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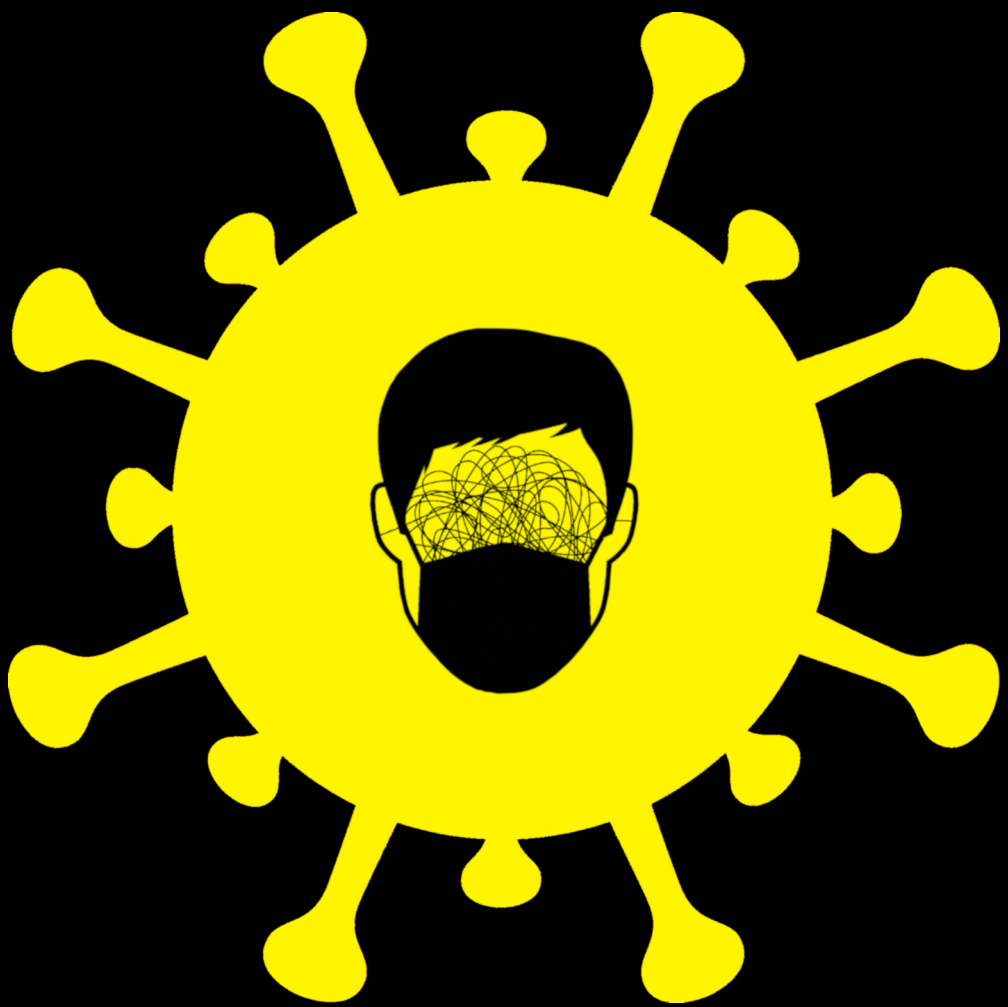
Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



Edited by: Sadegh Attari, David Christie, Hanan Fara, Niall Gallen, Richard Kendall, Liam J. L. Knight, and Ronan Love

Comedy and Plague in the Time of Covid: The BBC's *Upstart Crow: Lockdown Christmas 1603*

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Abstract:

The BBC's *Upstart Crow*, created and scripted by Ben Elton, is a British situation comedy loosely based on the life and career of the early modern dramatist William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Beginning in 2016, as part of worldwide commemorations of the 400th anniversary of the writer's death, the show has gone on to provide viewers with a more irreverent take on this most well-known of playwrights for a total of three series thus far, repeatedly inviting favourable comparisons to the 1980s historical comedy series *Blackadder* (1983-9), on which Elton also previously worked. On 21 December 2020, however, a special episode of the sitcom aired which altered its tone and style considerably. The article first considers how the episode's tone and representation of social isolation sets it apart from the show's established formula. It then considers how this episode seeks to relate its viewers' experience of the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic to the experience of plague in early modern England. Finally, the article explores how the episode takes inspiration from Shakespeare's own life experiences and, more specifically, from his Jacobean tragedy *Macbeth* in order to construct a poignant reflection of the social isolation experienced by so many of the episode's anticipated audiences over the previous year.

Keywords: COVID-19, Literature, William Shakespeare, Upstart Crow

The BBC's *Upstart Crow*, created and scripted by Ben Elton, is a British situation comedy loosely based on the life and career of the early modern dramatist William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Beginning in 2016, as part of worldwide commemorations of the 400th anniversary of the writer's death, the show has gone on to provide viewers with a more irreverent take on this most well-known of playwrights for a total of three series thus far, repeatedly inviting favourable comparisons to the 1980s historical comedy series *Blackadder* (1983-9), on which Elton also previously worked. On 21 December 2020, however, a special episode of the sitcom aired which altered its tone and style considerably. Taking inspiration from London's calamitous bubonic plague outbreak of 1603-4 in order to offer viewers a reflection of our own pandemic-blighted times, the episode provided unexpectedly bittersweet comedy, with attention being provocatively given over to social distancing, mask wearing, stay-at-

home orders, and even an organised weekly clap for corpse collectors. In this article, I undertake to examine how this special episode serves to subvert viewers' expectations regarding how situation comedy might be expected to represent the historical hardships associated with plague and pestilence, arguing that the more mature exploration of such material in the 2020 *Upstart Crow* Christmas special may be indicative of a shift in our wider cultural understanding of widespread illness and disease. The article first considers how the episode's tone and representation of social isolation sets it apart from the show's established formula. It then considers how this episode seeks to relate its viewers' experience of the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic to the experience of plague in early modern England. Finally, the article explores how the episode takes inspiration from Shakespeare's own life experiences and, more specifically, from his Jacobean tragedy *Macbeth* in order to construct a poignant reflection of the social isolation experienced by so many of the episode's anticipated audiences over the previous year.

This episode, uniquely subtitled *Lockdown Christmas 1603* and using the episode title 'Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow', directly quoting from *Macbeth*, apparently had a relatively short gestation period, being conceived, written, and filmed (before a necessarily limited audience) within around nine months of the United Kingdom's first national lockdown being put into force. The premise of the episode is very straightforward, but also very much out of the ordinary for this particular programme. Will (David Mitchell) and his landlady's daughter Kate (Gemma Whelan) are living in 'lockdown' in the playwright's London lodgings, while the city is hit by what is darkly (yet also comically) described as the fifteenth wave of a deadly bubonic plague outbreak. Historically speaking, it should be noted, the special's use of the word 'lockdown' in its subtitle is an anachronistic application of such terminology: although various social measures were indeed enforced during times of plague – including restrictions on certain activities, large gatherings being prohibited, and those who were infected being confined to their homes – early modern societies never experienced a national lockdown in the sense that such a measure would be understood today. Furthermore, Will and Kate's personal situation in this episode is itself historically inaccurate: in the early seventeenth century, Will and Kate would only have been 'shut up' (to use the prevailing early modern terminology) in their home if they were themselves showing signs of infection; healthy people – unless they were a plague official, had been in contact with the sick, or if a member of their household was showing signs of the plague – were permitted to come and go as they pleased (for further information on the practice of 'shutting up' during plague time, see Slack 1991). This episode of *Upstart Crow*, therefore, very much constructs a fictionalised representation of an early modern plague outbreak in order to relate its characters' experiences to present-day Covid-19 restrictions, and it does this principally for comedic purposes.

In order to achieve this, the show cut its usual cast of some fifteen major recurring characters down to just two, and the entire episode takes place within a single room. There are some minor flashes of life outside in the street – a singer who apparently regularly performs on his balcony (although the residents of Will's street have seemingly long grown tired of his performances) and a man whom Will spies apparently visiting his mistress (although the guilty party insists that, at least to him, his errand does constitute an 'essential journey') – but we never actually see these other characters. The theme of the episode is isolation, something viewers might not traditionally expect to see in a popular and usually far more light-hearted BBC sitcom.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of being locked away inside a few small rooms in the middle of a previously busy city is one that the episode seeks to communicate to viewers from the very start. The first line of the episode, spoken by Kate, perhaps reflects a newfound awareness among viewers of the realities of deadly pandemics. 'Weary pass these sombre days', she laments, 'I am wasting my life!' The sense of isolation is palpable, as she longingly looks out onto the street below from the window of the single room in which this episode takes place. We as viewers, however, are not permitted to see the street she is observing. Like the two main characters of this episode, we the audience are only allowed to see what is going on inside this one room. But from the perspective of 2020, the show's viewers may not have been expected to interpret this purely as a glimpse into sufferings associated

with the past, now that so many of us have acquired considerable unwanted experience of this strange way of living.

It should not be assumed, however, that 'Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow' provides viewers with an accurate representation of early modern experiences of plague. In fact, the episode is inspired far more by viewers' contemporary experiences of Covid-19 than by the realities of plague in seventeenth-century England. Of course, *Upstart Crow*, like *Blackadder* before it, has never been a comedy principally concerned with placing historical accuracy above entertainment value. For example, Will's daughter Susanna is said in the first episode of the series ('Star Crossed Lovers', 2016) to be thirteen years old, the age the historical Susanna would have reached in 1596 (Holland 2004); yet for much of the first two series, Will is hard at work writing *Romeo and Juliet*, a play he would have already completed in 1595. Similarly, the playwright Christopher Marlowe, who was murdered in 1593 (Nicholl 2004), is not shown to lose his life (or, in this reality, fake his own death) until the second episode of the third series ('Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death', 2018), after which he lives on under the guise of his fictitious twin brother 'Kurt'. And Robert Greene, whose famous criticism of Shakespeare as 'an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers' gives the sitcom its title, and who historically died in 1592 (Newcomb 2004), outlives Will's son Hamnet, who died aged eleven in 1596 (Holland 2004), as depicted at the end of series 3 ('Go On and I Will Follow', 2018).

The 2020 special likewise plays fast and loose with its history. Although it is made clear that Scotland's King James VI has only recently acquired his second monarchical identity as King James I of England – which fits the episode's situation during the *Lockdown Christmas 1603* of its title, James having become King in March of that year (Wormald 2004) – Will is already working on *Macbeth*, a tragedy he almost certainly did not write until at least 1606 (see Wills 1995). The plague which has caused Will and Kate's shared isolation from society, however, is inspired by a true historical outbreak, which hit Londoners hot on the heels of soon after Elizabeth I's death on 24 March.

For a sitcom which began as a celebration of four centuries of Shakespeare's legacy, the idea of producing a special episode of *Upstart Crow* as a means to mark a year of global Covid-19 restrictions may seem like a bizarre artistic choice. And yet it is also true that the life of the historical Shakespeare was in many ways defined by the spectre of the plague. As Ian Munro puts it, 'In the early seventeenth century London's plague was not a calamitous singularity but a continuous presence, ebbing and flowing throughout the years but never disappearing' (2000: 241). Perhaps most notably, Shakespeare was baptised on 26 April 1564, and was therefore probably born on 23 or 24 of that month (Holland 2004), meaning that he would have lived through his first deadly pestilential outbreak just eleven weeks after his birth. Records from his birthplace, the Warwickshire market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, record the death of a man around this period which is followed by the Latin phrase *Hic Incipit Pestis*, which can be translated into English as 'here begins the plague' (Stratford-upon-Avon Parish Register, 11 July 1564). That year, 237 people, around 10% of Stratford-upon-Avon's population, died (see Orlin 2021: 15). When we consider this fact, the new-born Shakespeare was remarkably lucky to survive. A world without him or his plays could have been a very real possibility.

Plague dogged the playwright's footsteps for the entirety of his life. Most scholars agree that he likely began working in the commercial theatre industry of early modern London in the mid- to late 1580s (see Loughnane 2020), although his name does not appear on any of his published works until the dedicatory epistles to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton which are attached to the 1593 poem *Venus and Adonis* and its 1594 follow-up *The Rape of Lucrece*. Interestingly, both of these works were products of the plague. With the theatres closed for much of this period, Shakespeare, who had only recently turned his hand to playwriting, had to find some a new way of making an income (Duncan-Jones 2003: 128). After all, at this point in history, plague was endemic and recurred regularly. In Shakespeare's London, the number of plague deaths was published every Thursday, and if it rose above 30 the authorities would demand that public playing cease and the theatres be closed (Shapiro 2015: 273). From the perspective of the present day, at a time when so many have had their livelihoods

curtailed by lockdown measures, viewers of *Upstart Crow* can perhaps get a better sense than ever before of just how precarious Shakespeare's profession truly was.

And thus, our comedy version of Shakespeare is stuck working from home. His frustrations, while humorous, are deliberately written so as to reflect many of our own. 'I cannot believe how many people out there aren't wearing bubonic plaguey-beaks', he comments at an early point in the episode, after he has returned home from collecting essential supplies, an activity he apparently has undertaken dressed in the full stereotypical regalia of an early modern plague doctor. Indeed, we are told that the people he and Kate encounter when they step outside their home to gather these essential supplies regularly include those who believe that if they catch the plague, it is their problem and theirs alone – an ostensive attitude which prompts Will to sardonically remark 'yes, but it's my problem if you give it to me!' – and those who do wear what they humorously call 'plaguey-beaks', but only around their necks. Yet the annoyances of the outside world are nothing compared to Will's struggles to continue his illustrious career while trapped in his home. To this end, he is hoping for a significant box office hit. For comparison's sake, it is reported to viewers that in this fictionalised universe all Will managed to produce during the last plague outbreak was *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, both of which, so Kate informs us, were considered to be 'absolute clunkers'. This time, however, Will is resolved to produce something 'timeless' to flatter the new King of England, which leads him to settle on the story of the Scottish tyrant Macbeth. This is a very plausible plot point, even if the dates are somewhat muddled. King James believed himself to be descended from Banquo (see e.g. Williams 1982), the onetime friend and ally of Macbeth who is murdered on the latter's command and whose ghost subsequently haunts his former comrade at the famous feasting scene later in the play, and so a play depicting his ancestral line triumphing over a Scottish tyrant would certainly have been flattering to the new King. This episode, however, seeks to use the fictionalised development history of *Macbeth* as something of a metaphor for the grim monotony of isolation itself.

Historically speaking, to suggest that *Macbeth* that was written as a direct response to a specific plague outbreak is problematic. While there was a plague outbreak in the summer of 1606, the year to which *Macbeth* is usually dated, it is likely that the play had already been written by that time; the greatest influence upon the work is usually thought to be the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot in November 1605 (Wills 1995). In the context of the beginning of James's English reign, it is *Measure for Measure*, probably the first of Shakespeare's plays to be written in the new King's reign (Quarmby 2012: 103-38), that most obviously reflects the prominence of disease in the London of 1603. The Vienna in which this play is set is depicted as a thoroughly diseased city, although the diseases on show are for the most part of a sexual, rather than of a bubonic, nature (Mardock 2011). But the Will of *Upstart Crow* does express to viewers why *Macbeth* might be the most appropriate of Shakespeare's plays to inspire such an episode as this (other than it perhaps being the more famous play for present-day audiences). As Will says to Kate, comically oblivious to the relevance of his circumstances to those he wishes to write about, the new King 'will demand spiritual depth to the monarch I depict, so I need one truly great speech, a forensically perceptive internal monologue on the utter nothingness of existence, and the weary, plodding progress of time. But where am I to find inspiration for such a speech? Enveloped as we are in the utter nothingness of existence, and the weary, plodding progress of time?' And so ultimately it is Kate, not Will, who comes up with exactly this kind of a speech, when reflecting upon her own feelings towards their enforced isolation:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale

> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing. (Clark and Mason 2015: 5.5.18-27)

Will, needless to say, promptly steals this speech, and applies it to the lips of the monarch he is writing about. For Macbeth, the speech has quite a different meaning. He is musing upon the prospect of death and the loss of his authority following an impending battle, and his words are occasioned by news he has just received of the suicide of his wife**.** But for Will, Kate, and the viewers watching their shared experience of this historic plague, the words of the tragic tyrant of Scotland could hardly be more resonant.

'Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow' is therefore a very different, darker, and more solemn episode of *Upstart Crow* than audiences will have become accustomed to in the years since the sitcom's on-screen debut in 2016; but what is particularly interesting is that the show had dealt with the matter of a plague outbreak before, in the 2016 episode 'What Bloody Man Is That?' (a title which also derives from *Macbeth*, quoting 1.2.1). The major difference, however, is that here the backdrop of plague is simply used as an excuse for Will, Kate, his servant Bottom, and their friend Marlowe to flee from London and stay at Will's home in Stratford-upon-Avon. The reason for such a stark change in focus between these two plague-focused episodes is obvious: in 2016, after all, how could most Western viewers have related to the idea of a deadly outbreak of disease? Previous new causes of illness with pandemic potential – such as the outbreaks of SARS, MERS, Zika virus, Bird Flu, Swine Flu, and Ebola – have all remained predominantly (to greater or lesser extents) region-specific. But our attitudes towards such suffering have clearly taken a marked turn in the short space of time since then. For Shakespeare, the story was even more worrying. After all, plague closed London's theatres every year for the first seven years of King James's English reign. Taking account of the historical prevalence of such outbreaks, it would not have been beyond the realm of possibility for the makers of *Upstart Crow* to once again have sent Will outside of London, returning him to the safer environment of the Warwickshire countryside. But such an approach would no longer have reflected the experiences of so many of the sitcom's viewers. In this sense, the drastically different tone of the 2020 special chronicles a significant alteration in popular attitudes towards such events. Plague and pestilence used to be primarily viewed by Western audiences as largely historical subject matter, far removed from their own daily experience of life. But now, they are something far more real, and far more contemporary. *Upstart Crow* has always sought to relate its depiction of history to present-day concerns, and, in a sense, being shut up as illness sweeps through the population is a far more relatable storyline now than it was in 2016.

Yet the makers of *Upstart Crow* would also have had personal reasons for bringing the tone of the show closer to the experiences of the historical Shakespeare. On 16 March 2020, with the start of the United Kingdom's first nationwide Covid-19 lockdown, theatres across the nation went dark. A stage adaptation of the sitcom (titled *The Upstart Crow*) had only recently premiered at the Gielgud Theatre in London, and was set to run until 25 April. Like with so much theatre in Shakespeare's lifetime, their artistic enterprise was forcibly curtailed. The arts sector was plunged into a financial crisis, one throughout which it had to fight tooth and nail to acquire the necessary government support it needed to survive. But unlike in Shakespeare's day, audiences are now in a much more fortunate position. On 6 May 2020, the UK became the first nation in Europe to pass the grim milestone of thirty thousand Covid-related deaths, but in 1603, this number died of plague in London alone, at a time when the city's population was only about two hundred thousand. And Also unlike today, there were no vaccines available to offer the populace hope, nor did early modern societies possess the medical knowledge required to effectively tackle plague outbreaks; during this period, after all, the aetiology of plague was not understood, and the resulting use of ineffective treatments left Shakespeare's contemporaries virtually powerless in the face of such a disease, a situation very different to the twenty-first century's familiarity with pathogens such as coronaviruses. The predicament of *Upstart Crow*'s Will, as represented in fictionalised form, may very much reflect our own, but watching this

with the knowledge that the historical Shakespeare would live for another thirteen years after 1603, and was at that point still to write *Othello* (1604), *All's Well that Ends Well* (1605), *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), *Timon of Athens* (1607), *Pericles* (1607), *Coriolanus* (1608), *Cymbeline* (1609), *The Winter's Tale* (1610), *The Tempest* (1611), the lost *Cardenio* (1612), *Henry VIII* (1612), and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613) might at the very least make viewers interpret the message of this episode – unity and companionship at a time of enforced isolation and widespread illness and death – in a much more positive light.

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, various outlets repeated the supposedly inspiring observation that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during a plague lockdown in 1605. The almost accusatory implication is that if Shakespeare wrote such a masterpiece when working from home, then why couldn't we all not similarly thrive under such circumstances? But surely what is far more inspiring is that Shakespeare managed to write or contribute to some forty or more plays between the late 1580s and the mid-1610s, all while living in a reality where plague and the associated risk of restrictions on life, including theatre closures, and all the associated social and economic hardships, were a continuous threat. The 2020 Christmas episode of *Upstart Crow* may not have provided the most historically accurate depiction of the 1603-4 plague outbreak, but its depiction of Shakespeare working under such conditions was a sympathetic portrayal of events which had previously seemed very distant. 'Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow', therefore, marked a significant change in how such material may now be presented to audiences; much more mature, less frivolous depictions of the history of illness and disease may now seem a far more appropriate means of exploring such themes, affected as viewers have themselves now been affected by such events. It remains to be seen whether such treatments of the history of plague continue to fit into these more serious moulds in the future times.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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