

# SHAKESPEARE & THE PLAGUE

## A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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Background information and discussion questions for teaching *Shakespeare & the Plague* in class and on stage. Composed by Director and Dramaturg Philippa Kelly.

*All quotations from Shakespeare taken from the Norton Shakespeare, Third Edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al, Norton, New York, 2016.*

### BACKGROUND

The Plague hit Shakespeare's world several times during his lifetime. There was no vaccine and no hope of developing one. There wasn't a medical understanding of how the plague was spread (we now know it was spread by rats). But people did know how to effectively stop the spread – shut up any house that was infected by the plague. Some neighbors, in order to ensure that inhabitants of an infected house didn't get out and spread the disease, would hammer boards across the door.

### LANGUAGE THEN AND NOW

When asked the number one challenge with Shakespeare's works, modern day audiences will almost always respond: "the language." It's true that the language does sound a bit different to our ears, and Shakespeare uses phrases that we no longer use in our everyday speech.

#### Questions:

- Name some lines in the video that seem strange to your modern ears. Now think of this: there are expressions that we use today that would puzzle Shakespeare. That's because language is constantly transforming. Can you name some contemporary expressions that fit the situations acted out in the video for which, if he were a fly on the wall, Shakespeare would need a glossary?
- Shakespeare writes his language in a certain meter, and this makes it musical. It has a rhythm. Try to match the rhythm of any or all of the passages to a modern-day beat like Rap. How do the words sound? Would you substitute any words to make the passages feel more relevant?

## ROMEO AND JULIET

### The Play

*Romeo and Juliet* was written between 1591 and 1594. It is about the discovery of love by people of approximately high school age: a thirteen-year-old girl and a seventeen-year-old boy. This love blooms secretly amidst the family conflict that frames the world of Verona, where Shakespeare sets the play. The family conflict is a plague that infects everything and everyone. Mercutio, a cousin to the Prince, is one of Romeo's buddies. When Romeo refuses Tybalt's challenge to a sword fight because his secret marriage has made him Tybalt's cousin, Mercutio leaps in and fights on Romeo's behalf. Tybalt fatally wounds Mercutio, and Mercutio's final words are, "A plague on both your houses." The viral force of hatred is a "plague" of sorts, and in return for this infection, Mercutio curses the warring houses that are responsible for his death. Mercutio's words come true: Romeo and Juliet are young and passionate; they are overwhelmed by the force of their love, and each commits suicide at the thought of losing the other amidst the "plague" of "their family's strife."

### Who's Who

Romeo Montague

Juliet Capulet

Mercutio: cousin of Prince Escalus

### Passages

Prologue to the play

Juliet: 2. 1. 80-91

Romeo: 2.4. 41-51

### Questions

- What do the actors do to add meaning and emotion to their words? How do they use gestures, facial expressions, body language, and movement? Would you act the words differently?
- Look for moments that you recognize in modern life: are the characters acting like people would today? Why or why not?
- Can people make their own destiny? Does your opinion differ from the views expressed by the characters in the video?
- Try writing your own soliloquy for Juliet to deliver to Romeo - in which she talks about Romeo's name and her love for him.
- Try writing your own words for Romeo to deliver to Juliet.

## JULIUS CAESAR

### The Play

*Julius Caesar*, written just before the turn of the century, concerns characters who want to get rid of a leader who seems to have abandoned the values he was appointed to stand for. Most of the play is about the conflicting feelings that Brutus – married to Portia who speaks in this passage – goes through. He wants to see the death of Caesar as a sacrifice for the common good – but he can't stop his imagination from constructing Caesar's death as an assassination. What is the difference between a sacrifice and an assassination?

### Who's Who

Portia, wife to Brutus, friend and then murderer of Caesar. Portia knows that something is up with her husband and his colleagues, but she doesn't know what. She appeals to her husband to let her in on what is bothering him.

### Passage

2.1. 261-8

### Questions

- Shakespeare looked to real historical events to build this play. What were these events and when did they happen?
- In using these events, Shakespeare was talking not just about a specific situation, but about human qualities. What are some relevant qualities?
- How do the plague references build Portia's point of view?
- Can you think of substitute words for Portia to use? How about some Covid expressions?

## **KING LEAR**

### **The Play**

Shakespeare wrote this play in 1603-5. It's about the crumbling of kingship and authority in ancient Britain. He doesn't want to get in trouble with his own king because of the views he expresses – that authority is not intrinsic to the person who holds it. We may be born with authority, but it can be taken away. Both Lear and Gloucester have to find new ways of negotiating a world that neither of them has any capacity to control.

### **Who's Who**

Lear, king of Britain, and then ex-king of Britain.

Gloucester: Earl, which is the second-top ranking of a nobleman. (The rank of Duke is equal to, or even greater than, Earl – but a Duke's title is conferred on him, not a title he is born to.)

Edgar ("Poor Tom"): he is the older son of Gloucester, and the son to whom Gloucester would naturally leave all his earthly possessions and titles. But in the second scene of the play we see both Gloucester and Edgar tricked by Edmund, Edgar's younger brother. As a consequence, both Gloucester and Edgar lose their positions and every worldly thing that defines them. Edgar comes back to help his father, disguised as "poor Tom," a beggar.

### **Passages**

2.2. 398-405

4.1.51-77

### **Questions**

- Passage 2.2. 398-405
  - Lear conveys his rage at his daughter. Can you explain this rage? Imagine you are Lear's daughter, Goneril. Make up a modern-day speech that you might give if you were her, explaining to him why you have acted in the way you have.
- 4.1.51-77
  - Gloucester expresses his sadness about his mistakes and his wish to go to Dover. Why does he want to go to Dover? What does this place signify in the play? Is there a modern-day equivalent for Dover that you would use? What does Gloucester's blindness signify in the play?
- "Every king is a beggar-in-waiting." How would you use these words to convey something about the significance of "Poor Tom" in the play?

## MACBETH

### The Play

*Macbeth*, written in 1604, is a play about ambition, and it is also about fate. A great soldier kills his king in order to get his rank and title. He receives what he has feared – not a moment of joy, not a moment of gratification: only paranoia and fear.

### Passages

4.3.164-73

5.1.28-46

5.3.29-30

Third Apparition: 4.1.91-93

### Questions

- Why does Macbeth kill the king if he has known the suffering this would cause?
- Do you think that ambition is a part of destiny?
- “Alas, poor country...” (4.3.164-73). These words are spoken by Ross, a Scottish soldier who observes how the world of Scotland has changed. How does Ross use the image of the plague to express that change? Can you find modern words to express emotions equivalent to Ross’ words?
- The sleepwalking passage (5.1.28-46). How does Shakespeare use the plague, and sleep, to represent Lady Macbeth’s mind? How has she gotten to this position in regard to the events in the play? Why is it important that the Gentlewoman, and the doctor, observe her sleepwalking?
- Who is more responsible for the Macbeths’ fall from grace? The husband? The wife? The witches? Someone else?

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING AND TWELFTH NIGHT

### The Play

*Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* were written in 1598 and 1599 respectively.

### Who's Who

*Much Ado*: Beatrice, cousin of Hero, secret lover of Benedick (who also secretly loves her).

*Twelfth Night*: the Countess Olivia, who, because she is in mourning, has no intention of falling in love for at least the next seven years. But she suddenly falls in love – as if she has caught the plague and cannot shake it!

### Passages

*Much Ado*: i.1. 68-71

*Twelfth Night* 1.5.277-80

### Questions

- In these brief passages, both characters who use plague references are in love – yet each uses the plague differently. Can you express how or why?

## THE TEMPEST

### The Play

*The Tempest* (1611) is a play about Duke Prospero who, thirteen years on from his forcible replacement by his brother, looks back on his exile to the unknown island where we (the audience) land in the play's first scene – and where he (Prospero) once landed with his daughter Miranda thirteen years ago. Prospero gets the chance to use his magic powers to exact revenge for this wrong. So many of us seek revenge for harms done to us – yet when we seek revenge, we so rarely get what we plan or ask for.

### Who's Who

Prospero, former Duke of Milan, and now self-appointed leader on an un-named island somewhere off the Caribbean.

### Passages

5.1.33 – 57 and Epilogue

### Questions

- How would you characterize revenge in this play? How does Prospero see it in the end? Do you think the fact that Prospero gets it by “magic” powers means that revenge can only really be exacted in our dreams?
- What characters in the play does Prospero want to take revenge against? When you think of Prospero, what does the word “anger” mean? What does the word “mercy” mean?
- Both passages address Prospero’s feelings about what he has suffered, what he has been forced to relinquish, what he is now willing to relinquish, and how he sees his past and his future. Can you find contemporary words for him to express the same feelings that he does in one or both of these passages?

## PHILIPPA KELLY

Philippa Kelly (PhD Shakespeare) is Resident Dramaturg for the California Shakespeare Theater. She has published 11 books and 98 articles (presses include Halstead, Ashgate, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Michigan, Arden, Palgrave, Routledge, University of Western Australia Press, University of Sydney Press, Benjamin Press). Her latest edited book, with Associate Editor Amrita Ramanan, is *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy: Case Studies From the Field*, published by Routledge Press in April 2020. For her research Philippa has been awarded many fellowships and scholarships, including a Fulbright Postdoctoral Fellowship, a Rockefeller Fellowship, a Walter and Eliza Hall Scholarship, a Commonwealth Scholarship, and a Bly Award for Innovation in Dramaturgy from the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Philippa has also been awarded grants as team leader by the Walter and Elise Haas and from the California Arts Council, allowing her to create, teach and lead artists in delivering innovative curriculum components across Oakland schools. She is also proud to lead a year-round community theater group entitled Berkeley Theater Explorations, the purpose of which is to make dramaturgy foundational to community theater appreciation – in other words, to make theater-going an active practice rather than a passive form of consumption.

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The Simpson Literary Project offers four core initiatives: outreach to high school-age writers, a writer-in-residence program, a national literary prize, and our annual anthology —*Simpsonistas: Tales from the Simpson Literary Project*.