 See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
 That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love,  
 And I, for winking at your discords too,  
 Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished. (5.3.301-305)

In fact, Shakespeare proves to be a skillful master in blinding the plague theme into some figurative



plague-like motifs. Examples of such motifs are "lovesickness," "the feud between the two families," "the language of the two lovers" as well as "death". As mentioned before, the audience of *Romeo and Juliet* had not encountered the plagued bodies that they were indeed confronting in the streets of London. Rather, they could encounter the 'lovesick' Romeo who was infected by Juliet's love. Although Juliet was not Romeo's first love, but he fell in love with her immediately after they had met in the party held at Juliet's house. Having been infected by Juliet's love, Romeo went to the balcony at once in his attempt to confess his true feelings towards her, and then promised to stay forever with her through marriage. For Shakespeare, love can act as a 'plague' whose contagion could harvest the lives of the two star-crossed lovers.

In point of fact, Mercutio, who was slain by Tybalt, had already been troubled by the "feud" between the Montagues and the Capulets. Such a feud could be seen as a 'plague' whose infection had spread not just to the close members of the two families (Romeo and Juliet) but also to their innocent relatives and friends (Mercutio, Tybalt and Paris). That ancient grudge deplorably poisoned the life of all the citizens in Verona to the extent that the innocent of them (Mercutio) wished the worst thing at that time (the deadly plague) to infect and eradicate his killers. In this regard, Begley, Coe and Palmer argue, "The houses of Montague and Capulet will suffer as a consequence of the feud that caused the curser's death" (11).

Again, such a grudge resulted in "the death of each patriarch's only offspring" (Begley et al. 7), i.e.

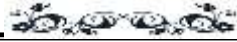


Romeo and Juliet. Henceforth, there were no longer any descendants of the original ancestors of both the House of Montague and the House of Capulet, and the "lineages have possibly become extinct, or heirless," (7). The death of Romeo and Juliet, along with the killing of Tybalt, has affected "Verona in such a way that even its prince, Escalus, representative of the state, loses a brace of kinsmen" (7). Thus, the feud between the Montagues and Capulets has had a deadly impact not only on the members of the two households but on all the citizens of Verona. That is what made the Prince of Verona states at the end of the play, saying, "All are punish'd" (5.3.305).

Another important metaphorical motif used by Shakespeare to blind the plague can be traced in the "language of the two lovers". Indeed, Shakespeare could masterfully employ various allusions to the plague and other modern diseases through some of the words and phrases mentioned by his characters in general and Romeo and Juliet in particular. In this regard, Nichole DeWall maintains:

The language of *Romeo and Juliet* is saturated with references to and images of early modern diseases and treatments ... Both peace and hate are "cankered", for example (1.1.81) and the moon is "sick and pale with grief" (2.2.4). Many passages like Romeo's "Bid a sick man in sadness make his will— / A word ill urged to one that is so ill! (1.1.189-190) and Benvolio's "...one fire burns out another's burning, / One pain is lessened by another's anguish... / One desperate grief cures with





another's languish" (1.2.43-46) demonstrate familiarity with the suffering caused by disease. (37)

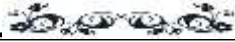
Just as there are some symbolic allusions to the diseases in general and the plague in particular in Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, there are also some references to remedies through the language used by the two star-crossed lovers. That to mention the disease and the remedy which can repair its traumatic anxieties is a remarkable sign of Shakespeare's poetic justice. In Act One Scene One, Romeo talks to Benvolio about the grief that lies heavy in his heart because Rosaline does not return his affection as she has chosen to remain chaste. Now, Romeo likens "love" to "smoke" which can be "purged" with a fume of sighs. In this regard, Romeo complains to Benvolio, wondering:

Why, such is love's transgression.  
 Grievs of mine own lie heavy in my breast,  
 Which thou wilt propagate to have it pressed  
 With more of thine. This love that thou hast  
 shown  
 Doth add more grief to too much of mine own.  
 Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;  
 Being **purged**, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;  
 Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears.  
 What is it else? A madness most discreet,  
 A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.  
 Farewell, my coz. (1.1. 192-202)



Again, in Act One Scene Five, Romeo claims that his sin is purged with Juliet's kiss. He also adds that her kiss is a "**preserving sweet**" (1.5.118, 1.1.121). Moreover, Romeo takes too literally "Benvolio's offer of '**plantain leaf**' to cure his lovesickness (1.2.53); the Nurse calls for a '**poultice**' and '**aqua-vitae**' (2.5.66, 2.2.88); [whereas] Benvolio's '**fee-simple**' was the price demanded by medical practitioners in Shakespeare's London (2.1.33)" (DeWall 37).

"Death" can be one of the most noteworthy symbolic motifs employed by Shakespeare to blind the plague theme. As shown before, Mercutio's death acted as the climax that complicated matters between the Montagues and Capulets. Before his death, Mercutio wished the plague to befall upon his killers' houses, "I am hurt. / A plague o' both houses! I am sped. / Is he gone and hath nothing?" (3.1.93-95). It seems that the dying Mercutio realized for sure what would follow the fatal plague, i.e. "death." The tragic play of *Romeo and Juliet* witnesses six deaths, not only belonging to the Montagues and Capulets but also to other noble families from Verona. The six deaths are as follows: Romeo and Lady Montague from the Montagues; Tybalt and Juliet from the Capulets; and then Mercutio (Romeo's friend) and Paris (Juliet's suitor) who are both kinsmen of Escalus, the Prince of Verona. In point of fact, the ancient grudge between the two households was what caused those six deaths. If it had not been for such a longstanding feud, the whole Verona in general and the two families would have lived in peace, love, harmony and intimacy.



However, the major blame should be placed on Romeo who made the biggest mistake through his marriage from Juliet. His determination to go to the Capulet's party had caused Mercutio's death at the hands of Tybalt. To revenge for Mercutio's death Romeo killed Tybalt. Romeo's banishment to Mantua caused the death of his mother who died of her grief over him. The plague in Verona caused the tragic fate of Juliet, Paris and Juliet as it prevented Friar Lawrence's letter to reach Romeo. Although the plague did not occupy a tremendous part in the play's plot, it doomed the star-crossed lovers to a tragic end. Thus, it can be said the plague (Mercutio's wish) caused three deaths out of the six victims: Paris, Romeo and Juliet.

### **Real and Symbolic Images of Quarantine in *Romeo and Juliet*:**

In point of fact, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be categorized as "a drama in quarantine" or "a quarantine play" since it was written during a period of quarantine. Indeed, the images of quarantine are widespread throughout the play, both real and symbolic. Actually, the only explicit portrayal of quarantine in *Romeo and Juliet* is that of Friar John and his companion. It seems that Shakespeare had shaped such a significant part of the plot to function as the tragic flaw that doomed the two lovers and caused their death. If it had not been for such quarantine, Friar Lawrence's letter would have reached Romeo, which could have saved three lives: Juliet's, Romeo's and that of Paris. In case Romeo got Friar Lawrence's message, the tragedy "would then be a happy love story that would bring joy to the readers and not pain" (Athira and Sowmiya 747).



On the other hand, the quarantine motif can be symbolically represented through a number of images that have been experienced by almost all the characters of the play. Examples of such figurative images are those of "confinement," "prison," and of "enclosure". One of the scenes that best illustrate the symbolic quarantine is when the searchers of the town suspected that Friar John and his friend were in a house whose inhabitants had been infected by the plague. Accordingly, the doors of the city gates were "**Seal'd** up the doors, and would not let us forth; / So that my speed to Mantua there was stay'd. (5.2.11-12). Here, the word "**sealed**," symbolically alludes to a quarantine procedure, which is "confinement". Moreover, the same word is also mentioned at the end of the play particularly in Act five, Scene three, when Romeo entered Juliet's tomb to bury Count Paris beside her. He drank the poison, and then uttered his last words:

Here, here will I remain

With worms that are thy chambermaids. O,  
here

Will I set up my everlasting rest

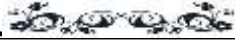
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars

From this world-wearied flesh! Eyes, look  
your last.

Arms, take your last embrace. And, lips, O,  
you

The doors of breath, **seal** with a righteous kiss

A dateless bargain to engrossing death.  
(5.3.108-115)



Here, Romeo ordered the doors of the tomb to be sealed with a righteous kiss. Then, the two lovers could start an everlasting quarantine with each other, not in our world but in the other world.

Having seen Count Paris slain, Juliet bleeding and Romeo newly dead of poison; Prince Escalus asked Lord Montague, Romeo's father, who was weeping over his son's body, to calm down and

**Seal** up the mouth of outrage for awhile,  
Till we can clear these ambiguities  
And know their spring, their head, their true  
descent,  
And then will I be general of your woes  
And lead you even to death. Meantime forbear,  
And let mischance be slave to patience.—  
Bring forth the parties of suspicion. (5.3.224-  
231)

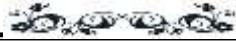
It is known that the act of shutting mouth is one of the preventive measures that have been advised to be taken during the outbreak of such pandemics as Covid-19 and Plague. As long as the mouth is to be shut until the plague is cleared up, then Prince Escalus wishes the mourner Montague to shut his mouth until the vagueness of the crime is revealed.

Another symbolic form of quarantine is the "prison" imagery. Indeed, the images of shut houses during the plague are analogous to 'prisons'. Those who are quarantined often felt horrified and dismayed for being trapped by unforeseen circumstances. In his book



*A Journal of the Plague Year* (1896), Daniel Defoe maintains that those quarantined by the plague act exactly like prisoners in their own homes. For him, those people “were guilty of no crime, only shut up because miserable, it was really the more intolerable to them” (261). It is important to note that the word “**prison**” is repeated three times throughout *Romeo and Juliet*: the first is said by Romeo in Act One, Scene Two, “Shut up in **prison**, kept without my food, / Whipped and tormented” (1.2.58-59); the second is said by Juliet in Act Two, Scene Three, “Like a poor **prisoner** in his twisted gyves” (2.3.193); whereas the third is mentioned in Act Three, Scene Two, by Juliet who wishes her heart to break and her eyes to prison, “O break, my heart, poor bankrout, break at once! / To **prison**, eyes; ne’er look on liberty” (3.2.63-64). This recurrent mention of the word “**prison**” symbolically alludes to quarantine imagery.

In the same way, the “enclosure” imagery is the best to illustrate the quarantine theme in *Romeo and Juliet*. Such images can be echoed several times through a number of words and expressions. Perhaps the word “**shut**” is the best to illustrate the “enclosure” motif. The contemplative reader can monitor the word “**shut**” in more than one place in the text as follows: “**Shuts** up his windows, locks fair daylight out,” (1.1.142); “**Shut** up in prison, kept without my food, / Whipped and tormented,” (1.2.58-59); “I am not I if there be such an ‘I,’ / Or those eyes **shut** that makes thee answer ‘Ay.’ / If he be slain, say ‘Ay,’ or if not, ‘No.’” (3.2.54-56); “O, **shut** the door, and when thou hast done so, / Come weep with me, past hope, past care, past help” (4.1.45-



46); “Like death when he **shuts** up the day of life.” (4.1.103); and “Being holiday, the beggar’s shop is **shut**.—” (5.1.59). This remarkable repetition of the word “**shut**” accounts best for the existence of the plague and its preventive measures during Shakespeare’s time.

Additionally, the "enclosure" imagery can be demonstrated by various expressions that are reverberated throughout *Romeo and Juliet*. Examples of such expressions are those uttered by Romeo in “Not mad, but **bound** more than a mad-man is;” (1.2.57); or by Mercutio who comments on Benvolio’s cowardice by saying:

Thou art like one of these fellows that, when  
He enters the **confines** of a tavern, claps me his  
Sword upon the table and says “God send me  
no  
Need of thee” and, by the operation of the  
second  
Cup, draws him on the drawer when indeed  
there is  
No need. (3.1.5-10)

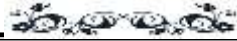
Moreover, the enclosure imagery can be echoed in Juliet’s words, who fears that Romeo’s “vile matter” is “So fairly **bound** ... / In such a gorgeous palace!” (3.2.88-90). Romeo’s despised life is also trapped in his breast, “Of a despised life **closed** in my breast / By some vile forfeit of untimely death.” (1.4.117-118). Later, it will be Juliet who wishes to chain Romeo until morning “Like a poor **prisoner** in his twisted gyves, / And with a silken thread plucks it back again, / So



loving-jealous of his liberty" (2.2.193-195). All these words and expressions are masterfully employed by Shakespeare to refer symbolically to the plague at that time.

**In conclusion,** Shakespeare's lifetime, particularly his writing career, was wholly shaped by the traumatic experience of the Plague. Strangely, Shakespeare never wrote explicitly about the plague in most of his plays, though allusions sometimes surface. His play, *Romeo and Juliet*, can be classified as "a drama in quarantine" since it was written in 1594, just after the ravaging outbreak that hit London in the years 1592-3. Throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, the reader could encounter only two scenes that explicitly mention or dramatize the plague: the scene of Mercutio's death, as well as the scene in which Friar John tells Friar Lawrence that the quarantine protocols are what prevented his letter from reaching Romeo. Rather, Shakespeare proves to be a skillful master in blending the plague and quarantine themes into several symbolic and figurative motifs. Indeed, the plague can be symbolically monitored in more than one image throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, including those of "lovesickness," "the ancient feud between the two households," "the language of the two lovers," as well as "death". Similarly, the quarantine motif can be symbolically monitored through a number of images, including those of "confinement," "prison," and "enclosure".





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