

Shakespeare on maladies and medicine men

William Shakespeare's plays are replete with references to maladies, medicines and medical men. His poetic prowess was matched by such remarkable powers of observation, as his vivid portrayal of diseases reveals. He would have made an astute physician.

On maladies

Shakespeare considered the "...brain ... the soul's frail dwelling-house..." (*The Life and Death of King John*, act V, scene VII, line 2), and it is not surprising that neurological diseases were frequently depicted.

Several Shakespearean characters had epilepsy. Caesar had seizures, and Cassius recounts one: "...when the fit was on him, ...how he did shake; ... his coward lips did from their colour fly, and that same eye whose bend doth awe the world did lose his lustre; I did hear him groan...". When Caesar thrice refused the crown offered by Antony, and the crowd demanded him to accept, the emotion seems to have precipitated a seizure; Casca narrates; "...he offered it the third time, ...and still as he refused it the rabblement shouted...; for he swooned and fell down..., and foamed at mouth, and was speechless." Replies Brutus: "'Tis very like; he hath the falling-sickness." (*Julius Caesar*, act I, scene II, lines 120-124 and 240-254).

Othello, the Moor of Venice, had complex partial seizures with post-ictal 'madness'. His ensign Iago cautions: "My lord is fallen into an epilepsy; ... he foams at mouth, and by and by, breaks out into savage madness." (act IV, scene I, line 50-56). Desdemona, Othello's wife, dreaded them: "...yet I fear you; for you are fatal then, when your eyes roll so." Her fears were justified, for Othello killed her in a rage. Just before her death, Desdemona cries; "Alas! Why gnaw you so your nether lip? Some bloody passion shakes your very frame..." (act V, scene II, line 36-43). Othello stabs himself before being tried. Today he may have found clemency as having committed the murder during a seizure.

Lord Say in *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth* had parkinsonism, the shaking palsy. When asked "Why dost thou quiver, man?", he responds "The palsy, and not fear, provokes me." His head nodding had catastrophic consequences; "Nay, he nods at us, as who should say, I'll be even with you: I'll see if his head will stand steadier on a pole, or no. Take him away and behead him." (act IV, scene VII, line 96-102).

King Henry IV had a stroke (apoplexy). Sir John Falstaff opines: "...I hear, moreover, his highness is fallen into this same whorson apoplexy. ...This apoplexy is ...a kind of lethargy, a kind of sleeping in the blood, ...it hath it original from much grief, from study and perturbation of the brain." (*The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, act I, scene II, line 122-132).

Falstaff, one of the most colourful Shakespearean characters, inquires about a urine analysis: "...what says

the doctor to my water?". Answers his Page: "He said, sir, the water itself was good healthy water; but, for the party that owed it, he might have more diseases than he knew for." (*The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, act I, scene II, line 1-4).

Falstaff died of a delirium following malaria. As the hostess of the tavern recounts: "...he is so shaken of a burning quotidian tertian, I saw him fumble with the sheets and play with flowers and smile upon his fingers' ends and a'babbed of green fields." (*The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, act II, scene I, line 124-125, and act II, scene III, line 13-17).

Shakespeare's insight into psychiatric illnesses was remarkable in a time when standard treatment was "...a dark house and a whip..." (*As You Like It*, act III, scene II, line 426). *Macbeth*, whose wife "...is troubled with thick-coming fancies, that keeps her from her rest", implores the attending physician: "Cure her of that: Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart?" (act V, scene III, line 38-43).

Dementia is exemplified by *King Lear*: "Where have I been? Where am I? ... I know not what to say. ...I am not in my perfect mind. Methinks I should know you, ...yet I am doubtful: for I am merely ignorant what place this is; and all the skill I have remembers not these garments; nor I know not where I did lodge last night." (act IV, scene VII, line 50-67).

Shakespeare was at his best when describing the malady that afflicts almost everyone, love-sickness. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine asks Speed, his 'clownish servant', "...how you know that I am in love?". Says Speed, "...by these special marks: you have learned, ...to wreath your arms, like a malcontent; to relish a love-song, like a robin-redbreast; to walk alone, like one that had the pestilence; to sigh, like a schoolboy that had lost his ABC; to weep, like a young wench that had buried her grandam; to fast, like one that takes diet; to watch, like one that fears robbing; to speak pining, like a beggar at Hallowmas. ...these are within you and shine through you..." (act II, scene I, line 17-42).

On medicine

At a time when "...the most sovereign prescription in Galen is but empiric..." (*Coriolanus*, act II, scene I, line 128), Shakespeare was astute enough to observe that "...diseases desperate grown, by desperate appliances are reliev'd, or not at all." (*Hamlet*, act IV, scene III, line 8-10).

Physicians recognized that the same plant could be therapeutic or poisonous. Friar Laurence remarks in *Romeo and Juliet*: "...the powerful grace that lies in herbs, plants, stones, ...Virtue itself turns vice when misapplied, ...Within

the infant rind of this weak flower, poison hath residence and medicine power: For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part; being tasted, slays all senses with the heart." (act II, scene III, line 14-25).

The effects of alcohol on heart and brain were known to Falstaff. "A good sherries-sack hath a two-fold operation ... It ascends me into the brain; ... makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble fiery and delectable shapes; which, deliver'd o'er to the voice, the tongue, ... becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherris is, the warming of the blood; ... it illumineth the face, ... the heart, ... great and puffed up with this retinue, doth any deed of courage; ..." (*The Second Part of King Henry IV*, act IV, scene III, line 102-122). Its adverse effects were also recognized: "...drink, Sir, is a great provoker of three things, ... nose painting, sleep and urine. Lechery, Sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance." (*Macbeth*, act II, scene III, line 28-36).

There is sound advice regarding end of life decisions: "It is silliness to live when to live is torment; and then have we a prescription to die when death is our physician." (*Othello, the Moor of Venice*, act I, scene III, line 309-311). And the Earl of Kent cautions at *King Lear's* deathbed: "Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer." (act V, scene III, line 314-315).

On medicine men

Shakespeare's physicians were not always regarded as saintly. *Timon of Athens* cautions a band of thieves: "trust not the physician; his antidotes are poison, and he slays more than you rob;" (act IV, scene III, line 436-438). And *Pericles, the Prince of Tyre* comments: "Thou speak'st like a physician, ... that minister'st a potion unto me that thou wouldst tremble to receive thyself." (act I, scene II, line 66-68).

Doctor-bashing is not a new phenomenon: "My master and his man ... bound the doctor, whose beard they have sing'd off with brands of fire; and ever as it blaz'd they threw on him great pails of puddle mire to quench his hair." (*Comedy of Errors*, act V, scene I, line 169-173). The Earl of Kent exclaims to *King Lear*: "Kill thy physician,

and the fee bestow upon the foul disease." (act I, scene II, line 165-166).

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, "Doctor Caius, the renowned French physician" challenges the priest to a duel, and friends broker a truce: "Master Doctor: he is a curer of souls, and you a curer of bodies: if you should fight, you go against the hair of your professions" (act II, scene III, line 38-41), and "Shall I lose my doctor? No; he gives me the potions and the motions. Shall I lose ... my priest? No; he gives me the proverbs and the no-verbs. Give me thy hand, terrestrial; ... give me thy hand, celestial; Come, lay ... swords to pawn". (act III, scene I, line 103-112).

Most doctors, however, were honourable and were revered. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Lafew pleads with the ailing king to seek a second opinion; "...my good lord, ... will you be cur'd of your infirmity? ... I have seen a medicine that's able to breathe life into a stone, quicken a rock, and make you dance canary with spritely fire and motion; whose simple touch is powerful to arise King, ..." Helena, the gentlewoman doctor promises the king; "...I know most sure, my art is not past power nor you past cure ... What is infirm from your sound parts shall fly, Health shall live free, and sickness freely die." (act II, scene I, line 71-170).

Lord Cerimon in *Pericles* epitomised the virtuous physician: "I hold it ever, virtue and cunning were endowments greater than nobleness and riches; ...immortality attends the former, making man a god. 'Tis known I ever have studied physic, through which secret art, by turning over authorities, I have - together with my practice - made familiar to me and my aid the blest infusions that dwell in vegetives, in metals, stones; And can speak of the disturbances that nature works, and of her cures; which doth give me a more content in course of true delight than to be thirsty after tottering honour..." (act III, scene II, line 26-47).

As today's physicians we strive to be modern day Cerimons, Shakespeare shows us the path: "...ignorance is the curse of God, knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven..." (*The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*, act IV, scene VII, line 77).

Bibliography

Craig WJ, ed. The complete works of Shakespeare. London: Magpie Books, 1992.

Udaya K Ranawaka, Institute of Neurology, National Hospital of Sri Lanka, Colombo. (Telephones +94 1 674681, 94 1 917970, e-mail: udayaran@yahoo.com).