

The Royal Society of Medicine



Medicine and Literature

An exhibition at the Library of the Royal Society of Medicine which will explore how medicine has inspired literature throughout history.

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Exhibition hours

Monday - Thursday 9:30am - 6:00pm
Friday 9:30am - 5.30pm

Exhibition ends 12 September 2022

INTRODUCTION

Meet with us authors who left the world of medicine behind to become some of our best-loved wordsmiths. From Shakespeare to Shelly medical themes have influenced every aspect of literature and continue to do so.

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William Shakespeare

Shakespeare references disease, doctors, and treatment within almost all of his plays. He even makes mention of over 160 herbs and flowers, many for medicinal purposes.



William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *The Chandos portrait* (held by the National Portrait Gallery, London)

Romeo and Juliet

Act 2 Scene 2

Oh, mickle is the powerful grace that lies In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities. For naught so vile that on the earth doth live But to the earth some special good doth give.

Friar Laurence explains how poison and medicine can both be extracted from the same plant. When Juliet fakes her own death to avoid marriage, a vial is filled with a liquid that Friar Laurence has distilled from a plant to make it appear that Juliet has died.

Henry IV

Part 1, Act 2, Scene 4

Falstaff: For though the camomile, the more it is trodden on the faster it grows, so youth, the more it is wasted, the sooner it wears.

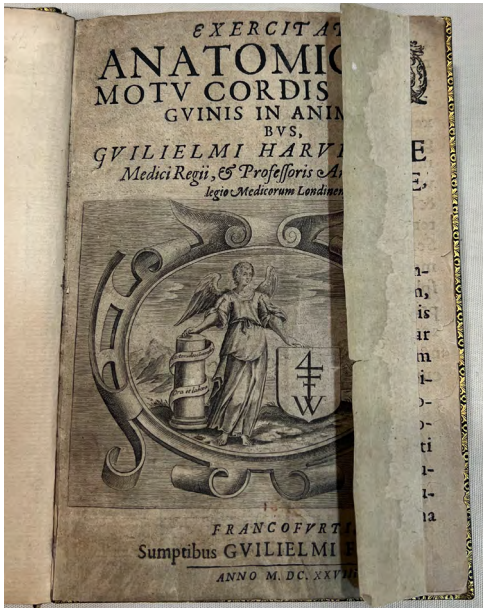
Camomile has always been popular in gardens due to its medicinal qualities and pleasant fragrance. This herb is thought to relax the mind and bring balance and health to the human body.

Shakespeare's knowledge extended much further than medicinal plants and used many accurate medical terms throughout his plays. Some say there is also evidence in many of his plays showing that Shakespeare was aware of how blood circulated around the body long before William Harvey's *De motu cordis* was published in 1628.

Julius Caesar

Act 2 Scene 1

You're my true and honorable wife, as dear to me as the blood that runs through my sad heart.



In 1917 Sir William Osler presented to the Royal Society of Medicine Library a copy of the very rare 1628 edition of William Harvey's *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* ("An anatomical disquisition concerning the motion of the heart and blood," usually called just *De motu cordis*). It is the rarest book held in the RSM Library, and only 55 copies of this edition are known still to be in existence.



A Curious Herbal by Elizabeth Blackwell (1707-1758) containing five hundred cuts of the most useful plants, many of which are mentioned throughout William Shakespeare's plays. Showing Chamomile - "It is esteem'd good for the Stomach, Collic, Jaundice, Stone, stoppage of Urinations and Tumors."

MONSTERS AND MEDICINE

Mary Shelley



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797 - 1851), Richard Rothwell's portrait of Shelley was shown at the Royal Academy in 1840

English novelist Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is best known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, which tells the tale of a young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who creates a monster from a science experiment.

Where did 18-year-old Shelley's inspiration come from to create her monster? Shelley was inspired by the concept of galvanism, where Scientists could use electricity to restart life.

And this began with a pair of frog's legs.

The concept of galvanism is named after Italian doctor Luigi Galvani, who hooked up a frog to an electric charge and make the frogs legs twitch. Discovered by accident, Galvani learnt that the spinal cord of a frog carried an electrical charge. Galvani's nephew, Giovanni Aldini, went so far as to shock dissected human corpses in pursuit of this theory.

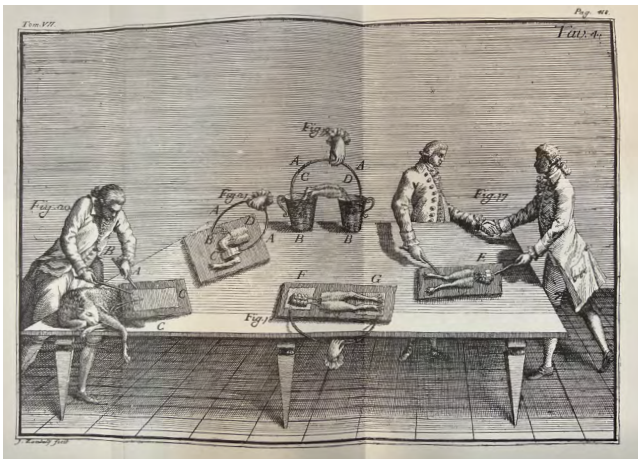
A lot was still to be learnt at this time about electricity during the late 18th Century which is why some thought it possible to make creatures come alive after death.



Plate 1. Figure 1.

“Having provided the head of an ox, recently killed, I thrust a finger of one of my hands, moistened with salt water, into one of the ears (Plate I. fig 1), at the same time that I held a prepared frog in the other hand, in such a manner that its spinal marrow touched the upper part of the tongue. When this arrangement was made, strong convulsions were observed in the frog; but on separating the arc all the contractions ceased.”

John Aldini, 1803



Galvani, Effects of Electricity on Muscular Motion

Plate IV - The use of electricity to reanimate frog limbs

“Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me.”

Frankenstein, Ch 2

John Keats



John Keats (1795 - 1821), Posthumous portrait of Keats by William Hilton, National Portrait Gallery, London (c. 1822)

Born on 31 October 1795 in Moorgate, the Romantic poet trained first as a surgeon-apothecary at Guy's Hospital. Aged just 14, Keats left school to apprentice to the family doctor, Thomas Hammond (1766-1817), at Edmonton Hospital for two years. Between 1813-1815 Keats trained as a surgeon at one of the most innovative teaching hospitals in London - Guy's Hospital.

Keats entered Guy's Hospital in October 1815, paying £1.2s for admission and £25.4s to be a surgeon pupil for twelve months. This demonstrates that he was still intent on becoming a fully qualified doctor, both an apothecary and a surgeon. In 1816 Keats was appointed very quickly to the prestigious post of surgical dresser.

In May 1816, aged 20, Keats wrote his first published sonnet, 'O Solitude', published in 'The Examiner', a leading liberal magazine.

Later that month, he wrote 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', which is now ranked as one of the finest English sonnets.

On 25 July 1816, Keats passed his Society of Apothecaries exam. Despite qualifying so quickly, by the end of 1816, Keats gave up a career in medicine, put off by the gruesome operations performed and the pain and horror he witnessed; this influenced his writing on human suffering. Keats began to concentrate on poetry. His epic work 'Endymion' is 'imbued with images demonstrating his medical knowledge'. Keats left his post as surgical dresser in March 1817 to concentrate full-time on poetry.

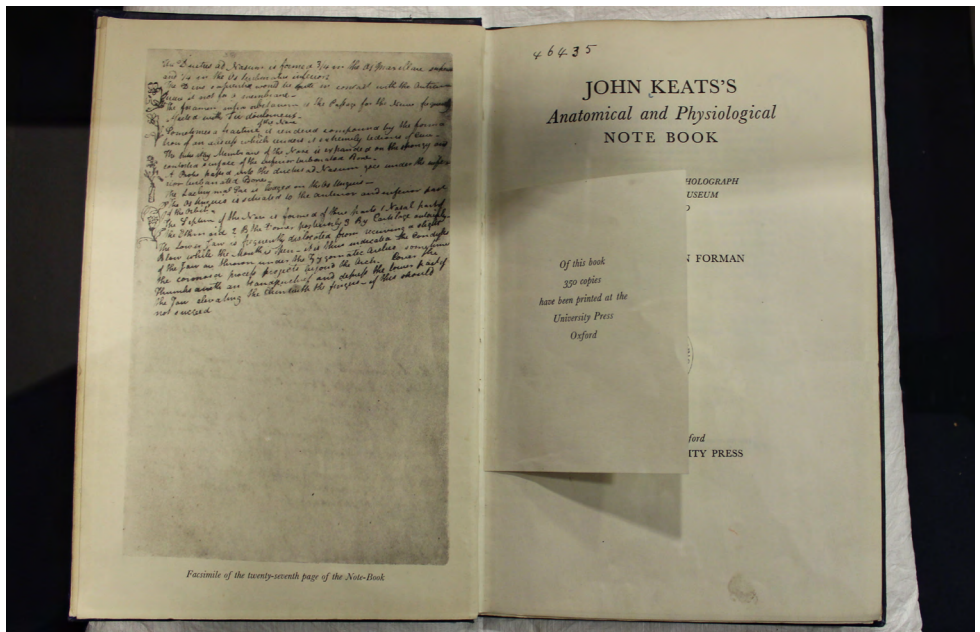
Keats published three volumes of poetry, *Poems* (1817), *Endymion* (1818), and *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). In his poems "Hyperion" and "The Fall of Hyperion," Keats examines the relationship between medicine and poetry, attempting to determine the ideal "healer" of the ills of humankind. Keats' medical background shows itself in how the poet viewed poetry as a healing medium. Keats' best-known works include 'Bright Star' and his 1819 odes, including 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'To Autumn'.

In 1818, Keats met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne (1800-1865). They became secretly engaged in October 1819. Keats soon discovered that he was suffering from tuberculosis, his condition limited their opportunities to meet, but their correspondence revealed passionate devotion. Some of Keats best-loved poems were produced during this time. Keats did try to cure himself by living by

the sea and taking long walks in the fresh air.

In February 1820, Keats began to cough up blood; he knew he was going to die because of his medical knowledge. A month later, he wrote in his notebook, 'in disease medical men guess, if they cannot ascertain a disease, they call it nervous'. Keats health deteriorated, and in September 1820, he left for the warmer climate of Rome. After a stormy ride which took thirty-five days plus ten days to quarantine, Keats finally arrived in Rome on 14 November 1820.

Keats was plagued with fever and delirium, the disease advanced, and on 23 February 1821, Keats died of tuberculosis in Joseph Severn's arms, aged just twenty-five.



Facsimile of the twenty-seventh page of the Note-Book

John Keats' Anatomical and Physiological Note Book

1934

The book in which he made notes of the lectures he attended while he was a pupil and dresser at Guys Hospital

"Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold, and many goodly states and kingdoms seen".

John Keats "Ode to a Nightingale" October 1816

"Sure a poet is a sage; A humanist, physician to all."

John Keats, "The Fall of Hyperion - A Dream"

PLAGUE LITERATURE

A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials, Of the most Remarkable Occurrences, As well Publick as Private, which happened in London During the last Great Visitation In 1665.

Daniel Defoe



Daniel Defoe (1660 - 1731), Portrait of Daniel Defoe, National Maritime Museum, London

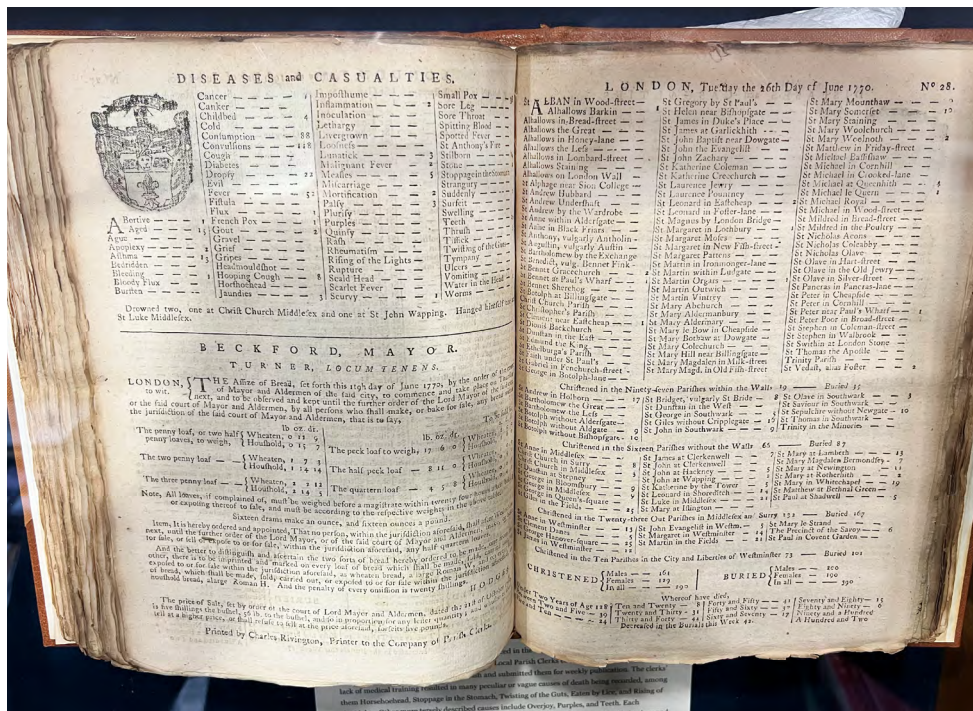
1927

The Great Plague of London (1665-1666) was the last significant occurrence of the bubonic plague to occur in England. The Great Plague killed almost a quarter of the London population (approximately 100,000 people) within this short time frame.

The bubonic plague profoundly impacted Art and Literature, with much European culture turning morbid and pessimistic. Art and Literature followed suit, with many dark themes surrounding death represented.

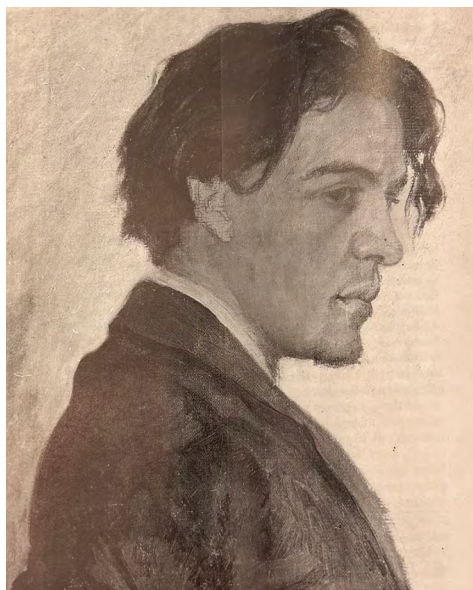
Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* accounts for one man's experience when the bubonic plague came to London in 1665. As Defoe was only five years old at the time of the Great Plague of 1665, he stitched together historical accounts and his own fictionalisation. Although Defoe's work merges both non-fiction and fiction, some have said Defoe's description of the Great Plague is often compared to actual accounts, such as in the diary of Samuel Pepys.

Why do we read plague stories? Defoe is only one of many writers who saw the literary potential of an epidemic. Stories of pandemics are often turned to for both horror and comfort. The stories with happy endings show us that we can get through adversity, and those with sad endings show us that things can always be worse.



The London Bills of Mortality were introduced in the early sixteenth century, mainly to act as a method of warning about plague epidemics. Local Parish Clerks collected the information concerning births and deaths in the parish and submitted them for weekly publication. The clerks' lack of medical training resulted in many peculiar or vague causes of death being recorded, among them Horsehoehead, Stoppage in the Stomach, Twisting of the Guts, Eaten by Lice, and Rising of the Lights. Other more tersely described causes include Overjoy, Purples, and Teeth. Each December saw the publication of a single sheet summarising the year's figures for "Christings and Burials" and was attractively decorated with a border pattern alternating hour glasses with a skull and crossed bones. *The Royal Society of Medicine Library has complete holdings of the Bills of Mortality for the years 1657 to 1814 bound into 14 volumes.*

Anton Chekhov



Anton Chekhov (1860 - 1904), Portrait by the artist Nicholas Checkhov (1858-89) of brother Anton, 1883.

Russian Physician and Playwright Anton Chekhov published over 500 short stories and several plays, including *Uncle Vanya*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *Three Sisters*. He is often considered one of the world's greatest writers. *Sakhalin Island* is by far his longest book and a work of non-fiction. Not surprisingly, as he continued to practice medicine throughout most of his literary career, more than a hundred

fictional physicians are included in his works. His medical expertise often influenced his writing and its subject matter.

Chekhov graduated from medical school in 1884 and practised medicine until 1892. As a Physician, he often worked for free, setting up clinics in provincial Russia and fought cholera and famine epidemics in 1891 and 1892.

Alongside practising medicine, Chekhov wrote stories for a weekly magazine and newspapers. Feeling embarrassed about his love of writing, he wrote under a pseudonym at first, once telling a friend, "Medicine takes itself seriously; the game of literature requires nicknames."

Anton Chekhov died at the age of 44 from Tuberculosis.

"Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress; when I get tired of one, I spend the night with the other."

Anton Chekhov, 11th September 1888. In a letter written to his friend Alexei Suvorin.

William Somerset Maugham



William Somerset Maugham (1874 - 1965)

William Somerset Maugham was one of the most prolific writers of the 20th Century, known for his novels, short stories, and plays. His best-known works are *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and *Moon and Sixpence* (1919).

Born in Paris on January 25th 1874, Maugham could speak French before English. Sadly, both of his parents died when he was a young child and soon after, he went to live in England with his uncle.

At 18 years old, Maugham inherited money from his father. He already knew that

he wanted to devote himself to writing, but “he did not dare to make a proposal which would have seemed impractical and revolutionary to his uncle.” So, he decided to study medicine which his uncle approved of.

Maugham attended St Thomas’s Hospital Medical School in London. After qualifying in 1898, he became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.

St Thomas’s offered Maugham an appointment at the hospital; however, he refused the offer. He had already published his first novel *Liza of Lambeth*, which confirmed his desire to continue his career as a writer.

As a playwright and a novelist, Maugham’s earlier plays were often turned down by producers. However, after a lot of persistent effort, in 1907, his first successful play *Lady Frederick* was produced, with a popular actress in the title role.

Before long, Maugham, with four of his plays running simultaneously, was known as “the most fortunate young man in London.”

Maugham believed that not only every creative writer, but every literary critic should possess a thorough knowledge of physiology as well as psychology, “for he must know how the basic elements of literature are related to the minds and bodies of men”.

Clinical excerpts, 1945



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