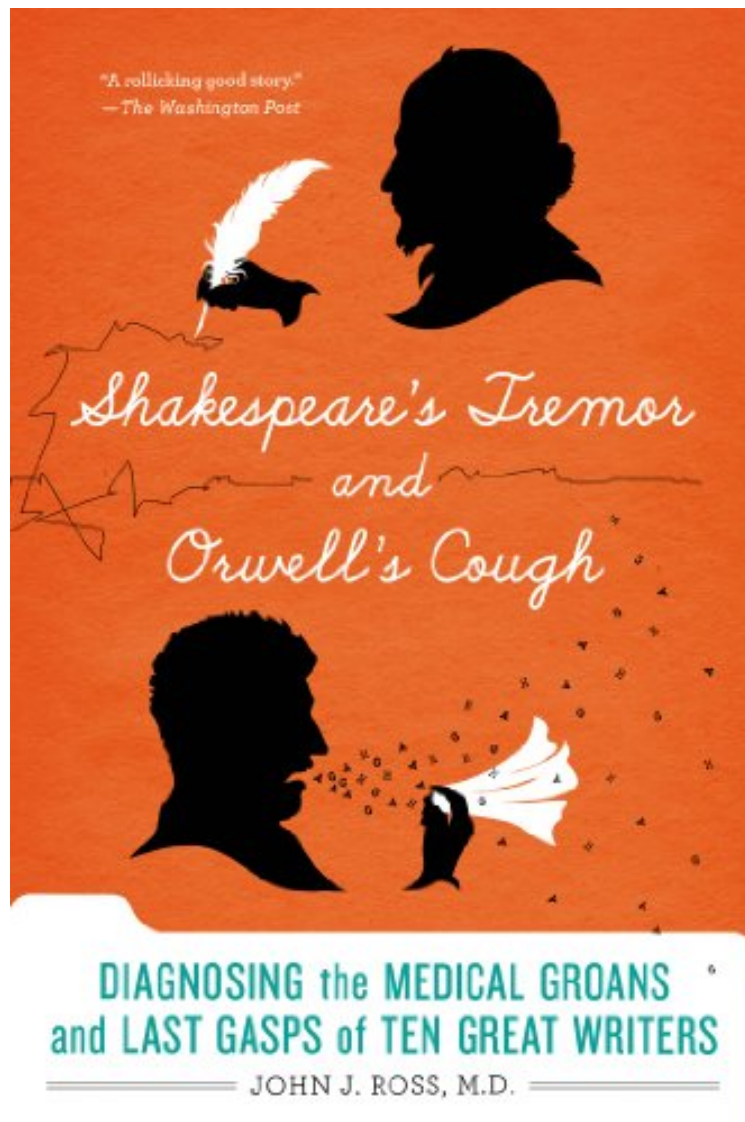


Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough: Diagnosing the Medical Groans and Last Gasps of Ten Great Writers

John J. Ross MD

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John J. Ross MD : Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough: Diagnosing the Medical Groans and Last Gasps of Ten Great Writers before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough: Diagnosing the Medical Groans and Last Gasps of Ten Great Writers:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Literature, maladies and autism. By SInohey According to the author,

the spark for writing this book occurred when Dr. Ross was researching the literature for quotations on syphilis, the subject of a forthcoming academic presentation. He was impressed by the number of references to venereal disease in Shakespeare's body of work. Further research uncovered that the Bard, later in life, suffered from unsteady gait and shaky handwriting possible as a complication of mercury vapor treatments for syphilis. Dr. Ross put his findings in a published article "Shakespeare's Chancre: did the Bard have syphilis?" 02/2005. This was followed a few months later by "Tuberculosis, bronchiectasis and infertility: what ailed George Orwell?" 12/2005; and three years later by "The many ailments of Herman Melville (1819-91)" published on 02/2008. These articles became the core of this book that was expanded by adding seven more literary luminaries and exploring their physical afflictions. Each of the ten chapters deals with a specific author, his biography, medical history, possible etiology of the diseases, differential diagnosis, treatments and consequences. Chapters begin with a fictitious event, setting the stage for the maladies of the subject and the contemporary state of the art of medicine. The lives and maladies of Shakespeare (syphilis), Milton (blindness/gout), Swift (dementia), the Bronte sisters (TB), Hawthorne (anxiety/cancer), Melville (ankylosing spondylitis/bipolar), Yeats (Hypertension/Brucellosis), London (Yaws), Joyce (VD) and Orwell (TB) are presented and detailed in a similar fashion = No spoilers here= Dr. Ross postulates many theories as to the afflictions of his subjects and explains his assumptions in plain language for the non-medical reader. In my opinion the book goes off the rails when the author ascribes mental illness and psychiatric syndromes to most of his subjects; "Asperger's syndrome was the cause of Emily Bronte's lack of social skills and overall odd behavior". Dr. Ross attributes the same ailment to other writers (Milton, Swift, Yeats) as well. He implies that the writers' maladies were intrinsic to the eminent distinction of their work. The author, in his attempt to appeal to a general readership, has diluted the medical context and eschewed medical jargon, all the while inserting biographical vignettes and fictional situations to link historical events. This, in turn, would not satiate the medical historian or the curious clinician. The prose is smooth, clear and sometimes witty. The writing becomes awkward when the author tries to construct some fictitious scenes. Dr. Ross treats his subjects with compassion for the physical pain and psychological torture they endured, often made worse by some of the barbaric treatments inflicted by their physicians. Overall, I found the book to be entertaining by its font of historical trivia, but uneven in its coverage of literary figures and overreaching in some of its diagnoses. By the end of the book, I was left with the impression that mental illness was a prerequisite for great literary works. I would recommend this book to the lay reader, interested in literary and medical history, as a primer for further exploration.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Shaking, Coughing, and Much More By Michael J. Tucker, Author The stereotype that writers are considered to be a bit odd or reclusive is perhaps because they are odd and reclusive. John J. Ross, a physician at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital and guest editor for the prestigious quarterly Infectious Diseases Clinics of North America, has written a highly readable and entertaining book that delves into the lives and illnesses of some of our most famous and beloved authors. His book is an easy to read combination biography, review of classic literature, and medical journal. I've spent my life deliberately avoiding reading Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre but after reading the real life tragedies of the Bronte family, and learning these two classics are somewhat based on the realities of the sisters' lives has piqued my interest. While tuberculosis stalked the reclusive family, Ross identifies enough traits to suggest the Emily Bronte had Asperger syndrome. Jonathan Swift's proclivities suggest Obsessive Compulsive Disorder based on his "abhorrence of filth" — filth apparently being the norm for the period — and his celibate life style. Even with his abstinence he managed to ruin the lives of two women. Roth also sees bipolar disorder as a psychological malady of writers. In the case of Herman Melville, it seems to have been inherited from his father, Allan Melville. We are treated to a fair bit of senior Melville's erratic life before delving into Herman's. Of him, Roth writes, "Melville had two powerful risk factors for bipolar affective disorder; the loss of a parent in childhood, and a robust family history of mood disorders." We learn that Melville's friend — perhaps intimate friend — Nathaniel Hawthorne also comes from a disrupted childhood, and exhibits a "pathological shyness consistent with social anxiety disorder, or social phobia." Hawthorne's behavior is such that he would "run into a field to avoid meeting strangers on a road" and avoid eye contact when dining or walking in public. According to his wife, "He hates to be touched." Apart from the psychological disorders of famous authors, there are the physical maladies, ranging from sexually transmitted diseases, perforated ulcers, blindness and deafness, to Jack London's renal failure, undoubtedly brought on by a self-administered morphine overdose. I found the history of medicine in this book to be both frightening and fascinating. Whether you favor Obamacare or not, we should be so grateful we live in the times that we do. There was no concept of germs, therefore surgeons saw no need to wash their hands while attending to multiple patients. If your disease didn't kill you, the treatment often would. Medicines often included heavy doses of lead, arsenic, and mercury. It seems mercury was a very effective laxative in its day; the heavy liquid metal could push anything through the intestinal track.

John J. Ross's Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough is a fast, enjoyable read that is hard to put down. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Sick and Tired By D. Brown Consignment Every time I take a pill for my maladies, I am grateful that I live today rather in some primitive age, like fifty years ago! John J. Ross's book about the ailments

that beset some famed authors make me even more grateful to be alive now. Of course I realize that future generations may very well look at our time with horror at the stupidity of our current so-called treatments and cures. Ross's book is very readable, because of, or despite, its display of thorough academic knowledge of what may, or may not, have sickened or killed Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Melville, the Bronte sisters, Yeats, James Joyce, and Orwell, and a few others. The critique of the medical overuse of mercury and arsenic, bleeding, and useless potions will keep you reading and also fact-checking your own doctor's prescriptions. Some of the medical jargon may be arcane and hard to swallow, but the reader always feels the author/doctor knows what he is talking about. He ticks off symptoms and failed treatments of these celebrity writers so completely, it's possible to forget which actual disease did in the poor fellow at the last. It isn't pretty, but it does make a person appreciate how these writers suffered and yet somehow managed to complete their works. Cheers for them and cheers for this doctor who diagnoses the mood disorders, STDs, and excesses of the famed, but not totally blessed, writers of the Western Canon. --- Daniel Curzon

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 Bronte 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.

“Dr. Ross hits his narrative stride... in chapter after chapter. The stories of the wounded storytellers unfold smoothly on the page, as mesmerizing as any they themselves might have told, those squinting, wheezing, arthritic, infected, demented, defective yet superlative examples of the human condition.” *The New York Times*; “A rollicking good story.” *The Washington Post*; “[This] engrossing account of the illnesses endured by Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, the Brontës, Hawthorne, Melville, Yeats, Jack London, Joyce and Orwell... which deftly mixes close reading and diagnostic acumen, will stay with me for a long time. I have scarcely touched on the richness of this witty and deeply humane book. It would be worth reading for the extraordinary tale of the pathologically shy Hawthorne... Dr. Ross avoids the common mistake of overconfidence in his retrospective diagnoses, aware that nothing fits so neatly as a wrong diagnosis. And he avoids the reductive temptation of explaining the genius of his writers by pathologies that are, after all, suffered also by the untalented. Though some of his stories are familiar, they have never, in my experience, been told so well. Given that many of Dr. Ross's subjects were suffering from infectious diseases, it helps that this is his area of expertise. But he is also a penetrating literary critic and a perceptive and humane observer of the lives of writers and of those in their orbit. His light touch with cultural, social and political history is something from which many of the professionals in literary studies could learn. This is a book to which I shall return again and again.” *The Wall Street Journal*; “Carefully looking at distinguished authors from a medical perspective, Ross blends biography, history, literature, science, and imagination in just the right doses.” *Booklist* (starred review); “Lively, probing.” *The Washington Times*; “Especially recommended for readers who enjoy historical context with their great books.” *Kirkus*; “This lively, occasionally squirm-inducing book sketches the case histories of 10 writers whose health influenced their literary work... Into a satisfying series of medical mysteries [Ross] injects notes of wry humor and obvious affection.” *The Boston Globe*; “... a fascinating, surprising, and at times hilarious compilation.” *New Scientist*; “Most writers aren't doctors. And most doctors aren't writers. When the two talents coincide, readers are treated to rare wisdom and novel insights. John Ross skillfully walks us through a clinic of the famous unwell.” *Nassir Ghaemi*,

author of *A First-Rate Madness* and Professor of Psychiatry, Tufts University School of Medicine; We always long to know writers better: more than just their words, we want to immerse ourselves in their lives, to really feel what they felt. This book does that, plunging you in the day-to-day pains and struggles of some of the most celebrated names in the canon. Sam Kean, author of *The Disappearing Spoon* and *The Violinists' Thumb*; If this irresistibly entertaining collection of medical biographies is anything to go by, its author would make a crackerjack after-dinner speaker. Each section consists of a whirlwind tour through the life of a famous literary figure from a doctor's perspective, some of it imagined, and all of it punctuated by witty and fun-loving asides... what sets Ross apart is his pure storytelling ability. Using a fluid and unpretentious style, much like fellow physician and writer Atul Gawande's, he excels at condensing massive amounts of research into pleasurable reading. Winnipeg Free Press; The book is rather like a gripping medical detective book as Ross works out what was wrong with a collection of literary greats. The Daily Telegraph; Ross has nicely merged biographical data for each author with insightful discussions of his proposed medical diagnoses, and how their symptoms and treatments might have affected their work. While those in the medical community will find this book of interest, it is wonderfully engaging, often witty and quite intriguing to those of us outside of it, too. Shelf Awareness About the Author JOHN J. ROSS is a physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. He lives in the Boston area with his family. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

1. THE HARDEST KNIFE ILL-USED: Shakespeare's Tremor; The real mystery of Shakespeare, a thousand times more mysterious than any matter of the will, is: why is it that—unlike Dante, Cervantes, Chaucer, Tolstoy, whomever you wish—he makes what seems a voluntary choice to stop writing?—Harold Bloom In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote.—Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses"; Twenty years he lived in London; Twenty years he dallied there between conjugal love and its chaste delights and scortatory love and its foul pleasures.—James Joyce, *Ulysses* His fitful fever returned. Master Shakespeare pulled the hood of his cloak down low over his eyes and hurried from his lodgings in Bishopsgate, walking as quickly as he could on his hobbled legs. He awkwardly dodged a pair of rambling pigs and picked his way through the dung and muck of the city streets. The stench and filth rarely troubled him now, as they had when he first came here from the country. Nearer the bridge, the clamor of the city increased: the clatter of carts, the cries of street peddlers, the gossip of alewives, the drunken braggadocio of London gallants. A black-clad Puritan surveyed the scene sourly and made brief eye contact with Will. The player hung his head and balled his hands into fists—to hide the telltale rash on his palms. London Bridge was marvelous and strange, a massive structure built over with splendid houses. With relief he entered the dark, claustrophobic tunnel beneath the dwellings. Inside, a continual roar of noise: the tidal rush of water between the ancient piers; waterwheels creaking; apprentices brawling; carters disputing the right-of-way; a blind fiddler playing; sheep bleating on their way to Eastcheap, bound for slaughter. He left the shelter of the bridge, and emerged into painful sunlight on the other side. His shins throbbed and his muscles ached. In spite of himself, he peered up at the great stone gate at the end of the bridge, adorned with traitors' heads on pikes. Shreds of moldy flesh clung to the grinning skulls, their tattered hair bleached by sun and rain. In Southwark, he heard the barking mastiffs and the howling crowd at the Bear Garden. He imagined old Sackerson the bear bellowing, lashing out with his claws, chained to a post, set on by dogs. A glimpse of ragged children playing in an alley filled him with thoughts of home and a pang of loneliness and shame. Before a row of brothels he saw a scabby beggarwoman with sunken nose and ulcerated shins. After years of faithful service in the stews, she has been turned out in the street to die of the pox. A chill of fear ran up his spine, and he looked away. There was a pounding in his head and he felt dull and stupid. He circled many times through a maze of flyblown houses before he stumbled on the place. A servant showed him down a set of stairs. The bard descended into a hot cellar reeking of sulfur. A vast oven filled the room with flickering orange light. The sweaty heads of groaning men peered out from large wooden tubs. But the tubs were not filled with water. A sallow and emaciated man carrying iron tongs scurried round, feeding hot bricks into the tubs through a trapdoor. He poured vinegar onto the heaps of bricks and acrid steam rose up, making the glistening men within moan and shake. 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. Shakespeare extended a handful of silver coins. The physician took them with a gloved hand, scrutinized them carefully, and put them in his purse with the hint of a smirk. He pointed Will toward the skinny, pallid man tending bricks at the great oven. When the poet looked round again, the doctor had vanished. The gaunt man tending the bricks was not quite right in the head. His hands shook, and he seemed both timorous and irritable. When he saw the poet's rash, he cackled and slobbered, revealing a mouth full of rotten teeth. "Bit by a Winchester goose, eh? Ha-ha! A few good sweats will fix that, my lad. Into the powdering tub with you, then!" The poet stripped and stood ashamed, his flesh covered in scaly blots. He nervously clambered over the side of a tub, and sat down on a plank nailed to the side.

Under the plank, the wooden bottom had been removed, leaving an earthen pit. The queer thin man clumsily secured a heavy lid over the top of the tub, leaving an opening just large enough for the poet's head. Then he popped open the trapdoor at the base of the tub and placed a hot metal plate at the poet's feet. He tossed red powder on the plate. The dust disappeared in a mephitic bloom of hissing fumes. The doctor's man repeated this again and again, until Will began to gag. A fine metallic powder settled on his body. The thin man piled hot bricks into the pit under the seat, and doused them with vinegar. As the acid waves of steam billowed upward, the bard started to tremble and sweat. This week would not be a pleasant one.

Even those who know little about Shakespeare are aware that there is a sort of controversy about the authorship of his plays. A vocal and eccentric minority doubts that a man of Shakespeare's background could possess literary genius, and speculates his plays were really written by an aristocrat who wished for some reason to remain anonymous. This belief rests on two snobbish and mistaken assumptions: first, that a great deal of formal education is essential for great writing; and second, that creativity depends on wealth and comfort. A good case could be made that the exact opposite is true. Many great authors were largely self-taught, and either did not attend university or dropped out. Furthermore, a dose of youthful misery may help a writer by serving as a powerful stimulus to fantasy and imagination. A recurrent biographical pattern in great writers is a happy early childhood, followed by an adolescence made insecure by financial catastrophe, the loss of a parent, or other traumas. Such was the case with William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was born in April 1564, in the market town of Stratford. We know almost nothing about his mother Mary, but quite a lot about his father. John Shakespeare combined something of Falstaff's wit and rascality, Kent's stubbornness and loyalty, and Lear's feckless ill judgment. He made a lawful fortune from the glove trade, and an illegal one from usury and black market wool dealing. His fellow citizens liked him well enough to elect him the town's bailiff, an office akin to that of mayor today. However, the gossamer prosperity of the Shakespeares unraveled in William's teenage years, as John ran afoul of the law and lost much of his money and his lands. Elizabethan England was something between a modern constitutional monarchy and a police state. Spies and informers enforced religious orthodoxy and an oppressive system of trade regulations and monopolies. John Shakespeare was fined heavily, not only for his shady business practices, but also for his repeated failures to attend Protestant services, one of several signs that the family were probably closet Catholics. If John Shakespeare once hoped to send his brilliant oldest son to get a gentleman's university education, near bankruptcy now made this impossible. Young Will would have studied Latin and rhetoric in the local grammar school until the age of fifteen or sixteen, probably getting more formal education than Dickens, Yeats, or Herman Melville would receive. He then may have served as a tutor in a noble Catholic household in Lancashire. By age eighteen, he was back in Stratford and hastily wed to Anne Hathaway, twenty-six years old and two months pregnant at the time of the marriage. According to tradition, Will toiled in his father's glove shop, and might also have moonlighted as a scrivener or a law clerk. Anne gave birth to the couple's daughter Susannah in May 1583, followed by the twins, Hamnet and Judith, in February 1585. Shortly thereafter, Shakespeare went to seek his fortune in London. According to a durable, if somewhat dubious, Stratford legend, Shakespeare was whipped for poaching deer on the lands of one Sir Thomas Lucy, a notorious persecutor of local Catholics. Will made matters worse by posting a lampoon of Lucy on his park gate, and fled town one step ahead of Lucy's thugs. London was home to a burgeoning and intensely competitive theater scene. Some playwrights were college graduates; others, such as Shakespeare, Kyd, and Jonson, were not. Shakespeare's quick success, rural origins, and lack of a university degree made him the natural target of jealous attacks from the University Wits. These included Robert Greene, George Peele, and that great spendthrift of language, Thomas Nashe, a trio as noted for their depravity as for their abundant literary talents. All three would soon be dead. Their enemies blamed their passing on the pox, or syphilis, the dread disease that became a Shakespearean obsession. By the early 1590s, Shakespeare had obtained the patronage of Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. Wriothesley was an effete dandy of flexible sexuality, with a penchant for poetry. Both of Shakespeare's racy, best-selling narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, are dedicated to him. The dedication for *Lucrece*, published in 1594, suggests that by then Shakespeare and Southamp...