



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF CULTURAL  
STUDIES & HUMANITIES

## Pre-course activity two: Shakespeare, Pandemics and Writing

Introduced by Dr Nick Cox, Senior Lecturer in English at Leeds Beckett University



The Cobbe Portrait (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) by an unknown artist, believed to be of Shakespeare in about 1610

My teaching and research interest is in the ways in which writing from the past has both continuities with the present but is also fascinating and often challenging differences. Part of the experience of studying English at University, as critical readers and creative writers, is the opportunity it provides for encountering literature from the past and seeing it from our vantage point in the present.

In a recent post, [Shakespeare in Lock-down](#) on the LBU Together Blog, I discuss the ways in which the experience of an epidemic and the responses of the authorities to it affected not just the writing practice but probably the whole creative environment in which Shakespeare worked.

Social distancing and the prohibition of public gatherings has transformed our experience of the world. It will already have had a huge impact on your learning experience and, more generally, on the processes of reading, writing, thinking and creative interaction that we identify as culture. The tendencies, which were already present in our culture, for our experience of the world to be a virtual one, mediated through various screens, has been accelerated. 'Live' theatre, for instance, is currently available only in the form of recordings

of performances that pre-date our current reality and watching them seems to make us even more conscious of how different things are from a time which is both recent and very remote.

The kind of vertigo that comes with having a whole way of living cut away from beneath us seems like an incredibly new and 'modern' experience. The word 'unprecedented' has become a cliché used to describe our present condition. But one of the valuable things about engaging with the culture and literature of the past is that it enables us to understand that people have lived through experiences that are comparable to our own. Exploring their responses to radical and sometimes frightening change can provide us with new perspectives and insight into our own situation. There are dangers with this as well. Our ways of conceptualising a pandemic, for instance, are very different from those of people in the sixteenth century. Some of Shakespeare's contemporaries thought, for instance, that bubonic plague was a punishment from God; that it would be most prevalent amongst sinful, degraded and lawless people; and that a good way to deal with it would be to light huge bonfires in the streets to drive away unclean air. In the sixteenth-century version of lockdown whole families were sealed up in their houses together (sick and well) and emerged only once (or if) they recovered. Although these attitudes seem, at first, cruel, intolerant, or bizarre to us, they were the product of the moral and ideological framework through which people understood their world. Where some similarities perhaps lie are in the ways in which those in power sought to control the circulation of people and disease and the impact that this had on writers and artists.

As I point out in the blog post, Shakespeare's writing was closely linked to his involvement with the theatre (as an actor and part-owner of the company as well as a playwright). When the authorities ordered the closure of the theatres for nearly two years in June 1592, just as his career was getting going, it looks as if Shakespeare turned his hand to writing long poems for a high-end readership because there were few other options. Whilst some actors left London to go on tour during the plague, it looks as if Shakespeare took up work that was enabled by seclusion. Yet, when the theatres eventually re-opened, he returned to drama and, working with actors, other writers and, responding to the very large audience in the playhouses, produced about seven plays in two years. What this tells us is that Shakespeare had to be a flexible writer, responsive to the changing institutional and social context in which he worked. The essentially collaborative environment of the theatre produced a Shakespeare we're more familiar with than the perhaps more introverted poet, locked down in plague-stricken London with a shelf of Ancient Greek and Roman writers as his frame of reference.

...How now?

Even so quickly may one catch the plague ?

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections

With an invisible and subtle stealth

To creep in at mine eyes

In this quotation from *Twelfth Night* Olivia, the Countess who has sworn not to marry, uses plague as a metaphor for falling in love. Desire here is a surprise, unbidden, like an infection - perhaps all the more dangerous because this 'youth' is a woman in disguise. In the same play the riotous knight, Sir Toby Belch, says that the fool, Feste, has 'contagious breath' because he spreads melancholy with his singing. Plague was a reality for Shakespeare and his audience, but it was also a metaphor. Writers and critics should be alert to the ways in which

language helps to shape and re-shape our experience and understanding of the world. When Shakespeare turns plague into a metaphor for love or sadness, he changes the way we can think about those things. At the same time plague becomes something other than itself, something different from a disease through its transformation into metaphor.

### **Study questions/activities:**

Have a think about the ways in which metaphor is being used in relation to the current pandemic.

- 1) What metaphors are used to characterise the disease by, for instance, government spokespeople? In her book *Illness as Metaphor* Susan Sontag says: 'disease is regularly described as invading the society, and efforts to reduce mortality... a fight, a struggle, a war.' You may have noticed the ways in which such metaphors have been used in recent speeches by politicians.
- 2) How does this shape our perception of our situation and how does it encourage us to respond?

Sontag also talks about how viral infections are 'animalistically characterized – as a in waiting, as mutable, as furtive, as biologically innovative [which] reinforces the sense that a disease can be something ingenious, unpredictable, novel'. Think about the ways in which Covid-19 has been reported and represented.

- 3) Can you think of examples where such metaphors are at work in the news and social media?
- 4) Can you think of ways in which metaphor might be used differently in creative work (fiction, poetry) to respond to our current situation?

At the start I suggested that we can look to the past as a way of interpreting our present. Daniel Defoe, an important figure in developing the novel, wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year*. The text purports to be an 'eye-witness' account of the 'Great Plague' of 1665. But Defoe was writing in 1722 and imagines both the self who writes and the experiences of plague-stricken London he undergoes. He may have been prompted to write it by the apparent reappearance of Bubonic Plague in Marseilles and the fear that it might spread to London. Other writers have used the concept of a catastrophic pandemic as the apocalyptic event that leads to a radical transformation of the world and human society in the future. One of the most interesting recent examples of this is Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) which traces the experience of a troupe of actors who tour the remnants of North America performing reinvented versions of Shakespeare's plays.

You might want to consider looking at these or some of the other texts suggested by my colleague, Professor Susan Watkins, in her blog-post on [the best things to read in quarantine](#) on the LBU Together Blog.

*You could also consider producing some creative work which uses an imagined past or future as a way of responding to and giving expression to your own experience of living through a pandemic.*

### **Final Comments**

If you would like to discuss your ideas / work, or if any other questions related to the degree programme or studying at Leeds Beckett University, please contact Dr Nick Cox, Senior Lecturer in English at: [N.Cox@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:N.Cox@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

Also, feel free to give the degree page on Twitter a follow too: @BeckettEnglish