

Is Shakespeare to blame for the negative connotations of skin disease?

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Disease was rife in Elizabethan England; visible signs of illness led to stigmatization and pejorative connotations followed. Shakespeare's works have survived the intervening centuries; has his success led to the perpetuation of Elizabethan negativity towards skin disease?

Rat-infested with open sewers, overcrowding and sexual promiscuity, Elizabethan London was a melting pot for diseases such as plague, syphilis and smallpox. Telltale cutaneous signs heightened the fear of contagion. Reputedly even the Queen masked her face with a mixture of lead and egg white to hide her pockmarks.



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Shakespeare was no stranger to insults derived from skin troubles: "Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle" (*King Lear*). Rhinophyma seems to have triggered Shakespeare's sense of humour: likening the resultant erythema to the glow of a lantern: "thou art a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire night. Thou has saved me a thousand marks in links and torches" (*Henry IV part 1*). Whilst infective lesions such as boils, carbuncles and pox – "A pox upon him" (*All's Well That Ends Well*) – were often used as curses and insults, other forms of skin disease were also used: "I scorn you, scurvy companion" (*Henry IV part 2*).



Bardolph
from *Henry IV part 2*

Ellie Kurttz,
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Elizabethan's prized pale skins: "that whiter skin of hers than snow" (*Othello*), believing that "outer appearances reflected inner reality". Anything dark or unusual, such as naevi were considered ugly and signs of witchcraft or devilry, including physical deformities. Shakespeare uses these negative undertones to his advantage employing physical idiosyncrasies in his characters to signify foibles in their behavior: "since the heavens have shaped my body so, let hell make crooked my mind to answer it" (*Richard III*); "patch'd with foul moles and eye-offending marks, then I should not love thee, nor thou become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown" (*King John*).



Othello and Desdemona Angus McBean ©
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Despite preserving the Elizabethan's negativity towards skin disease, Shakespeare does try to redeem himself by highlighting the innocence of affected individuals: "that for some vicious mole of nature in them, as in their birth – wherein they are not guilty, since nature cannot choose his origin – their virtues else, be they as pure as grace, as infinite as man may undergo, shall in general censure take corruption from that particular fault" (*Hamlet*).

Therefore whilst Shakespeare may not have accepted Elizabethan society's negativity towards skin disease, it can be argued that his success has led to its perpetuation.