

# Doctors could learn from Shakespeare's deep understanding of mind-body connection

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Shakespeare was a master at portraying profound emotional upset in the physical symptoms of his characters, and many modern day doctors would do well to study the Bard to better understand the mind-body connection, concludes an analysis of his works, published in *Medical Humanities*.

Kenneth Heaton, a medical doctor and extensively published author on William Shakespeare's oeuvre, systematically analysed 42 of the author's major works and 46 of those of his contemporaries, looking for evidence of psychosomatic symptoms.

He focused on sensory symptoms other than those relating to sight, taste, the heart, and the gut.

He found that Shakespeare's portrayal of symptoms such as dizziness/faintness, and blunted or heightened sensitivity to touch and pain in characters expressing profound emotions was significantly more common than in works by other authors of the time.

Vertigo/giddiness/dizziness is expressed by five male characters in "Taming of the Shrew", "Romeo and Juliet", "Henry VI" part 1, "Cymbeline" and "Troilus and Cressida". The nearest approximation in contemporaries' works was one incident in John Marston's "The Malcontent".

There are at least 11 instances of [breathlessness](#) associated with extreme

emotion in "Two Gentlemen of Verona", "The Rape of Lucrece", "Venus and Adonis", and "Troilus and Cressida", compared with just two in the works of other writers.

Fatigue/weariness as a result of grief or distress is a familiar sensation among Shakespeare's characters, most notably in "Hamlet", "The Merchant of Venice", "As You Like It", "Richard II" and "Henry IV" part 2. This crops up twice as frequently as in other contemporaries' works, argues Dr Heaton.

Disturbed hearing at a time of high emotion occurs in "King Lear", "Richard II" and "King John" while blunted/exaggerated senses are portrayed in "Much Ado about Nothing", "Venus and Adonis", "King Lear", "Love's Labour's Lost" and "Coriolanus".

"Shakespeare's perception that numbness and enhanced sensation can have a psychological origin seems not to have been shared by his contemporaries, none of whom included such phenomena in the works examined," writes Dr Heaton.

The Bard also uses coldness - for example, "Romeo and Juliet" - and faintness to convey shock, including in "Titus Andronicus", "Julius Caesar", "Love's Labour's Lost", and "Richard III", significantly more frequently than other writers of the period.

Dr Heaton concludes that his data show that Shakespeare "was an exceptionally body-conscious writer," suggesting that the technique was used to make his characters seem more human and engender greater empathy or raise the emotional temperature of his plays and poems.

And his findings should encourage doctors to remember that [physical symptoms](#) can have psychological causes, he suggests.

"Many doctors are reluctant to attribute physical symptoms to emotional disturbance, and this results in delayed diagnosis, overinvestigation, and inappropriate treatment," he writes.

"They could learn to be better doctors by studying Shakespeare. This is important because the so-called functional symptoms are the leading cause of general practitioner visits and of referrals to specialists," he says.

Provided by British Medical Journal

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