

We, Shakespeare and the Fall of Civilization
(‘A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!’ *King Lear*, V, iii)

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The Bosnian version of the following article, appeared in June 2020 in well-respected Bosnian journal for scientific and literary studies *Novi Izraz* (no. 77-78, January-June 2020, pp.3-12), Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina. This article was written at the time when the shock waves of Covid19 had started shattering the remains of our civilization by April 2020 after the big knock-down-blow in early January the same year. With passage of time, the attitude of our entire civilization towards this crisis kept on randomly changing on daily basis. The civilization, the way it was designed over the past several centuries, was bound to collapse at some point anyway but the subtle ‘un-expectancy’ in which it caught unalarmed the entire mankind was unforeseen. Valuable contemporary concerns, regarding the triviality of all that marked the civilization before 26th December, 2019, had been given voice by scholars like Noam Chomsky, thinkers like Hussain Nasr, philosophers like Frithjof Schuon and countless others over the decades. However, the thick curtains of blindness named variously social progress, economic prosperity, cultural development and all sorts of ‘rights’ literally for all that human mind could so far afford to squeeze out of its rugged, shabby languages, made some enthusiasts believe that ultimate destination of victory for glorious humans is at hand. While the ‘word revealed’, said otherwise: ‘By time, Indeed, mankind is in loss.’¹ Prosperity, victory and glory is a promise for those who do ‘righteous deeds and counsel each other to truth and advise each other to patience.’²

Where is that humanity lost? Those who search for truth and see in humanity the potential to groom and cultivate itself, have, since time immemorial, detected the root of all vice in human impulse of self-glorification. Lost in the fake images of glory of one’s own self, one

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stands far from the images of truth, righteous deed and patience; thus, lost forever in the abyss of nothingness.

Shakespeare's perception of life as 'poor shadow', civilization as 'unweeded garden' and mankind as something that 'delights not' held the grip over the mind and hearts of millions over the centuries. A quick revision of his works, during the early days of lock-down in Bosnia Herzegovina in February 2020, made me sense that the images of plagues and deaths throughout his plays have a different message than I had ever perceived before; the pandemic was giving new meanings to life. The intensity which this pandemic brought with it in already existing uncertainty of our socio-economic lives, the thought of being helpless without any hope of rescue from the clutches of unseen enemy and an awkward, eerie sense of relief that the decadent institutions of our civilization are finally nearing their long awaited end, match in entirety the uncertainty, helplessness and eeriness of a Shakespearean plot as well. For the first time, I realized that I was not reading the text of a play, I was living it as well. It's not that Shakespearean drama is for all ages, I felt that as such it is 'all ages'. I felt that one could trace both the past and future histories while going through his works. When I say the past and future histories, I am not referring to events that mark historical phases but the states that we, the lowly humans, live as result of those phases. His drama is an insight in to the possibilities of exploring our own potential of survival with elegance in times such as these. It also points out to the circumstances ripening for the birth of a new outlook of our social structures and the death of the worn out ones.

With this faith that we are observing something grand, something that happens only rarely in cosmic sense, I decided sharing my thoughts with the readers. However, the conspiracy theories, the claims that it is a pandemic happening only through the media and the world is safe and secure, at least as secure as it was before 2020, led me to observe the universal attitude of humans when undergoing social changes. All the observations confirmed that humans, regardless of their cast, religion, geographical area and era, resist change. Human impulse searches for permanence but the universe around this creature demands constant change and adaptability. This clash between the impulse and the universal laws is the soul of Shakespearean drama and we all are living it at the moment.

Hoping, that the thoughts registered in the article are of relevant interest to a wider range of readers, English version is presented hereby. For feedback and comments readers my contact via messenger or email (shahabyar_khan@hotmail.com).

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (*The Tempest* Act 4, scene 1, 148–158)

Covid19 has changed our world view to a very large extent, as if it was all a dream what we considered 'normal' in life only a few months back. The superpowers of the world lay exposed at 'the hand' of a lowly creature about which it is difficult to say that it is even fully alive, until it feeds upon the flesh and blood of the 'paragon of creation'. The entire civilization which took a century to evolve its present features lay vanquished within less than a month of the onslaught of the 'unseen, invisible enemy'. There can be various ways of understanding the nature of this disaster which shook the confidence of the space-age mankind to a limit that the restoration of this lost self-belief would require another century of equally long list of 'isms' and deep layers of fake images of glory which had lately defined our world from 1920 to 2020 (the world in between the Spanish flue and Covid19); the great world dispatched to pieces by a virus.

Keeping aside all the conspiracy theories related to Covid19, including Mr. David Icke's 5G theory and Sino-American biological warfare, the scientific, religious and astrological views offer a lot to a mind that still has capacity to reflect and power to speculate.

Scientifically speaking, this coronavirus, consisting of less than three dozen proteins, is changing the world which was designed by the creatures

created after God's image. Data is collected at this stage with great efficiency around the globe as the world for the first time in the last hundred years has become united in its fear of losing all. At the moment, as these thoughts are composed, from the richest to the poorest nations and individuals of the world, all regardless of their military might or personal wealth, are going through 'lock-downs'. Lock-down is a term which was completely unknown to us at the time when we were with joy shouting enthusiastic slogans of 'happy new year' and with eyes bulging out with excitement watching fireworks at the mid-night hour of the 31st of December, 2019. On 26th of December, just four days before these stereotype celebrations, the Solar eclipse, with a conjunction of seven celestial bodies in Capricorn, had sent its warning to the 'global city'. 'Global village' is actually a wrong, misleading term, as traditionalism, simplicity of life-style marked by humility and decorum of shyness, deep contact with mother Nature and sharing sorrows and joys of one another, the basic features of village life, were the foremost victims of the world created in the last 100 years. Instead, revolt against traditions, fake life of glamour based on savage instinct of competition, pride and shamelessness, complete disconnection with and disrespect for Nature and insensitivity towards the feelings and sufferings of others are the hallmarks of our modern age. Throughout the last century, we proudly associated this abnormal manner of life with our meaning of the word 'urbanization'. This global city at the moment has only one concern, 'can the presence of antibodies to the Covid19 virus provide some protection'. Scientists need more data. The World Health Organization's *Solidarity II* study will pool antibody data from more than half a dozen countries. In the U.S., Collaborative Multiyear Project aims to provide a picture of nationwide antibody prevalence. Its first phase is already collecting samples from blood donors in six major urban areas, including New York City and Seattle. And, of course, one cannot forget the names such as Mr. Bill Gate or Miss Greta Thunberg who donate generously for the cause of eliminating the virus. But to be honest, this is pretty much it. This is all one can report at this stage from a scientific perspective. Four months after the report coming from China at the toast of the 'happy new year', we know that the vaccine will not be in sight for at least a year. Can reflecting minds and minds still capable of speculation make some sense out of it or, at least, learn something out of it?³

When a disaster of similar scale happened in Shakespeare's age, the most reflecting and meditative mind of the age had composed lines such as quoted above. Infirmity of life which seems otherwise so permanent, was a 'revelation' to him as it is to us. Our sense of our own vulnerability makes us feel humble within.

A reflecting mind is always a humble mind and it always evolves in a direction which helps one to rise above one's own self, the very Scriptural purpose of the creation. Realization of the truth of one's own self is the core essence of all the scriptures ever revealed to the mankind. Crisis such as these offer an opportunity to reconnect with one's own lost self in the wilderness of the world. Everything that happens in Nature is a 'sign' given to the people of wisdom to improve upon their own selves inwardly. Without this inward furbishing of soul, outward luster remains fake. Shakespeare's plays are filled with references where he invokes in us our lost self and urges us to relocate our sense of our identity within the bounds of cosmic happenings. The following passage from *King Lear* is widely misunderstood as Gloucester's superstitious proclamation; in reality it is reading of the signs in Nature and an honest viewer of the play must confess that Gloucester's entire study of the cosmic signs as a serious phenomenon was word by word absolutely right:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide, in cities mutinies, in countries discord, in palaces treason, and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction—there's son against father. The king falls from bias of nature—there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves... 'Tis strange, strange. (*King Lear*, Act I, Sc. II)

Shakespeare had witnessed on 25 February 1598 a total eclipse with a diagonal track from Cornwall in the south-west to Aberdeen in the north-east of Scotland. The omens were forecast by court astrologers. Shakespeare was a keen follower of Dr. John Dee and it is certain that this

group of scholars did take it very seriously in their own particular quasi-mystical way. Plague was a forecast among other omens like shuffling of the system of monarchy and deaths of the monarchs. Beyond doubt, Shakespeare had seen very similar images in his time as we do see in our age; the images of helplessness and desperation.

It was brutal Nature unleashed, (this symbol appears in Shakespeare's play throughout as intense storm) against which no defense could offer shelter. *King Lear*'s 'pitiless storm', with no hope whatsoever for rescue, is one of the greatest examples of humanity suffering at the hands of Nature:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (*King Lear*, III, iv)

Shakespeare's concern for understanding Nature and his efforts in tying the human life with the strings of cosmic thread are not a result of his Greek fascination. His drama is not by any means 'renaissance' of Greco-Roman models observed elsewhere in Europe. He studies Nature as a scientist, as a philosopher tries to read its hidden meaning, as a mystic deciphers metaphors of Nature in oneness of purpose with life on earth and as a great poet shares his findings with his audiences and readers. He does not force upon human will subjugation of the Will of Nature. Instead his characters, such as Edgar in *King Lear*, learn to evolve in alignment with the law of Nature and finally groom in to the absolute possibility of Man, the king.

Edgar in *King Lear*, Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, Malcolm in *Macbeth* or Richmond in *Richard III*, among many, are not images of traditional monarchy. These characters represent concept of a new form of government. The head of the state in Shakespeare's political system is groomed by the powers of Nature. He learns through hostility of Nature

the meaning of his own fragility and matures his mind and soul by bearing the wrongs:

“I am a man
More sinned against than sinning.” (King Lear, Act III, Sc. II)

Once trained in the school of Nature, this higher possibility of human existence, qualifies to lead the rest. Without this suffering and understanding of it, Shakespeare does not offer us the image of a ‘hero-king’. As such, this is the only test through which one can distinguish the good from the bad in Shakespearean drama.

Shakespeare himself matured through suffering and with every personal trauma he understood Nature better as well. Every eclipse was an occasion for reclusive thinking and a poetic reference and plague was an eye opener into the meaning of life and death. Shakespeare’s deep connection with men of wisdom like Dr. John Dee perhaps also helped him to understand the cosmos as part of the story that he was writing and the story that he himself was.

Dr. Dee, perhaps the most important man of learning of Elizabethan England, was an accomplished astronomer and astrologer beside being an expert diplomat, pioneer of secret services, excellent mathematician, botanist, renowned alchemist and magician. He is among those very few sources who observed in 1572 the most important supernova of astronomical history. The supernova of 1572, also called, "Tycho's supernova", got this name from Tycho Brahe's⁴ work *De nova et nullius aevi memoria prius visa stella*, published in 1573. The appearance of the "new star" helped to revise ancient models of the heavens. As a revolution in astronomy it challenged the Aristotelian dogma of the un-changeability of the of stars. Tycho, though, was not the first to observe the 1572 supernova. John Dee, Thomas Digges, Jerónimo Muñoz,⁵ Bartholomäus Reisacher⁶, all preceded him. John Dee and Queen’s court astrologer, Thomas Allan were assigned to give the queen proper advice about the new cosmic happening. Remnant of this supernova can be observed even now.⁷ Our eyes can witness what Shakespeare and Dr. Dee studied so enthusiastically and send messages to mankind in their writings about the impact that this supernova was about to have on earth.

Shakespeare was not a spiritualist, observing and forecasting the celestial movements and writing about it. Shakespeare was not only a playwright, he was shareholder in major theater of London, the Globe. In case of an impact of plague or eclipse, he was going to suffer both professional and existential threats. Life was changing every moment in front of him and he wanted to register all his impressions, concern, hopes and doubts. The marked change that we see in his works from 1599 to the end of his career has a lot to do with his perceptions of existence changing with the changing cosmic and global reality.

Economic depression was approaching fast, his theater was to be closed down and he was soon to be out of business. In 1603 ‘the unthinkable’ happened, On March 24, 1603, Elizabeth I died after 45 years of reign. And the country soon afterwards reported five cases of plague. Elizabeth was larger than a monarch. Rather than marrying and producing heirs to the throne – which was expected of her – Elizabeth was committed to shaping an image of femininity and majesty for herself and stabling England as a major world power. She was successful in these goals but heirless she left kingdom to James I of Scotland. He was a distasteful man with constantly growing unpopularity among the English masses. In the midst of this chaos no one paid much attention to a few deaths but soon bubonic plague was going to sweep over. As incitement to lewdness and cross-dressing, playhouses were the first to close. Brothels and bear-baiting arenas, too, which some theatre owners relied on for income were also banned. As a preacher of the time put it: “The cause of plagues is sin, and the cause of sin is plays.” Jobless and scared of the evolving situation, Shakespeare was like any other Londoner under a lock down.

Here are a few of the details what life looked like four centuries ago and how similar are the experiences four centuries later. I wish that the people of wisdom could learn in this hour of turmoil, the turmoil which has brought us all to our knees in front of a unicellular organism.

Based on the documented evidence it is believed that the incubation period was one-two weeks. Symptoms included: high fever, body aches, fatigue, respiratory problem. Most plague victims died within a week of showing symptoms. The bubonic plague could be transported on people, baggage, animals. At the time, it was believed that plague could be transmitted one of three ways: Person to person, Person to fabric to person, through the air

by way of the evil eye (a way of explaining airborne illness – hundreds of years before it could be proven scientifically).

The Plague Orders were issued in printed form. The orders that were released in 1603 were the same as from 1592 and included detailed instructions on how London's city administration, churches, doctors, and citizens were expected to respond in the case of a plague outbreak. Amazingly, the orders remain identically the same four centuries later as well, it seems as if nothing has changed⁸. The moment this farcical mask of glory and progress was scratched by Nature, same crooked and helpless face emerged behind the mask as it did centuries ago.

In order to keep the situation in hand, homes with infected people were marked with notices with the words "God Have Mercy on Us"⁹. But, people were not interested in staying home;¹⁰ a lock down ('house arrest') was finally forced upon people on July 29. By that time three thousand people were already dead of the plague. It was far too late to control the chaos¹¹. Many people were ill, spreading disease around the city. Alehouses were full of infected people, but not closed. Infected persons would leave the city limits to die in fields and buried in mass graves¹². Other infected persons would knowingly and willingly run into the street and touch other people with the goal of spreading the disease further.¹³

Each one of these details, including the last one, were witnessed around the world, including in the US in 2020.

Shakespeare records this situation of absolute panic in *Romeo and Juliet*; we all experienced it lately:

FRIAR LAURENCE: Welcome from Mantua. What says
Romeo?

Or, if his mind be writ, give me his letter.

FRIAR JOHN: Going to find a barefoot brother out,

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,

Sealed up the doors and would not let us forth.
So that my speed to Mantua there was stayed.
FRIAR LAURENCE: Who bare my letter, then, to Romeo?
FRIAR JOHN: I could not send it—here it is again—
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,
So fearful were they of infection.
FRIAR LAURENCE: Unhappy fortune! (V, ii)

On August 8th, all fairs and festivals within 50 miles of London were prohibited. Festivals that took place outside of that radius would not grant admission to anyone who had been infected or whose household had been infected. Religion and superstition intertwined with science and medicine to provide explanations for the cause of disease. No need to say that a wide majority of people thought they were getting sick because a divine influence was punishing them.¹⁴

Four centuries later, during the 2020 pandemic, on 25th March, Israeli Health Minister, Yaakov Litzman, claimed that Coronavirus was a sign for the end of the world and the days for the descend of the “Messiah” to end the plight of the Jews were near. Among certain Muslim scholars (Dr. Israr Ahemed (late)¹⁵ among them), as well, there has been a belief that the arrival of Imam Mehdi (Islamic name for the opponent of the Anti-Christ before the second coming of Jesus Christ himself) is due anytime. Since most of the prophecies about the arrival of the Judgment Day are fulfilled, the spread of this pandemic is among the sign of the approaching of the End of Time¹⁶, ‘Imam Mehdi will appear soon’.¹⁷

Shakespeare knew for sure that the medicine of the age was not yet prepared to deal with the plague, exactly the way we feel in 2020. He portrays his apothecary in his works always with a touch of disgrace. Being a doctor is not an honorable profession in Shakespearean drama.

As far as divine punishment is concerned, I think Shakespeare would have not been in agreement with the ‘second coming’ but he definitely associated the plague as a curse upon the people who have been cruel, unjust, shameless, vulgar, selfishly plundering the land of its treasures and people of their dignity. It is due to these people whose unwholesome presence always forces an 'Albion' entering 'confusion'.

In Shakespeare's time or today in our own age, Albion, a symbolic place where peace could reign, remains a place where the dark shadows of death and disease cast their reflections. Our societies based on systems of injustice, exploitation and corruption called competition have changed very little since the days of Shakespeare.

Time offers us opportunities to look back to look ahead. But being creatures as vain as we are (who could believe, just a year ago, that there would be brands for masks and matching colours available in the market to satisfy the self-glorification desires of humans), all the warnings bypass us. God (if you have faith)/Nature (if you are secular) sends us signs and each of the signs communicates to us urging us to 'see better and let me be the true blank of your eyes'.¹⁸ Through his plays, Shakespeare offers us the stories of our own societies and our own curse, a curse that we all inherit as 'confusion' (the word signifies chaos and disorder in the broadest possible sense), dispatching apart justice and balance in both our social and personal lives.

The fool told the audience in *King Lear* holding a mirror to people of its age to show them their crooked faces; we can see our own crookedness in the same mirror four centuries later:

When priests are more in word than matter;
 When brewers mar their malt with water;
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
 No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors;
 When every case in law is right,
 No squire in debt nor no poor knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues,
 Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
 When usurers tell their gold i' th' field
 And bawds and whores do churches build:
 Then shall the realm of Albion
 Come to great confusion...
 This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.
 (*King Lear*, Act III, Sc. II)

And until Merlin, a symbol of justice, wisdom, sacrifice and peace appears, the 'fool' shall keep on narrating the tale of our pathetic 'confusion' as a civilization.

ENDNOTES

1. The Quran, Surah Al-'Asr - 103
2. ibid
3. Eleven months later, at the time of writing of these thoughts, the state of the world in any direction whatsoever (including search for vaccine) can be best defined by the word, inertia.
4. Tycho Brahe, great Danish astronomer, and writer (1546 – 1601)
5. De mirabili Novae ac splendidis stellae, Mense Nouembri anni 1572, primum conspectae, ac etiam nunc apparentis, Phœnomeno
6. Jerónimo Muñoz (1573). Libro del nuevo Cometa, y del lugar donde se hazen; y como se vera por las Parallaxes quan lexos estan de tierra; y del Prognostico deste. Valencia.
7. ‘The supernova remnant of B Cas was discovered in the 1960s by scientists with a Palomar Mountain telescope as a very faint nebula. It was later photographed by a telescope on the international ROSAT spacecraft. The supernova has been confirmed as Type Ia, in which a white dwarf star has accreted matter from a companion until it approaches the Chandrasekhar limit and explodes. This type of supernova does not typically create the spectacular nebula more typical of Type II supernovas, such as SN 1054 which created the Crab Nebula. A shell of gas is still expanding from its center at about 9,000 km/s. A recent study indicates a rate of expansion below 5,000 km/s’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SN_1572)
8. <https://www.focusdailynews.com/tarrant-county-covid-19-testing/>
9. Coronavirus-positive people will have digital surveillance (<https://theconversation.com/digital-surveillance-can-help-bring-the-coronavirus-pandemic-under-control-but-also-threatens-privacy-135151>)
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/italy-charges-more-than-40000-people-violating-lockdown-coronavirus>
11. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/coronavirus-trump-may-quarantine-new-york-new-jersey-and-connecticut>
12. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52241221>
13. rumors spread throughout the U.S. that coronavirus positive people were touching cars to infect the car owners
14. See, <https://saltatiomedica.wordpress.com/2017/08/07/london-plague-of-1603/>
15. Israr Ahmed (1932–2010) was an Islamic theologian, popular mainly in South Asia but also well respected in the Middle East, Western Europe and North America (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jzMnAd91bk>)
16. Many of these claims are made by Orya Maqbool Jan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPxEZaQmnek>), a well-known Pakistani scholar and TV presenter and Dr. Shahid Masood a famous TV journalist (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr95OgBrI-8>)
17. Many Christians (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU07o_Us98E) and Hindus (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tel4iqh5ZCM>) await the arrival of Messiah /Avatar as a result of the Corona Covid19 pandemic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU07o_Us98E)
18. Earl of Kent urged King Lear in Act I, Sc. I to reconsider his decision to avert the forthcoming personal and social chaos.

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5. Shakespeare William, Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare, Octopus Publishing Group, 2001.
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13. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52241221>
14. <https://saltatiomedica.wordpress.com/2017/08/07/london-plague-of-1603/>
15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jzMnAd91bk>
16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPxEZaQmnek>
17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr95OgBr1-8>
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tel4iqh5ZCM>
19. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU07o_Us98E

Abstract

This article aims at sharing images of the bubonic plague very similar in William Shakespeare's time as we do see images of helplessness and desperation in our age due to Coronavirus. Jobless and scared of the evolving situation, Shakespeare was like any other Londoner under a lock down. Shakespeare was not a spiritualist, observing and forecasting the celestial movements and writing about it. He was only a playwright, he was shareholder in major theater of London, the Globe. In case of an image of plague or eclipse, he was going to suffer both professional and existential threats. Life was changing every movement in front of him and he wanted to register all his impressions, concerns, hopes and doubts. The marked change that we see in his works from 1599 to the end of his career has a lot to do with his perceptions of existence changing with the changing cosmos and global reality. The incubation period was one-two weeks. Symptoms included: high fever, body aches, fatigue, respiratory problem. Most plagues victims died within a week of showing symptoms. The bubonic plague could be transported on people, baggage and animal.

Keyword: Shakespeare plays, Coronavirus, images of helplessness.