

The Tempest: a Reflection in Pandemic Loneliness

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Abstract – “The Tempest” is one of Shakespeare’s great late-period plays focusing on isolation. This article examines a viewing during Covid-19 lockdown of “The Tempest” as a reflection on the stressors and difficulties of medical professionals facing Covid-19, both at work and in society. It discusses the difficulties of adapting to the new normal, the physical and psychological isolation of tending to patients with Covid-19, stigma associated with Covid-19, and the effects of burn-out on healthcare professionals, through reflections on various pertinent segments of the play. The reflection also focuses on the crucial role of leadership styles and organisational management in dealing with Covid-19 through the conceit of a viewing of “The Tempest”. In conclusion, the article reminds the readers that like all tempests, Covid-19 will end too.

Keywords: Covid-19; pandemic; “The Tempest”; Shakespeare

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Introduction

An early play adapted for coronavirus lockdown was Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”. In April 2020, Oxford’s Creation Theatre Company and Northern Ireland’s Big Telly crafted a unique Zoom production from multiple locations [1]. Also, the vault of Shakespearean performances has been thrown wide open online, especially to budding Shakespeare scholars and aficionados in remote locations, who would be unable to access the theatre pre- or post-Covid. The Globe allowed us a cross-dressing “Hamlet”, “Romeo and Juliet” and “the Two Noble Kinsmen”, whereas the Na-

tional Theatre has given us Twelfth Night and Antony and Cleopatra [2,3]. However, the play that has most resonated with myself, as a psychiatrist and a frontliner battling covid-19 as part of a Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre, is the Shakespearean play that has, as its central conceit, prolonged isolation: the Stratford Festival on Film’s chilling performance of “The Tempest” [4]. “The Tempest” is not part of the famous stable of “plays written by Shakespeare in 1606” during an outbreak of the plague, that achieved momentary fame as an Internet meme recently. This group includes such classics as “Macbeth” and “King Lear”, lending credence to the modern-day belief that it is indeed more productive to work from home [5]. However, “The Tempest” has lessons to teach me most as a medical professional, similar to another reflection on “King Lear” [6,7].

The play opens with Prospero and Miranda, who have been isolated on the island for many

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years; Prospero's question to her "Canst thou remember; A time before we came unto this cell?" (I.ii.2.48-49) echoes ironically with burnt-out medical professionals worldwide. It is hard to remember how life was like before the relentless "new normal" hit. For non-essential services, the "new normal" may involve difficulties attending Zoom meetings; for the frontline, the "new normal" is day after day without rest, in sixteen-hour shifts, perspiring in our "cells" – our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Wearing PPE is isolating, as it is nigh impossible to talk to another person, let alone have meaningful contact; it is through self-reflection, particularly on literature, that we can still "Sit still, and hear the last of our sea-sorrow." (I.ii.204)

When Ariel speaks of his tricks, plague language is specifically used when Prospero enquires who "would not infect his reason" (I.ii.245). Ariel's reply that "Not a soul; but felt a fever of the mad, and played; some tricks of desperation" (I.ii.246-248) echoes the spiraling fear and anxiety that can emerge in healthcare workers facing the metaphorical daily tempest of being infected with Covid-19. It is telling that he refers to "a fever of the mad"; given the high level of protection accorded by PPE and conventional public health measures, the fear of Covid-19 is more a psychological, not a physical, contagion [8].

Further on, Ariel's imploration to Prospero to give him "what thou hast promised; Which is not yet performed me." – his liberty – as Ariel has "...done thee worthy service; Told thee no lies, made no mistakings, served; Without or grudge or grumblings" (I.ii.289-296) echoes starkly with healthcare professionals who have been working unbegrudgingly without a day off. Prospero's "white magic" metaphor is extended to the healthcare sector, weaving magic in using science to combat Covid-19 and magically make it vanish. Ownership of this magic, however, is very isolating, owing to the physical isolation of being in PPE, the psychological isolation of working day and night without con-

tacting family, and the social isolation of being stigmatized and unfairly maligned by members of the public due to public misperception that healthcare workers are likely to transmit Covid-19 to the public [8]. Metaphorically, I suppose, Prospero is cast into the position of leaders of healthcare services; Ariel, the position of the healthcare worker. Though they both serve on the same side, rescuing the world from "The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy; Was grown into a hoop" (I.ii.309-310), however, there seems to be no end in sight to the days and nights of isolation and the looming threat of infection and quarantine. All we can do is "...be correspondent to command; And do my spriting gently." (I.ii.353-354).

At play's end, another encounter between Prospero and Ariel resounds:

Prospero:

- *Now does my project gather to a head.*
- *My charms crack not, my spirits obey, and time*
- *Goes upright with his carriage.—How's the day?*

Ariel:

- *On the sixth hour, at which time, my lord,*
- *You said our work should cease". (V.i.1-5)*

These lines poignantly reminded me of exhaustion and burnout in the days and nights battling Covid-19 as a preparedness centre worker. These sentiments are no doubt shared and magnified in frontline clinical staff. As urgent and as altruistic sometimes as the healthcare response might need to be, it is important to ensure that where possible, rotation and judicious timetabling of frontliners can do wonders in ensuring that bosses atop hierarchies are not blinded to their staff burning out and quitting the profession instead.

Of course, no discussion of "The Tempest" can satisfactorily conclude without a nod to its two most-quoted passages. Caliban reminds Stephano and Trinculo "Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises; sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not" (III.ii.148–

149) remind us as healthcare professionals that in this isolation and fear, there is great beauty if we learn to see it. Also, it is poignant that Caliban, of all the characters, is the one who is most isolated prior to the play's commencement due to his stigmatisation, but ironically is the first character who can truly appreciate this level of beauty in isolation. As healthcare professionals, we are reminded daily of the stigma certain types of infectious diseases and mental illnesses suffer baselessly and needlessly.

This is the first time in recent memory that the world at large has similar experiences of isolation, quarantine, and stigma (or, even worse, fear of stigma). There is beauty in finding solace in oneself, be it while trapped inside PPE for hours, trapped at home under compulsory quarantine, or trapped away from a world of extroversion and contact with others. It stands to reason that individuals whose lived experiences already feature isolation and stigma may have important lessons to teach the rest of us who are still finding it daunting, just as Caliban teaches Stephano and Trinculo to look for "... riches; Ready to drop upon me". (III.ii.154-55)

Poignantly, Gonzalo, another nobleman stuck on the enchanted island, speaks striking words about the isolated island people: "Their manners are more gentle, kind, than of; our human generation you shall find; many, nay, almost any." (III.iii.39-41). Fear and anxiety underlie Covid-19 isolation, be it in patients, quarantined suspected cases, or healthcare workers. Nevertheless, beneath it all, they – and we – are humans just like everyone else, bringing to mind Shylock's famous words [9]:

*"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed
with the same
food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the
same diseases,
heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the
same winter*

*and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us,
do we not bleed?*

If you tickle us, do we not laugh?"

(Merchant of Venice, III.i.58-63)

Finally, at the end of the masque, there is a familiar thrill in hearing Prospero intone: "We are such stuff; as dreams are made on, and our little life; is rounded with a sleep." (IV.i.165–167). The Covid-19 pandemic is an enemy that is invisible; there is a "baseless fabric of this vision" (IV.i.168), which is difficult to tackle precisely because it is both highly transmissible while asymptomatic, and widely transmitted in local communities rather than foreign importation. However, we healthcare professionals are consoled in our burnout that, just like SARS and Mers-COV before it, with appropriate and decisive infectious disease and public health measures, it too "shall dissolve; and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind." (IV.i.171-173).

Whatever it is, all tempests will end too, all we healthcare workers need is some kindness to ourselves and to each other, some timely interventions, both from psychological professionals and from higher-ups to prevent burnout and disillusionment, and most importantly, some time to "retire into my cell; And there repose. A turn or two I'll walk; To still my beating mind" (IV.i.178-180), and have some me-time to watch plays like "The Tempest" online in order to reflect, recollect, and recharge [10].

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Conflict of interest

None to declare.

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