

24.4.20

Dear --

You ask about young people, Shakespeare, the plague he lived through and our own coronavirus crisis -- and ask why Shakespeare didn't write about his contemporary plague. His plays are divided into surprisingly distinct periods. He began with some generalised dramatics. Then he became concerned about the government of England -- the history plays. What is good government? The answer was in part found in the government of Elisabeth I that had replaced the tyranny of Henry 8. But Shakespeare lived at the beginning of the enlightenment. And so he became interested not just in government but in individual responsibility -- and that meant asking what human beings are, not as children of God but what makes them tick. Hamlet's play is revolutionary in that it combines power with human responsibility (though Hamlet himself is essentially passive or trapped).

Some Jacobean playwrights did write about contemporary events. But plague was difficult because it involved religion and the wrath of God. A dangerous subject shadowed by superstition heresy inquisition and torture. Instead, Shakespeare needed to try to understand what good government was. He explores nature but also power and human responsibility. To do this he wrote three major tragedies, desperately trying to understand the human-and-social problem. They are *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*. I explain in *The Human Plot* how and why he failed to solve the problem. He knew it related to human nature (the three plays concern family and, graphically, childhood) but also the structure of the state. He ends *Macbeth* by bringing in the English king, a sort of Donald Trump with a Halo. But then his own pre-modern disquiet makes him end the play, after all, not with the fulfilment of the prophecies of the three Tudor witches and Trump with a halo, but with Lady Macbeth's modern anxiety. He had failed to answer the question raised in the early enlightenment and the early industrial revolution. He knew the question but couldn't answer it, which is why he fascinated Marx. It is still our question and it is still unanswered. Modern establishment theatre ignores it -- I'm tempted to say like the plague, which shows the torturous convulsions in our self misunderstanding. We mistakes the disease for the cure.

Because Shakespeare couldn't solve the problem, after *Macbeth* he wrote no more tragedies but instead what were called romantic comedies -- as if he turned to earning his living by writing for TV and our other media. Perhaps a children's theatre might want to write plays about coronavirus. But its

inevitable that children and young people ask, awake and asleep, Shakespeare's more fundamental, foundational, questions. The young are not yet obsessed with earning a living and forced to work in the industries promoted by Trump, who is now openly exposed as a liar. Their questions are more profound. (Remember that the Jesuits said that if they caught children young they were theirs for life.) Childhood and early adolescent are a basic stage in the development of secure humanness.

Plague? - create a new industry to purify the cesspits. notch up the profits -- problem solved! But it isn't and it won't do. In my ten or so Big Brum plays for young people and adults I found, as Shakespeare had done, that we had to enter into other areas of humanness if we are to survive. I don't agree with you that the modern crises are a return of earlier crises. They aren't. They are unprecedented and become more frequent. In my later Big Brum plays, and since then in "Dea" and "Shoe", I have shown that the power and extent of Coronavirus and other crises come from the sickness already in the inequalities in our society and in the sick way we ravage and pollute the earth. The sickness is already there, waiting to be animated by the death-viruses. And we are making the earth our grave. We are trapped because we have left nowhere to escape to. This is a species crisis. The whole world catches its diseases from us.

At least try to stay sane! -- Edward