

Exhibition Sharp physic

The quiet, limewashed rooms of Hall's Croft seem centuries away from the dusty tourist bustle of Stratford-upon-Avon and its Shakespeare industry. This Jacobean townhouse has had many remarkable owners—not least Marie Corelli, author of the Edwardian pulp-fiction classic *The Sorrows of Satan*—but its fame rests on its first occupants. In 1607 Susanna Shakespeare, William's daughter, married the Cambridge-educated physician John Hall, and in 1613 they moved into the house Hall had built for his family.

Hall's Croft is one of a clutch of properties in the care of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. The Trust's mission is to celebrate William Shakespeare's life and work, but in *Method in the Madness: Understanding Ourselves Then and Now*, a new permanent exhibition at Hall's Croft, curator Lucy Dale shifts the focus to Shakespeare's son-in-law, asking how Hall and his contemporaries would have understood health and sickness. In her selection of texts, images, and objects Dale has sought to let historical theories, therapies, and experiences speak for themselves, without forcing them into a modern framework of clinical knowledge. "I was struck", she told me, "by the way in which the medicine of Hall's age was a comprehensive and interconnected system, one which took the world and even the whole universe into account in understanding the patient's body and life".

This is a small show—two rooms, four cases—but a vaultingly ambitious one, offering a rich sense of early modern medicine and its responses to suffering, physical and mental. Large and detailed text panels tell a story of radical transformations in knowledge, from the new anatomy of Andreas Vesalius to William Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood, but many of the objects suggest the brutal realities of treatment. Wickedly jagged amputation knives and a blunt, battered urethral syringe

provoke the usual shudders, and a folding pocket fleam—the Swiss army knife of Jacobean surgery—recalls the ubiquity of bloodletting in terrifyingly heroic volumes.

"...the medicine of Hall's age was a comprehensive and interconnected system"

Visitors can also get their hands dirty, metaphorically at least: a tabletop uroscopy station is equipped with diagnosis charts and flasks of (I assume) replica urine, ranging in colour from a golden Sauternes to a frankly alarming claret.

Other objects elicit more cerebral thrills. A hand-coloured 1633 edition of John Gerard's *Herball* shares a case with the pocket-sized *A Good Booke of Medicines Called the Treasure of Poore Men*—the former filled with delicate woodcuts of lilies and herbs, the latter offering a recipe for loosening rotten teeth: "take a waterfrogge and a greene frogge and seathe them together, and gather the grece". The most intriguing object, though, is one of the smallest: a burnished gold medal, given to an unnamed contemporary of Shakespeare who received the royal touch as a treatment for scrofula (a form of lymphatic tuberculosis). Gaze

at this long enough and historical distance seems to melt away: this scrap of precious metal was once held by someone who had, however briefly, been held by Queen Elizabeth I.

If *Method in the Madness* has a flaw, it is borne of ambition: Dale and her team have packed a tremendous amount into these two rooms, and as the gallery develops some of the material would benefit from a little more space to breathe. The imposing 1678 edition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, for instance, could be made to speak wisely and wittily about Elizabethan madness, scholarship, and the connections between humour (in the Hippocratic sense) and comedy (in the Shakespearean sense).

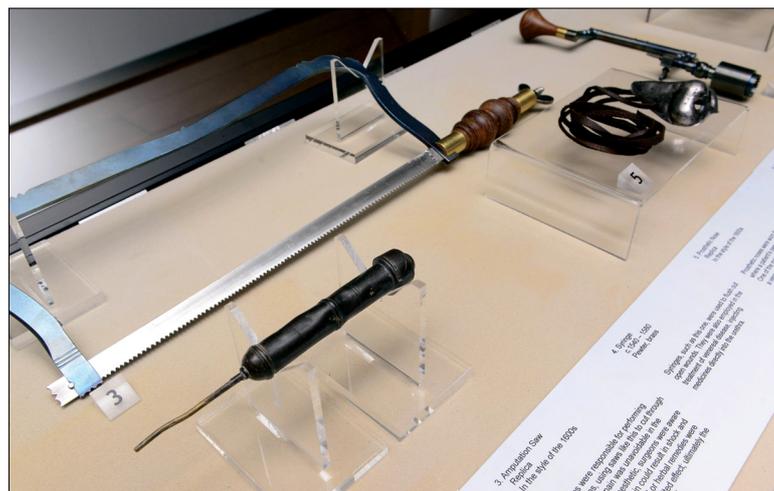
Hall is buried beside Susanna and her father in the chancel of Holy Trinity church, a few minutes' walk from Hall's Croft. The burial register describes him as *medicus peritissimus*, "most skilled physician", and he seems to have been on good terms with his father-in-law—but then Shakespeare never endured the brisk, no-nonsense treatment Hall prescribed for "Mr Drayton, an excellent Poet": "He was properly purged both upwards and downwards, and cured".

Richard Barnett



Stewart Writtle/Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Method in the Madness: Understanding Ourselves Then and Now
Hall's Croft, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK
<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/visit/halls-croft/>



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