

*Shakespeare's First Folio: 1623–2023*

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“Science, Public Health, and the Theater”

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Following a global pandemic that has altered human life in immeasurable ways, questions about scientific knowledge, public health, and the ethical obligations of individuals and governments alike still weigh heavily on our minds in 2023. Renaissance England did not experience a pandemic like Covid-19, but bubonic plague was an endemic disease, ravaging the European populace throughout the period; in our own state, in fact, the Oregon Health Authority has recorded 18 cases of bubonic plague since 1970. Although the discovery of microorganisms would not occur until the late 17th century and the invention of antibiotics would have to wait until the early 20th century, Shakespeare's contemporaries understood that plague outbreaks increased during winter months and that gatherings in close quarters intensified infection rates.

For each of London's 130 parishes, the Company of Parish Clerks published weekly “Bills of Mortality” that included deaths from bubonic plague. In 1603, under the new administration of King James I—who had to delay his formal processional entry into London by a full year because of a devastating outbreak—the Privy Council closed theaters if plague deaths in the city climbed above 30 per week. When the infected were discovered by health officers called “searchers,” authorities locked up the ill and the healthy together in their houses under quarantine. The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* hinges on such practices: after the searchers indiscriminately lock up Friar John “in a house / Where the infectious pestilence did reign” (5.2.9–10), he is unable to reach Romeo to tell him that Juliet but feigns her death, resulting in both lovers' ill-timed suicides. After the pandemic, as after plague outbreaks, people will be drawn together once again to commiserate, to mourn, and to invent a new sense of normalcy. Focusing on these communal objectives in the distant past, a lecture on “Science, Public Health, and the Theater” will provide one forum for pursuing these communal objectives after our own recent past.