



Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough: The Medical Lives of Famous Writers

John J. Ross

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The doctor suddenly appeared beside Will, startling him. He was sleek and prosperous, with a dainty goatee. Though he smiled reassuringly, the poet noticed that he kept a safe distance. In a soothing, urbane voice, the physician explained the treatment: stewed prunes to evacuate the bowels; succulent meats to ease digestion; cinnabar and the sweating tub to cleanse the disease from the skin. The doctor warned of minor side effects: uncontrolled drooling, fetid breath, bloody gums, shakes and palsies. Yet desperate diseases called for desperate remedies, of course.

Were **Shakespeare's** shaky handwriting, his obsession with venereal disease, and his premature retirement connected? Did **John Milton** go blind from his propaganda work for the Puritan dictator Oliver Cromwell, as he believed, or did he have a rare and devastating complication of a very common eye problem? Did **Jonathan Swift's** preoccupation with sex and filth result from a neurological condition that might also explain his late-life surge in creativity? What Victorian plague wiped out the entire **Brontë** family? What was the cause of **Nathaniel Hawthorne's** sudden demise? Were **Herman Melville's** disabling attacks of eye and back pain the product of "nervous affections," as his family and physicians believed, or did he actually have a malady that was unknown to medical science until well after his death? Was **Jack London** a suicide, or was his death the product of a series of self-induced medical misadventures? Why did **W. B. Yeats's** doctors dose him with toxic amounts of arsenic? Did **James Joyce** need several horrific eye operations because of a strange autoimmune disease acquired from a Dublin streetwalker? Did writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* actually kill **George Orwell**? The Bard meets *House, M.D.* in this fascinating untold story of the impact of disease on the lives and works of some of the finest writers in the English language. In *Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough*, John Ross cheerfully debunks old biographical myths and suggests fresh diagnoses for these writers' real-life medical mysteries. The author takes us way back, when leeches were used for bleeding and cupping was a common method of cure, to a time before vaccinations, sterilized scalpels, or real drug regimens. With a healthy dose of gross descriptions and a deep love for the literary output of these ten greats, Ross is the doctor these writers should have had in their time of need.

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