



Metaphors of Plagues in Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of Shakespeare's plays which contain bubonic plague in light of our disastrous situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation of bubonic plague is found to be reflected in the Bard's plays, for example, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *King Lear*. Besides, the widely discussed lawsuit occurred in late 1603 might have influenced Shakespeare's writing about *King Lear*. This paper, utilizing New Criticism close reading, provides an informative overview of Shakespeare's life in the shadow of plague and his references to the disease in his plays. This article argues that plagues and pandemics can work as metaphors to symbolize diseases, moral decadence, and lovesickness.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Literature, Plagues, Pandemics, COVID-19

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COVID-19 pandemics nowadays can let us recall the plagues in William Shakespeare's plays, in which Shakespeare uses the plague and the pandemic as metaphors to symbolize not just diseases but also lovesickness and moral decadence. Many literature works are related to pandemics and plagues, such as Gabriel García Márquez's Spanish novel *El amor en Los Tiempos del Cólera* (in English: *Love in the Time of Cholera*) uses plague as a metaphor for the protagonist poet Florentino Ariza's lovesickness in the love triangle. Plagues and pandemics also happened several times in Shakespeare's time. From history, what can we learn from William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the great dramatist in the U.K. in English Literature, during his time on pandemics?

The situation of plagues is reflected in the Bard's plays. In 1592 when the plague hit London, theatres across the city were closed. From autumn 1592 to May 1594 no new plays were demanded in London due to the serious plague. There were no theatre performances during pandemics. Thus, Shakespeare turned to write poetry; his narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece" were finished around that plague period. When the plague in 1603-4 prevented the new king James I's coronation celebrations, Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*. When Shakespeare was in quarantine in the summer of 1606, he might have written *King Lear*.

I argue Shakespeare used the plagues as literature metaphors and expressions at least in the three ways: first, the plague as a metaphor for a curse and a literary expression of the fatal disease; second, not only as a description of disease, but also as a metaphor of moral decadence; third, literature expression functions as lovesickness. This article will, after offering a literature review, explore the three ways Shakespeare used the plagues as metaphors; will discuss the expression of the plagues in Shakespeare's plays; will provide comments on Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (1999), a postmodern adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*, and will draw the conclusion.

1 During COVID-19 and Its Variants, We can Learn from Shakespeare during the Bubonic Plagues

1.1 Literature Review

The fundamental research methodology applied for this study is the textual and intertextual analysis of various materials ranging from scenes and contents of Shakespeare's plays, journal articles, books, book chapters, commentary articles, newspapers, interviews, to social media, with a focus on English-language comments and Shakespearean research. This article also adds the perspective of ecocriticism, such as Simon C. Estok's *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, especially on my interpretation of Shakespeare's plays connected with the descriptions of natural world, human nature, environment, and plagues. "Sex and the City: An Ecocritical Perspective on the Place of Gender and Race in *Othello*" written by Breyan Strickler uses ecocriticism and feminist literary methods to investigate Shakespeare's *Othello*. Consisting of land and sea, Dan Brayton (2012, p. 197) in the book *Shakespeare's Ocean* proclaims:

Forever drawn to water, Shakespeare was acutely aware that humanity and salt water are strangely allied; as Melville would later put it, ours is a "terraqueous globe," and "meditation and water are wedded forever." The aesthetic possibilities of water constitute a sort of metaphorical undertow throughout the plays and poems, drawing our attention to marine phenomena at the most unlikely moments".

Shakespeare used the metaphors of sea and land in his plays and poems in Brayton's view of going toward a terraqueous ecocriticism. Furthermore, Gabriel Egan's book *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* discusses ecocritical volleys about a confluence of genetics, nuclear fission, and geology. The benzene ring is similar to the Globe Theater in structure in terms of ecocriticism and Shakespeare.

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In history, in Shakespeare's time, in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, and 1608-09, there were outbreaks of plague in the 16th century and the early 17th century. Shakespeare used the years between 1606 and 1610 to write and produce good plays, including *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. J. Leeds Barroll III, the theatre historian, also validates the above discovery. Barroll's book *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years* indicates in the first half of the book that Shakespeare's writing can be demarcated by his exposure to the environmental factors, including the plagues in London. Barroll (1991, p. 16) asserts that Shakespeare "wedded himself to an artistic form whose conceptualization could be delimited by social factors". Among the social factors, there were some restrictions on the theatres during Shakespeare's time, for instance, closures due to plagues, Lenten closures, closures at times of state mourning, and as a method of crowd control, especially in political emergencies. Besides, as Denise Cuthbert (1993, pp .132-133) notes in her book review of Barroll's book: "Plague, the pathologies of rat flea, and bacillus and the public health measures used to contain their effects are the subject of Chapter 3, which adopts the *annaliste* method in examining the activities of Shakespeare and his fellows in 1603 when the great plague came to London".

As the closures in Shakespeare's time during the plagues, since December 2, 2019 up to the present, the restrictions of quarantine, social distancing, and lockdown, shutdown of the national borders, and cancellation and decrease of international flights are adopted as some of the methods to face the outbreak of COVID-19 and its variants, such as Delta and Omicron. Even though many people are afraid of death that they get vaccine shots, however, currently, there are still some people who have doubts about the efficacy and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine shots. According to Stephen Greenblatt (2020):

Shakespeare seems to have shared Nashe's skepticism that there would ever be a medical solution to the plague— "Physic himself must fade" and, from what we know of the science of his time, this pessimism was justified. Instead, he focused his at-

tention on a different plague, the plague of being governed by a mendacious, morally bankrupt, incompetent, blood-soaked, and ultimately self-destructive leader.

Shakespeare might also have skepticism about the so-called medical solution to the plague at that time. It is a universal theme and skepticism toward the pandemic solution with COVID-19 and then with the plague.

1.2 Shakespeare in Plague Quarantine

In social ecology, plagues affect human sustainability related to the natural environment and political ruling coronation. Shakespeare had kept writing even during the plagues. The other example is that when the plague in 1603-4 prevented the new king James I's coronation celebrations, Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*. Shakespearean scholar Emma Smith in *The New York Times* indicates that Shakespeare particularly wrote about the audiences who live with the plague. The third example is that when Shakespeare was in quarantine from the plague outbreak in the summer of 1606, he may have been working on the play *King Lear*. Back to our real world now, when COVID-19 made many countries in the world lockdown in 2020, people get bored in quarantine to wonder what we can do while staying at home. To learn from history, not only Shakespearean scholars but also news and social media, such as Andrew Dickson in *The Guardian*, started to tell the story that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* in quarantine in the early 17th century when the plague seriously made the theatres shut down (Dickson 2020).

Moreover, as Andrew Dickson (2020) reports: "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". A similar shut-down situation has happened during COVID-19 from 2019 up to very recently. Dickson sums up to guess Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during the plague quarantine. Therefore, we can learn from Shakespeare during the outbreaks of the bubonic plague, try to survive by keeping positive writing.

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Furthermore, in “Shakespeare Wrote His Best Works during a Plague” Daniel Pollack-Pelzner (2020) also expresses the same opinion. Pollack-Pelzner’s idea is remarkable, for he thinks the Broadway shutdown could turn out to be suitable for plays. According to Shakespeare’s experiences, when London theaters were closed, he and his troupe, The King’s Men, had to depend on royal supports, gifts, and touring performances in the provinces during the first decade of King James I’s reign to make a living. However, plagues and COVID-19 may also in this peculiar way create literary works.

From history, we can learn from the Bard to get a clue about performing arts living with plague to learn from their experiences to cope with the current difficult condition of COVID-19 and COVID-19 variant viruses. We should learn from Shakespeare, who knew how to adjust to the plagues. “Write while you wait out the closure; lean on wealthy patrons for bailouts; exploit your rivals’ demise”, as Daniel Pollack-Pelzner comments in, “Shakespeare Wrote His Best Works during a Plague” posted on *The Atlantic*.

1.3 Shakespeare Wrote Poetry and Plays on Pandemics

Shakespeare wrote poetry, for example, the poem *Venus and Adonis*, in 1593 when plagues shut down the theaters. Shakespeare also wrote many plays, as Shapiro suggests, for instance, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* when theaters were closed in 1606. In this perspective, the plagues and COVID-19 might give Shakespeare and the people time and opportunities for creative literary works.

As the Chinese proverb says: “The stones of those hills may be used to polish gems.” It means that “some advice from others may help one’s defects.” We can learn from Shakespeare’s experiences. In 1593 the theatres in London in England were closed because of the bubonic plague. I find this scene is shot at the beginning of the film *Shakespeare in Love* in which shows Shakespeare as well as the theatre practitioners were in predicaments. This point is also made by Ling-Hua Chen (2003, p. 164).

2 Plague as a Metaphor for a Curse and Ecophobia

2.1 Plague and Pandemics Work as Metaphors

Shakespeare uses the plague as a metaphor for a curse and a literary expression of the fatal disease. Bubonic Plague Stopped the Letter Delivery in *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's well-known play *Romeo and Juliet* (written around 1595) contains the famous line from the character Mercutio, "A plague o' both your houses!" (III. i), reflecting the curse of plague. Besides, Friar John could not deliver Friar Laurence's important letter to Romeo because: "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." (V. ii) Due to the infectious plague, the confined friar could not deliver the letter to Romeo. He also could not get anyone to return the undelivered letter to Friar Laurence to let him know the problem. Romeo did not know Juliet just feigns to be dead in sleeping but is not dead. This unfortunate mistake causes the star-crossed lovers' tragic fate to commit suicide for each other. Although the plague does not kill them, the problem of the plague causes the forced quarantine, the prohibited social distancing, and the profound social disruption which altogether bring the young lovers' deaths.

Shakespeare uses the plague not only as a description of disease, but also as a metaphor of curse of moral decadence. Shakespeare's play *The Life of Timon of Athens* and *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* are two good examples to validate the insights.

In Shakespeare's play *The Life of Timon of Athens*, Timon orders:

Be as a planetary plague, when Jove
Will o'er some high-vised city hang his poison
In the sick air.

(IV. iii. 109-111)

Timon, the rich and benevolent Athenian noble, was cynical to hate humans after making use of those fair-weather friends to be broken.

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Timon gives Phrynia and Timandra gold to ask them to keep doing their job as prostitutes in Athens so that they can bring more mischief. He commands the prostitutes to lure men in and give them diseases. Here the plague is like moral decadence for Timon, later becomes a misanthrope hermit, who wants to see the city's destruction due to those decayed and maleficent people.

Moreover, Shakespeare uses the plague metaphor as a curse of the ungrateful people's moral decadence, because they betray the hero who just saved their lives from the enemies' invading army in the beginning of the play. In Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, Martius enters cursing to revile at the plebeians, the general body of free Roman citizens:

All the contagion of the south light on you
You shames of Rome! you herd of – Biles and plagues
Plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorr'd
Farther than seen, and one infect another
Against the wind a mile!"

(I. iv. 30-34)

Shakespeare uses the expression of plague to let Martius want it to fall to the city of Rome to make them contagious by the disease. It is a pity that the Roman citizens are not grateful to the hero Coriolanus who won several wars on the battlefield for Rome, but make the bad-temper hero in exile.

Furthermore, as cursed fate, Macbeth fears the repercussions if he kills King Duncan may arise to "plague the inventor." (I vii) Besides, Shakespeare also uses the plague to curse the bad human nature of no filial piety. In Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, we can find evidence that when the character Gloucester tells Lear the Duke of Cornwall will not see him, he screams to curse his daughter Regan and her husband Cornwall with "Vengeance, plague, death, confusion" (II.iv.90). Besides, Lear berates Regan as:

But yet art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
or rather a disease that's in my flesh,

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which I must need(s) call mine. Thou art a boil,
a plague-sore or embossed carbuncle
In my corrupted blood.

(II. Iv. 221-225)

Shakespeare compares the children who do not obey filial obedience with a disease. King Lear compares his daughter Regan to a disgusting plague sore in his skin to tolerate trying to live with. I apply the ideas of ecocriticism to refer to what Simon C. Estok says in his book *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018) and online speech (2021) about “ecophobia is the survival instinct gone mad” to interpret this play. While King Lear is mad to cry and curse loudly in the storm in the wilderness, the outside natural environment is also a superb literature metaphor for the representation of the inside cruel, realistic, and ungrateful human nature.

Shakespeare is related to ecocriticism in all kinds of phobia. “Falling under the rubric of ecophobia,” as Estok cites Michael Pollan’s term “germophobia (Pollan 2013, p. 297). Also known as microbiophobia,” “Mysophobia,” “verminophobia,” “bacillophobia,” and bacteriophobia” (Estok 2019, pp. 473-474). However, fear and phobia as they are. “A cynical view might have it that those doing this puny new - ism with an old and established giant such as Shakespeare are like parasites, like the ‘flea that dare eat his breakfast on the lip of a lion’” (Henry V, III, vii, 145–46) (Estok 2011, p. 124). Hope to “hold off disease and death” (Pollan 2013, p. 296). For those who attempt to do ecocriticism upon Shakespeare is not easy, this article just suggests to open possibilities for Shakespearean research, such as finding the historical law documents in the connection with Shakespeare’s plays.

During the plague, Shakespeare might write *King Lear*. King Lear presents what Shakespeare thought about old age, the explosion of rage, madness, grief, loss of power, authority, house, land, love, eyesight, and sanity. Not only the metaphors of plague have been employed in Shakespeare’s plays, such as *King Lear* in which King Lear curses his two elder daughters who do not have filial piety by using the expression of the

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“plague” as I have stated above, but also the widely discussed lawsuit occurred in late 1603 might have also impacted on his thinking about writing *King Lear*. Concerning the 1603 lawsuit, according to Greenblatt in the book *Will in the World*. The two elder daughters of a doddering gentleman named Sir Brian Annesley attempted to get their father legally certified as insane, thereby enabling themselves to take over his estate. In contrast, his youngest daughter vehemently protested on her father’s behalf (2004, p. 357). The plot of *King Lear* is like the lawsuit case, but also the name of King Lear’s youngest daughter Cordella happened to be the same as the youngest daughter in the lawsuit who tried to save her father from her malevolent vicious two older sisters.

2.2 *Macbeth and King Lear* were written during the Plague

During the isolation, Shakespeare still used time to write several good plays. For example, in mid-July of 1606, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *King Lear* (written between 1605 and 1606) were recognized as the finest plays ever staged. In *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, both plays reflect the situation of plague which made so many deaths in a short span of time. Besides, King Lear is mad at his two daughters, Goneril and Regan, to compare them as “A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood.” (II iv). The isolation caused by the plague shows in King Lear’s desolate outlook while he shouts in the storm, “Vengeance! plague! death! confusion!” Moreover, King Lear uses the plagues to curse and lament over his two evil daughters with no filial piety: “Now, all the plagues that in the pendulous air/Hang fated o’er men’s faults light on thy daughters!” (III iv) In terms of ecocriticism, I think that King Lear’s curse in the storm in the wilderness may also refer to ecophobia. The supporting view can be exemplified as Simon C. Estok (2011, p. 19) also indicates that “*King Lear* is vivid in its foregrounding of environmental unpredictability and in its dramatization of a fear of nature”. Indeed, I agree that Green criticism is beyond of the green forest in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the retreat in the Utopian forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. Ecophobia, fear or loath of the environment, for instance, in my

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view, is similar to the whale-hunting, the fear and hatred toward the mythical gigantic white whale, *Moby Dick*, the novel written by Herman Melville. Ecophobia is also interwoven with speciesism, homophobia, misogyny, racism, and even the unpredictable disease caused by environmental pollution. It connects with Shakespeare's using plagues as metaphors to express his concerns about humans, human relationship, and human's attitude toward the ecology and environment.

3 Plagues Symbolize Diseases, Lovesickness, and Moral Decadence

3.1 Expressions of the Plagues in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare made good use of the plagues for his literary expressions. The plague phrase in Shakespeare's play *King Lear*: "A plague upon your epileptic visage." Here the word "epileptic" is used in a derogatory. It actively demonstrates that meaning.

KENT (to Oswald)

A plague upon your epileptic visage.

Smile you my speeches as I were a fool?

Goose, if I had you upon Sarum plain,

I'd drive ye cackling home to Camelot.

(*King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 2)

According to Betts & Betts (1998, p. 408): "Syphilis was raging in England and a fear of syphilis gripped Elizabethan England as tightly as our present fear of AIDS". They use textual analysis of Shakespeare's play lines following the use of 'epileptic' to suggest that it is a reference to the "pock-marks of syphilis endemic in Elizabethan England and is not actually a reference to epilepsy itself" (Betts & Betts, 1998, p. 407).

Stephen Greenblatt (2004) also indicates what Shakespeare might be doing during the plagues in his time. Greenblatt indicates that London was an unhealthy place conjoined ravages of epidemic diseases. According to Greenblatt (2004, p. 163):

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The worst of these, bubonic plague, swept through the city again and again, spreading panic, wiping out whole families, decimating neighborhoods. Even in years, spared by the plague, the number of deaths recorded in London's parish records always exceeded the live births.

Plagues happened several times in London to kill many people during Shakespeare's time. Even though there were plagues, Shakespeare had kept writing plays and sonnets, so we can learn from Shakespeare to keep doing some positive things without committing suicide or stop learning something new. As Shakespeare kept busy and wrote successful plays throughout the pandemic, so should literature professors, scholars and performers be doing during COVID-19 and remain positive. When Shakespeare was only thirty-six years old, still young, he wrote plays to be extraordinary in the three major genres in drama—comedy, history, and tragedy.

The value of Shakespeare's tragedy is comparable to Greek tragedy. His *Hamlet* brought forth *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* have been popular on stage and shot into films very often. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* was well known, which can be traced back to, according to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Shakespeare, 1974, p. 1055), the "use of a sleeping potion as a way out of an unwelcome marriage goes back to the Ephesiaca of the Greek novelist Xenophon in the fourth century A.D." Shakespeare's accomplishment is not just in tragedy and historical plays but also in romances and comedies. In comedy, Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *As You Like It*, which all amused the theatergoers at that time. His *Twelfth Night* goes beyond the genre of comedy. In history plays, Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* might surpass the rest of history plays in history plays. Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare's plays *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Richard II* were "published during Shakespeare's lifetime as tragedies" (2004: 296).

Another plague crisis hit London in 1603-1604, followed by the big outbreak in the summer of 1606, forcing theatre shut down (April

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1606-April 1607). During the serious epidemic from 1603-1604, the horrendous plague even delayed the coronation of the Scottish King James to enter London to rule after the death of Queen Elizabeth I. During the plagues in London, Shakespeare and his troupe had to go on tour performing in the provinces.

3.2 Plagues as Comic Expression of Lovesickness

Plagues are used not just as a curse of disease and as a metaphor of moral decadence as elucidated above, but also are transformed by Shakespeare as an ingenious expression of lovesickness. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare lets the countess Olivia to marvel at how fast the speed she has fallen in love:

How now?
Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
Mythinks I feel this youth's perfections
With an invisible and subtle stealth
To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be.

(I. v. 294-298)

Creepy haunting death no more, here the plague is used as the comic expression of love mock or as everyday mundane language. The formal example is for Beatrice to mock Benedict: "O Lord! He will hang upon him like a disease. He is sooner caught than the pestilence...." (Act 1, Scene 1) in *Much Ado about Nothing*. As I mention and analyze above, this article argues that plague and pandemic can work as metaphors to symbolize diseases and lovesickness, and moral decadence.

4 Plagues in Mundane Language and Exoticization of Others

4.1 Mundane Language

An interconnection between COVID-19 and plagues is that plagues are vocalized in everyday mundane language. Furthermore, in more than special occasions, Shakespeare often uses the expression of plague in his plays to exclaim as everyday mundane language.¹ For instance, “a plague upon it when thieves cannot be true to one another”; “a plague of sighing and grief! It blows a man up like a bladder”; “a plague upon this howling”; “a plague of these pickle-herring!” In Shakespeare’s works, plague is like a familiar phenomenon accepted though unwillingly as an unavoidable situation people might encounter in their lives as ordinary daily lives. In similar vein, there are examples of how COVID-19 has also morphed into everyday mundane language and now forms a part of our ordinary metaphoric lives. For example, “wear masks, wash hands, keep social distancing” as not only public health COVID-19 prevention policy, but also a new fashion trend to choose to wear a mask with a specific color and pattern to match the clothes in our lives and on stage.

Encountering the pandemic and trying to co-exist and live with COVID-19 has become a part of our daily lives until we get back to our normal lives. Bubonic plague’s contagious source was mice², and the origin of the first CoVs might be from bats, and then transfer to birds, and mammals like pigs as Gupta (2020) indicated³ and the film *Contagion* (2011) cinematically predicted.⁴ Shakespearean researches and literature interpretation can be aided by referring to ecocriticism. As Richard C. Hoffmann’s book *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* explores the issues including the treatment of animals and the

1 Regarding the concept of mundane I follow Ju Yon Kim (2015).

2 The scientific evidence that mice is the root of the bubonic plagues can be found in the journal article “Complete Protection against Pneumonic and Bubonic Plague after a Single Oral Vaccination.” Written by Anne Derbise, Yuri Hanata, Manal Khalifé, Elizabeth Carniel, and Christian E. Demeure. *Plos Neglected Tropical Diseases*. Published: October 16, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0004162>

3 The details can be seen in Dr. Akanksha Gupta, co-authored with others. “COVID-19: Emergence of Infectious Diseases, Nanotechnology Aspects, Challenges, and Future Perspectives.” *Chemistry Europe*. First published: 06 July 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1002/slct.202001709>

4 See [Contagion \(film\) - Wikicali.com](https://www.wikicali.com/wiki/Contagion_(film)). See also Tuan’s (2020) conference paper.

environment of the natural world can bring about epidemic diseases to result in people's worry about sustainability, climate change, and global warming in terms of ecocriticism nowadays.

4.2 Deaths in *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*

Fatal plagues kill people to cause deaths just as the cruel wars and bloody revenge do in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*. Titus often curses Tamora and her two vicious sons. There is the loath of the Other associated with ecophobia. As Simon C. Estok in the book chapter "Staging Exotica and Ecophobia" in the book *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* indicates that madness is sometimes referred to "female, monstrous, and polluted," and the "transcodings between the Other and the bestial in discourses of madness," is "at once speciesist and ecophobic," and "there is a generalized environmental loathing implied in the exoticization of early modern Others" (99-110). The Other woman from outside, Tamora, Queen of the Goths; afterwards Empress of Rome, is described as monstrous to seek revenge upon the man Titus who is under her tyrannical polluted empire.

Tamora and her two beast sons (who commit bestially rape) are cinematically represented as if animals. Furthermore, the meat pies made of the cruel barbarous Tamora's two violent sons (who bestially rape Titus' gracious daughter and cut her hands and tongue) certainly distinguish what is human and what is nonhuman on the dinner table. Shakespearean research can be seen not only in the film's adaptations but also in the theater performances. For instance, the famous Oscar Award winner Anthony Hopkins plays well in the title role Titus in Director Julie Taymor's adaptation film *Titus* (1999), a postmodern revenge tragedy of Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*. During COVID-19 outbreak, many theaters, including Broadway, had been closed, and performances had been cancelled. Yet Shakespeare's plays are luckily performed on stage in the theater in Taiwan during COVID-19 as a live performance. For example, the contemporary production *The Madness of Titus Andronicus* (2021, Taipei), adapted from

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Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*, was staged in Taiwan from April 16-18, 2021.⁵

5 Conclusion

What can we learn from Shakespeare during his time on pandemics? The answer might be that we can keep positive and optimistic by writing, especially, intellectuals, scholars, writers, researchers, and professors. During the pandemics, Shakespeare was influenced by the pandemics to write several plays. Besides the examples given above, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare let Hamlet give the famous soliloquies:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world...

(*Hamlet* 3.3.358-60)

Encountering the plagues, pandemics hit London from autumn 1592 to May 1594; when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1599-1602, Shakespeare still remembered the fatal disease terror. So, he used the character Hamlet to express that at late night in darkness, in the churchyards full of graves, the dead who died of pandemics and sickness from hell spread out their contagious breath, as if a foul disease, in a noxious air atmosphere to inflict the world. Denise Ming-yueh Wang's journal article "Adieu, Adieu, Remember Me: The Death of Hamlet the Dane" also treats the "infectious disease" to show the "imagery of contamination"

5 The Tainaner Ensemble does the production. Director and Playwright Tsai, Chih-Ching narrowed down the scale to use only the six actors and actresses to present Shakespeare's huge bloody revenge tragedy after the Roman war against the barbarian Goths. The revenge between Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and Titus Andronicus, a noble Roman general, against the Goths.

With the aid of technology, this contemporary avant-garde little theatre performance in the proscenium stage also employs the two camera projections. To project the live performances onto the big white screen hanging in the stage background while the actor or the actress is performing as the media TV anchor reports the news at the side of the stage. This performance abounds in contemporary politics; for example, at the beginning of the performance, the presidential candidates Saturninus and Bassianus are running their political campaign, and media are manipulated by the dominant rulers who are corrupt, murders, schemes, mutilations, rape, and bloody revenge. The six-actor cast use the basins with either water or red liquids symbolizing blood to spray on each other with the development of the plot. Many deaths and a lot of blood, cruel revenge one after the other happen to represent on stage by many shocking images full of terror and violence.

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in the play *Hamlet*. It offers a “suggestive introduction to the idea of contagion as the crucial cause of death in Shakespeare’s day” (2010: 32).

To sum up, when there were plagues and pandemics during Shakespeare’s time, even when theatres were close, Shakespeare kept writing, writing the plays as I mention above, and writing the poetry sonnets. As Harvard University Professor Stephen Greenblatt speculates in the book *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* that Shakespeare might be hired to write the sonnets to encourage the young handsome noble (who might have Narcissism to love no ladies but himself) to get married to have children. Whether for making a living during the pandemic plagues or what, Shakespeare has the will to do it. As Shakespeare in the title of his sonnets, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, announces, he repeatedly has puns on his own first name:

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,
And Will to boot, and Will in overplus.

(Sonnet 135.1-2)

In the 154 sonnets, Shakespeare is smart to encourage the reader to identify the speaker with Shakespeare by using the witty alias. The word “Will” is the short nickname of “William,” Shakespeare’s first name. Besides, I believe that as the proverbs say: “Whenever there is a will, there is a way.” If we have the will to conquer COVID-19, human beings will sooner or later try their best to find a solution to cope with the dreadful COVID-19 and its virus variants which have killed so many people in the world. We can learn from Shakespeare on pandemics to try to survive.

Although Shakespeare’s tone in *King Lear* might sound nihilistic, I think that Shakespeare is not like the binary opposition to be attributed as negative or positive. Instead, Shakespeare in my perspective, is pragmatic and realistic. He knew how to survive to make a living during the bubonic plague without being killed by the pandemic. Moreover, Shakespeare made good use of the plagues to serve as the abundant metaphors and literature expressions in his plays.

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During COVID-19, while not many people wanted to get the vaccine shots to be tested as the experiment mice, Northern California doctors in the U.S. reworked the famous popular musical *Hamilton* track to promote vaccines. The famous lyric rings in your ear, such as: “Don’t throw away your shots.” To learn from their wits, I also rewrite the line in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: “Vengeance, plague, death, confusion” (II. iv.90) to be: “Revenge, COVID-19, mortality, chaos.” COVID-19 pandemics from 2020 to the present drastically change our daily lives. We can learn from Shakespeare to keep alive and be inspired by the Bard to make this as an opportunity for rest while we wait for proper COVID-19 vaccines to be shot for most of the people who are willing to get shots in Taiwan, America, Europe, and the world to try to co-exist with the pandemic.

The research on Shakespeare and COVID-19 with the reference of ecocriticism can be transformed into resources like rain and water in our literature reservoir. And the humankind in the future generations as treasure database and unforgettable experiences and lessons. We can learn from Shakespeare that even if we face the difficult pandemic situation during COVID-19, we can still develop our talents by keeping social distancing in quarantine. And train our skills to keep doing our jobs well while maintaining our health and productivity. We can read and write to discover what other literary works are connected to pandemics and plagues. We can use languages to express our feelings in writing works which may become literature masterpieces in the future.

What might Shakespeare learn from us? I try to answer the question raised by one member of the audience at the international 2021 INTERFACEing conference at National Taiwan University. I guess that our modern technological progress, advanced medicine, online performances, the Internet, social media, etc., can let Shakespeare (if he could see) be amazed at our marvelous innovative improvement in the 21st century. After all, human beings waited for 150 years to finally have the polio vaccine invented. And now, just after one year, humans have already invented COVID-19 vaccines. Thus, up to the present, when I finish revising to submit this journal paper, I believe that we can still

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have hope. We can pray that shortly, most/all people will get useful COVID-19 vaccines to confront the contagious dreadful pandemic with less death caused by dangerous COVID-19 pandemic and its variants Delta and Omicron. But there is no vaccine for climate change! Thus, we need to get rid of ecophobia. Just as Shakespeare, we can learn from him to sustain, survive, stay safe and healthy, and keep writing.

This article argues that plagues and pandemics can work for Shakespeare as metaphors to symbolize diseases, moral decadence, and love-sickness. As Richard C. Hoffmann's *Environmental History of Medieval Europe* on social ecology, COVID-19, though contagious might from bats or a biochemical weapon lab experiment (as some people's suspicion), is also relevant to the environment. Therefore, we can reflect on plagues in Shakespeare's plays aided with the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism while living or co-existing with COVID-19 pandemics. Plagues and COVID-19 pandemics, in a way, reflect the environmental pollution, climate change, and contagious problems between species. Still, Nature is utterly indifferent while human nature tries to survive to seek for sustainability to live with the beautiful nature. Shakespeare's plays filled with metaphors of plagues transcend time and space to still shine in the post COVID-19 era.

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