As a child at school, Shakespeare would have studied *reticencia* (*aposiopesis*), the rhetorical trick of breaking off a thought without finishing. The effect is to emphasize and expand the very thing that isn’t said.

I will do such things—
What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth! (*King Lear* 2.4.280-2)

Lear doesn’t say what he will do, and that makes it even more terrible and sad than if he had. Shakespeare uses *reticencia* often at the sentence level and also in the larger sense of omitting subjects altogether, what John Ashberry called “This leaving-out business.” Shakespeare left out a lot of things: he didn’t write about his own times; he didn’t write about himself; he left few biographical clues or hints about his personality in his works. And of special interest to our own time, he didn’t write about the plague. Shakespeare’s life was haunted by outbreaks and epidemics, but unlike many of his contemporaries, he never represented them in his plays or poems. Yet the plague is everywhere in Shakespeare’s work, hiding in plain sight.

I don’t know for sure that Shakespeare got his leaving-out skills from studying classical rhetoric. He may have been a naturally reticent person: reserved or restrained, inclined to say things by omission. John Keats praised him for his “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” The hands-off attitude of Negative Capability, like personal reticence, is a quality of mind and not just a rhetorical figure. But practicing *reticencia* in school certainly made Shakespeare conscious of omission as one of the choices open to a writer. He followed that path his whole career.

About what it was like to live with the plague, the playwright has nothing to say. Only in *Romeo and Juliet* does “infectious pestilence” make an appearance as a plot device, and even then it stays offstage. Friar John explains that suspicion of plague delayed a letter that would have kept the young lovers alive:

*Going to find a bare-foot brother out*
*One of our order, to associate me,*
*Here in this city visiting the sick*
*And finding him, the searchers of the town,*
*Suspecting that we both were in a house*
*Where the infectious pestilence did reign,*
*Seal’d up the doors and would not let us forth,*
*So that my speed to Mantua there was stay’d.* (5.3, 4-11)

But if Shakespeare wrote no plays or pamphlets about the plague, his language is full of it. As the scholar Emma Smith puts it, “The plague is everywhere and nowhere in his work. In the
language of “King Lear” and other plays it is ubiquitous — but otherwise it’s almost entirely absent.” What Smith means when she says the plague is ubiquitous in Shakespeare’s language is this: the word “plague” appears roughly 100 times in the plays. Other words that refer to the plague, such as “sickness,” “pestilence,” “disease,” “contagion,” and “infection” also appear often, as do descriptions of plague-like circumstances (Macbeth). But these references are almost always either metaphors or curses. The plague stands in for something else: corruption in society or a corrupt individual, for example. King Lear calls his daughter Regan “A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood” (3.2.151). To those familiar with the symptoms of plague—which most people were in 17th c. London—“plague sore” would have conjured a picture of Regan as an infected lymph node, a giant pimple.

Sometimes the plague stands for the “disease” of love. In Love’s Labour’s Lost, Berowne admits that he, like his three comrades, has fallen for a girl:

Yet I have a trick
Of the old rage: bear with me, I am sick;
I'll leave it by degrees. Soft, let us see:
Write, 'Lord have mercy on us' on those three;
They are infected; in their hearts it lies;
They have the plague and caught it of your eyes;
These lords are visited; you are not free,
For the Lord's tokens on you do I see. (5.2.117)

In this speech that elaborates the metaphor of love-as-plague, we get a glimpse of the particulars of epidemic in Shakespeare’s England. A sign saying, “Lord Have Mercy” (marked with a red cross) would be posted on an infected house, to warn others away. Such households were said to be “visited” by disease, which left “tokens” such as the “plague sore” that Lear compares to his daughter. Similarly, Olivia in Twelfth Night falls in love and wonders, “Even so quickly may one catch the plague?”

As useful as the disease metaphor is to Shakespeare, he uses plague even more often as an all-purpose curse. The most famous example is Mercutio’s curse on the Capulets and Montagues: “A plague o’ both your houses” (3.1) but there are many others. “A plague on thee! thou art too bad to curse,” says Apemantus in Timon of Athens (4.3), suggesting that “plague” is worse than ordinary curse word.

The plague is everywhere in Shakespeare’s language, always at the back of his mind, ready to spring up as a figure of speech. He writes about plague by not writing about it, just as King Lear describes the terrible things he will do by not describing them. The effect is to amplify the ubiquity of disease. Plague is the elephant in the room—or in Renaissance England—made even more present by avoidance. We learn from Shakespeare’s plague metaphors and plague curses and plague comparisons that epidemic was a commonplace in his life, available for metaphor like any other everyday thing—a house or a flower or a tree. Shakespeare is not a documentarian; he tells stories, and as he tells them he keeps his verbal associations fluid, “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” If a mention of the plague fits his thought, he uses it.
Keats, who was a pharmacist and surgeon by training, would have admitted that facts matter. But they don’t need to appear explicitly to be present. Keats wasn’t praising Shakespeare for ignoring truth, but for presenting truth as art. Rather than documenting the plague, Shakespeare let it saturate his vocabulary the same way it had seeped into the everyday life around him. He didn’t put the plague on stage, but neither did he resist it. He opened his own language choices to the “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” of his world. When we listen to Sir Toby Belch pretending he’s belching because of something he ate and not because he’s drunk—“A plague o’ these pickled herring!”—we’re hearing how folks talked in 1600, how they acknowledged and accepted the reality of the plague even when they weren’t thinking about it (1.5.121). We may need to learn this rhetorical trick ourselves.
Notes

1 “The Skaters” 133.

2 Compare Shakespeare’s reticence to, for example, Ben Jonson’s play *The Alchemist* (1610) or Thomas Dekker’s pamphlet *The Wonderfull Yeare* (1603).


4    Alas, poor country
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The deadman's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken. (*Macbeth*, 4.3.167-175)