

SPECIAL TOPIC

Human Disease on Stage

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Theater, being in most cases a representation of real life, can refer to any of its aspects, including disease. Human disease is a specific condition that usually affects the behavior of the patient and his environment as well as their interrelationship. Several play writers, even from the ancient years, have tried to present these effects. Furthermore, another topic for the theater can be the way Medicine is practiced, usually with a critical approach.

Of course play writers have not in general studied Medicine and so their references to disease may not be always absolutely right, especially if they represent aspects of past time. Furthermore, if we refer to poetic or symbolic drama it may express unrealistic situations only to serve the main idea of the author.

KEY WORDS: *Theater, Sophocles,
Shakespeare, Strindberg, Williams*

1. DISEASES OF THE BODY

There are several references to somatic diseases in ancient Greek drama. The most characteristic case is that of Philoctetes, the leading role in the homonymous tragedy by Sophocles. Philoctetes is suffering by a chronic, non-healing ulcer of the leg (possibly chronic osteomyelitis) caused by a snake biting (Fig. 1). The hero's shouts and blasphemies due to strong pain and the unpleasant smell of his wound made the Greeks—who were campaigning against Troy—desert him for years in the uninhabited island of Lemnos, in the north Aegean Sea. In this island the tragedy *Philoctetes* takes place. Odysseus, who has returned to Lemnos with Neoptolemus, describes why he had abandoned Philoctetes:

ODYSSEUS: Here long ago... I left... Philoctetes.
His swollen foot groaned with a festering ulcer,
and we could not so much as sacrifice
in peace of mind, when all our camp was filled
with savage, sacrilegious screams of pain,
moaning and wailing.*

Neoptolemos looks at the empty cave where Philoctetes lives:

*NEOPTOLEMUS: And over here - ugh! - filthy rags are lying,
set out to dry, and full of hideous pus.*

Later, the Chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors mourns for Philoctetes:

*CHORUS: He had no neighbor but himself, he could not walk,
and none was near to share in his suffering*

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* English translation by Robert Torrance.

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FIGURE 1. Alexis Minotis as Philoctetes in an attack of pain, and Thanos Livaditis as Neoptolemos in a 1967 production of *Philoctetes* by the National Theatre of Greece (photo: N. Mavrogenis)¹.

or listen when he would lament of his cruel, devouring pain, or soothe the burning-hot blood that would ooze from the wound in his poisonous foot, or gather soft herbs from the fruitful earth, whenever the agony would fall upon him...

In such a pain attack Philoctetes cries:

*PHILOCTETES: The pain, the pain!
Child, it is killing me: child, it devours me!...
Child, if you have a sword at hand, I pray you,
in God's name, take it, strike this foot of mine,
now, cut it off, now - never mind my life -*

After the attack, Philoctetes falls asleep and Neoptolemos observes him:

*NEOPTOLEMUS: ...his head already is bent back;
the sweat is pouring over his whole body;
a thin black stream of blood has broken from
his wounded foot.*

Philoctetes later mentions the bad odor of his wound:

*PHILOCTETES: Now help me rise again,
and leave these men alone. They should not suffer
this smell before they need to. On the ship
they will have pain enough from living with me.*

In *Oedipus Rex*, another tragedy by Sophocles, a severe epidemic, affecting plants, animals and humans*, has fallen

* Of course as far as we know such an epidemic cannot really exist.

upon Thebes. As the Priest of Zeus describes it:

*PRIEST: ...our city reeling like a wreck**...
A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth.
A blight is on the cattle in the fields,
a blight is on our women that no children
are born to them; a God that carries fire,
a deadly pestilence, is on our town...
while black Death
grows rich in groaning and in lamentation.*

And later the Chorus adds:

*CHORUS: There are no growing children in this famous land;
there are no women bearing the pangs of childbirth.
You may see them one with another, like birds swift on the wing,
quicker than fire unmastered,
speeding away to the coast of the Western God.
In the unnumbered death
of its people the city dies;
those children that are born lie dead on the naked earth
unpitied, spreading contagion of death;...*

Cases of patients with somatic diseases are also present in modern theater. Falstaff is one of the most popular characters created by William Shakespeare (Fig. 2). In his play *Henry the Fifth*, Falstaff is described to be seriously ill:

*HOSTESS: He is so shak'd of a burning quotidian tertian that
it is most lamentable to behold.*

Later, the Hostess announces his death. According to her description (very cold limbs after high fever), death may have been caused by septic shock:

*HOSTESS: So he bade me lay more clothes on his feet; I put my
hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any*



FIGURE 2. Orson Welles as Falstaff in the homonymous film of 1965².

However the tragic poet's aim is to emphasize that the whole Nature is suffering of a disease sent by the Gods.
** English translation by David Grene.

stone; then I felt to his knees, and so upward and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.

In another play by Shakespeare -*Hamlet, prince of Denmark*- the ghost of Hamlet's father describes how he was poisoned by his brother, aiming to usurp his throne. Some physiological details are especially interesting in revealing the beliefs of his time concerning some functions of the human body:

*...Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon* in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.*

A caustic satire of both doctors and patients –and very informative about the therapeutic methods of his time- appears in *The imaginary Invalid* by Molière. The main character, Argan, a typical hypochondriac, is obsessed by the idea that he suffers of several diseases (Fig. 3). After the failure of doctors to treat him, he is persuaded to become himself a doctor, following a parody of medical education. It is important to mention that just at the end of a performance of this comedy, in which Molière himself played the leading role, he had a severe pulmonary hemorrhage due to tuberculosis and died a few hours later.

In the initial scene of the play Argan is reading his pharmacist's bill:

ARGAN "Item on the 24th**, a small, insinuating clyster, preparative and gentle, to soften, moisten, and refresh the bowels of Mr. Argan... Item, on the said day, a good detergent clyster, compounded of double catholicon rhubarb, honey of roses, and other ingredients, according to the prescription, to scour, work, and clear out the bowels of Mr. Argan... Item, on the said day, in the evening, a julep, hepatic, soporiferous, and somniferous, intended to promote the sleep of Mr. Argan... Item, on the 25th, a good purgative and corroborative mixture, composed of fresh cassia with Levantine senna and other ingredients... to expel Mr.

* It is not clear what Shakespeare actually meant with this unusual word. It is generally accepted that he referred to a poison of plant origin, possibly hemlock or henbane.

** Translated by Charles Heron Wall.



FIGURE 3. Christophoros Nezer as Argan followed by his pharmacist ready for an enema in a 1954 production of *The imaginary Invalid* by the National Theater of Greece (photo: Emil)³.

Argan's bile... Item, on the 26th, a carminative clyster to cure the flatulence of Mr. Argan... Item, on the 27th, a good mixture composed for the purpose of driving out the bad humours of Mr. Argan... Item, on the 28th, a dose of clarified and edulcorated whey, to soften, lenify, temper, and refresh the blood of Mr. Argan... Item, a potion, cordial and preservative, composed of twelve grains of bezoar, syrup of citrons and pomegranates, and other ingredients... ” So that during this month I have taken eight mixtures and twelve clysters; and last month there were twelve mixtures and twenty clysters. I am not astonished, therefore, that I am not so well this month as last.

Anton Chekhov –being himself a doctor- presents on stage in *Uncle Vanya*, one of the main characters suffering from an attack of gout (Fig. 4).

SEREBRAKOFF: This pain is intolerable... I am suffocating. I dreamt just now that my left leg belonged to someone else, and it hurt so that I woke. I don't believe this is gout, it is more like rheumatism... Why do I find it so hard to breathe?

HELENA: You are tired; this is the second night you have had no sleep.

SEREBRAKOFF: They say that Turgenieff got angina of the heart from gout. I am afraid I am getting angina too. Oh, damn this horrible, accursed old age!

In Henric Ibsen's *The Ghosts*, the leading role is a young man suffering of progressive mental deterioration, obviously

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FIGURE 4. Nikos Paraskevas as professor Serebryakov suffering of gout attack in *Uncle Vanya* in a 1953 production of the National Theater of Greece (photo: Emil)⁴.

due to tertiary syphilis (Fig. 5). However in this play Ibsen is falsely considering that young Oswald inherited the disease from his syphilitic father while on reality there must have been a perinatal transfer through his mother. See, how he describes his case:

There is something I must tell you, mother... I complained of fatigue after my journey... not any ordinary fatigue... Mother, my mind is broken down –ruined– I shall never be able to work again!... I began to feel the most violent pains in my head – chiefly



FIGURE 5. Young Oswald (Kostas Kastanas) reveals his disease to his mother Mrs. Alving (Katina Paxinou) in a 1966 production of *The Ghosts* by the National Theater of Greece⁵.

in the back of my head, they seemed to come. It was as though a tight iron ring was being screwed round my neck and upwards... I couldn't work any more... At last I sent for a doctor... he said: "There has been something worm-eaten in you from your birth." ... He said, "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children."

In Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Fig. 6), a venereal disease transformed to young Heavenly Finley by her sexually overactive lover Chance Wayne made it necessary for her to undergo hysterectomy. It was possibly associated with oophorectomy, since she mentions that this operation destroyed her youth and transformed her to an old and infertile woman.

In the *Wild Duck*, another play by Ibsen, young Hedwig is progressively losing her vision due to an eye disease that she has inherited from the person who is revealed in the course of the play to be her real father.

In *The Idiot*, a famous novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky that has several times been adapted for the theater, the main hero Prince Myshkin is suffering of epilepsy, a disease that actually affected Dostoevsky himself.

In Tennessee Williams' *The Milk Train doesn't stop here anymore* we follow the last days of the wealthy and eccentric Mrs. Gofforth who, although dying of cancer, refuses to accept it and continues to seek till the end both power upon humans and sexual pleasure (Fig. 7). In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by the same author, one the main characters is diagnosed with colon



FIGURE 6. Melina Mercouri and Yannis Fertis in a 1960 production of *The Sweet Bird of Youth* by the Art Theater of Karolos Koun⁶.



FIGURE 7. Olympia Dukakis as Mrs. Gofforth in a 2008 Hartford Stage production of *The Milk Train doesn't stop here anymore*⁷.

cancer. The play presents the way this information affects all the characters and especially the patient himself who, after the initial shock, decides to refuse any medical intervention and be left to die in peace. In both plays the ways in which humans deal with death are at focus. As Williams has declared, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a “play which says only one affirmative thing about ‘Man’s Fate’: that he has it still in his power not to squeal like a pig but to keep a tight mouth about it.”^{*}

If we pass to the Opera we must mention that the main female characters in Verdi’s *La Traviata*^{**} and Puccini’s *La Boheme* (Fig. 8) die of tuberculosis in the last act, saying adieu to this world with very passionate arias. Amfortas, ruler in the kingdom of the Holy Grail in Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*, is suffering of an incurable wound due to an ethical offence.

2. PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

A characteristic case is that of Hercules in the tragedy

* Wikipedia, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat_on_a_Hot_Tin_Roof

** Inspired by the novel *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas, fils.



FIGURE 8. Dying Mimi in Puccini’s *La Boheme*⁸.

Hercules Furens (Hercules in madness) by Euripides (Fig. 9). During a god-sent crisis of madness the hero kills his wife and children thinking that they are those of his enemy Eurystheus. After that he falls in a deep sleep and when recovering he remembers nothing of what had happened. The whole clinical picture can be –in terms of modern Medicine- attributed to a crisis of temporal epilepsy followed by a postictal state:

*MESSENGER: But just as Alcmena’s son was bringing the torch*** in his right hand to dip it in the holy water,*

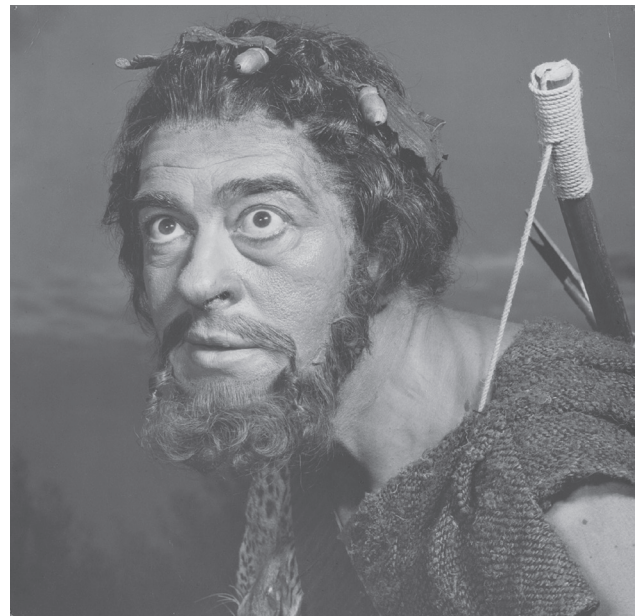


FIGURE 9. Thanos Kotsopoulos as the homonymous character of in a 1960 production of *Hercules Furens* by the National Theater of Greece (photo: D. Charisiadis)⁹.

*** Translated by E. P. Coleridge

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he stopped without a word... and lo, he was changed;
 his eyes were rolling; he was distraught;
 his eyeballs were bloodshot and starting from their sockets,
 and foam was oozing down his bearded cheek.
 Anon he spoke, laughing the while a madman's laugh...
 Then he set out, and though he had no chariot there,
 he thought he had, and was for mounting to its seat,
 and using a goad as though his fingers really held one.
 A twofold feeling filled his servants' breasts, half amusement,
 and half fear; and one looking to his neighbour said,
 "Is our master making sport for us, or is he mad?"...
 ...and then stripping himself of his mantle,
 he fell to competing with an imaginary rival,
 o'er whom he proclaimed himself victor...
 with his own voice, calling on imaginary spectators to listen.
 ...and then against his own children aimed his bow
 and made ready his quiver, thinking to slay the sons of Eurystheus.
 And they in wild affright darted hither and thither...
 But he, hunting the child* round and round...
 shot him to the heart;...
 ...with savage Gorgon-sowl, as the child** now stood
 in range of his baleful archery, smote him on the head...
 bringing down his club upon the fair-haired boy,
 and crushed the bones.
 ...forthwith the madman... prizes open the doors with levers,
 and... with one fell shaft laid low his wife and child***...
 So there he sleeps, poor wretch!

The appearance of Erinyes (Furies), visible only to Orestes but not anyone else, in Aeschylus *Choefori* (The Libation Bearers) can be described as a case of visual hallucinations:

ORESTES: ...breaking from the curb****
 my spirit whirls me off, a conquered prey,
 borne as a charioteer by steeds distraught
 far from the course, and madness in my breast
 burneth to chant its song, and leap, and rave...
 Look, look, alas!
 Handmaidens, see-what Gorgon shapes throng up
 dusky their robes and all their hair enwound-
 snakes coiled with snakes -off, off, -I must away!

CHORUS: ...What visions thus distract thee? Hold, abide...

ORESTES: These are no dreams, void shapes of haunting ill,
 But clear to sight another's hell-hounds come!

In the beginning of Euripides' *Orestes*, the homonymous hero is presented to suffer from a mixed –somatic and psychic-disorder due to the Erinyes' chase. His sister Electra (Fig. 10) takes care of him:

* Translated by E.P. Coleridge
 ** Refers to Hercules' first child.
 *** Refers to Hercules' second child.
 **** Translated by E.D.A. Morshead.



FIGURE 10. Eleni Chatziargiri (Electra) and Nikos Kourkoulos (Orestes) in a 1971 production of *Orestes* by the National Theater of Greece (photo: Studio Diamant)¹⁰.

ELECTRA: After this my poor Orestes fell sick*****
 of a cruel wasting disease; upon his couch he lies prostrated,
 and it is his mother's blood that goads him into frenzied fits;...
 'Tis now the sixth day since... no food has passed his lips,
 nor hath he washed his skin...

When he wakes from sleep he expresses his bad condition asking for help:

ORESTES: Take, oh! take me in thy arms,
 and from this sufferer's mouth and eyes wipe off the flakes of foam...
 Prop me up, thy side to mine;
 brush the matted hair from off my face, for I see but dimly...
 Lay me once more upon the couch;
 when my fit leaves me, I am all unnerved, unstrung.

Three main Shakespearean characters suffer of mental deterioration. Young Ophelia in *Hamlet* (Fig. 11), stressed by her father's death and her beloved Hamlet's indifference, goes mad and is finally drowned. A Gentleman describes her case:

GENTLEMAN: She is importunate, indeed distract:
 Her mood will needs be pitied...
 She speaks much of her father; says she hears
 There's tricks i' the world; and hems, and beats her heart;
 Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
 That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing,
 Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection; they aim at it,

***** Translated by E. P. Coleridge.



FIGURE 11. Tzeni Karezi as Ophelia in a 1956 production of *Hamlet* by the National Theater of Greece (photo: Emil)¹².

*And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks, and nods, and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.*

*HORATIO: 'Twere good she were spoken with; for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.*

In the last act of *Macbeth*, ruthless Lady Macbeth is tortured by obsessive compulsive behavior and visional illusions in which her old compunctions due to king Duncan's murder are emerging. A woman in attendance of hers, informs her doctor:

*GENTLEWOMAN: ...I have seen
her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon
her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it,
write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again
return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep...
Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise;
and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close...*

DOCTOR: You see, her eyes are open.

GENTLEWOMAN: Ay, but their sense is shut.

DOCTOR:...Look, how she rubs her hands.

*GENTLEWOMAN: It is an accustomed action with her, to seem
thus*

*washing her hands: I have known her continue in
this a quarter of an hour...*

LADY MACBETH: Yet here's a spot...

Out, damned spot! out, I say!...

*Yet who would have thought the old man
to have had so much blood in him...*

What, will these hands ne'er be clean?...

*Here's the smell of the blood still: all the
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand...*

Old King Lear in the homonymous tragedy, when abandoned by his ungrateful daughters, is wandering as a madman in a wild storm. However, this madness makes him able to understand some truths of human life that he had never realized when he was sane:

*LEAR: Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just...*

*When the rain came to wet me once,
And the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder
Would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em...
They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.*

August Strindberg, the greatest Swedish play writer, suffered himself of a psychiatric disorder, possibly of a paranoid type. In the *Easter*, the main character is Leonora, a young girl driven mad by shame over her father's disgrace. The role was inspired by Strindberg's own sister Elisabeth, who was institutionalized. It is interesting to see how in the play her brother, Elis, expresses his discomfort about the way they are treating this unfortunate creature:

ELIS: She is restless, poor child, and writes letters that wring
my heart. She wants to come home, naturally, but the superin-
tendent of the Asylum is afraid to let her go, for she does things
which lead to prison. I feel conscience-stricken at times because
I voted for her commitment... When I think of how she went
about here, casting a shadow over every semblance of pleasure ;
of how her fate depressed us, like a nightmare – tortured us to
despair – I am selfish enough to feel a certain relief, akin to joy.
And the greatest misfortune I can imagine at this moment would
be to see her step inside these doors. Just that contemptible am I.*

However this insane girl finally proves to be the cause for hope and mercy for her whole family. In *The Father* by the same author, the main hero gets mad when he is falsely persuaded

* Translated by Velma Swanston Howard.

by his wife that their only child is not his own. In the shocking last scene of the play he is cajoled into a straitjacket by his old nurse (Fig. 12).

NURSE: Mr. Adolf, do you remember when you were my dear little boy and I tucked you in at night and... how I used to get up in the night and... tell you stories when you had bad dreams and couldn't sleep? Do you remember all that?*

CAPTAIN: Go on talking, Margret, it soothes my head so. Tell me some more.

NURSE: ...Do you remember when you took the big kitchen knife and wanted to cut out boats with it, and how I came in and had to get the knife away by fooling you? You were just a little child who didn't understand, so I had to fool you, for you didn't know that it was for your own good. «Give me that snake,» I said, «or it will bite you!» and then you let go of the knife. (Takes the revolver out of the Captain's hand) And then when you had to be dressed and didn't want to, I had to coax you and say that you should have a coat of gold and be dressed like a prince. And then I took your little blouse that was just made of green wool and held it in front of you and said: "In with both arms," and then I said, "Now sit nice and still while I button it down the back," (She puts the straightjacket on) and then I said, "Get up now, and walk across the floor like a good boy so I can see how it fits." (She leads him to the sofa) And then I said, "Now you must go to bed."



FIGURE 12. Christina Kalogerikou putting a straitjacket on Alexis Minotis in a 1962 production of *The Father* by the National Theater of Greece (photo: Studio Elite)¹².

* Translated by Warner and Edith Oland.

CAPTAIN: What did you say? Was I to go to bed when I was dressed-- damnation! what have you done to me? (Tries to get free) Ah! you cunning devil of a woman! Who would have thought you had so much wit. (Lies down on sofa) Trapped, shorn, outwitted, and not to be able to die!

Equally shocking is the last scene of *A Streetcar named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, where Blanche DuBois suffering a complete mental breakdown after several unhappy events –including her rape by her sister's husband- is committed to a mental hospital.

Madness of a main hero offers a good chance for music in opera. Gaetano Donizetti has several scenes of madness in his operas, most famous being that of the homonymous role in *Lucia di Lamermoor* when she is forced to marry a man she does not love, persuaded that she was betrayed by her lover (Fig. 13). A similar reason causes Elvira's madness in Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*. An attack of madness is the consequence of a guilty conscience for Lady Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth* (Fig. 14) and the homonymous characters in *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky** and *Electra* by Richard Strauss (based not on the homonymous tragedies by either Sophocles or Euripides but on the play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal). In *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi, King Nebuchadnezzar gets mad when cursed by the Jewish priest Zachariah for his impiety.

A phrase of Iocasta in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* possibly inspired Sigmund Freud to formulate the Oedipus complex as the central tenet of psychoanalytical theory:

*As to your mother's marriage bed, don't fear it***.
Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles,
many a man has lain with his own mother.*

Analogous to it for females is the Electra complex -obviously inspired by the homonymous tragedy by Sophocles- introduced by Carl Jung to describe a girl's psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of her father.

Eugene O'Neill, an American Nobel laureate playwright, was greatly impressed by the psychoanalytical theory. In his trilogy *Mourning becomes Electra* he transfers the myth of the Atreidae -as presented in Aeschylus *Oresteia*- in a rich New England family at the end of the American Civil War (Fig. 15). The forces that move the plot are not the gods as in Greek Drama but those of the psyche as they were previously demonstrated by psychoanalysts, especially Karl Jung. In *Strange interlude* -an unusually long play needing around five hours if presented uncut- the characters reveal themselves by free associating aloud to the audience.

** Based on the homonymous tragedy by Alexander Pushkin.

*** English translation by David Grene.



FIGURE 13. Christina Poulitsi as Lucia in the scene of madness in a 2018 production of *Lucia di Lamermoor* by the Greek National Opera¹³.

3. DEPENDENCE

Alcohol dependence is the serious problem of the main hero in the play *Come Back, Little Sheba* by William Inge, who was also a former alcoholic. In his autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Eugene O'Neill dramatizes the life of his own family in which all members had serious medical problems: the mother was a morphine addict, the father and the elder son were alcoholics and the younger son (representing Eugene himself) suffered of tuberculosis. In *The Seafarer*, an interesting recent play by Conor McPherson, nearly all the main characters are alcoholics and much of the performance time runs in parallel with drinking. In *The Card Player* by Dimitris Psathas, a famous Greek comedy of the second half of the 20th century, the addiction of a respectable woman of the middle class to card playing is presented in a humoristic way.

4. DOCTORS AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE

Prometheus, bound in the homonymous tragedy by Aeschylus, describes how he taught humans to fight against disease:

*Hear the rest and you will be even more**

* Translated by Marianne McDonald

amazed at the arts and inventions I devised. The greatest was this: before, if a man fell sick, there was no remedy—nothing, no pill, ointment, nor drink—and without drugs they wasted away. I showed them how to mix healing medicines that could ward off all diseases.

In *Wealth*, the last surviving comedy by Aristophanes, the god Ploutos (Wealth) is driven to the sanctuary of Asclepius in order to be cured of his blindness. Through the description of this episode by the slave Karion, interesting details on the practice of Medicine at this time are offered:

*CARION: Having arrived near to the temple with our patient... we first led him down to the sea to purify him... Then we repaired to the temple of the god. Once the wafers and the various offerings had been consecrated upon the altar... we made Plutus lie on a couch according to the rite, and each of us prepared himself a bed of leaves... The lights were put out and the priest enjoined us to sleep... The god did the round of the patients and examined them all with great attention; then a slave placed beside him a stone mortar, a pestle and a little box. He first prepared an ointment for Neoclides**; he threw three heads of Tenian garlic into the mortar, pounded them with an admixture of fig-tree sap and lentisk, moistened the whole with Sphettian vinegar, and,*

** Neoclides, although blind, was a well-known thief in Athens.



FIGURE 14. Maria Callas as Lady Macbeth in a 1952 production of Verdi's *Macbeth* by La Scala, Milan¹⁴.



FIGURE 15. Mary Aroni and Vaso Manolidou in a 1971 production of *Homecoming* (the first part of *Mourning becomes Electra*) by the National Theater of Greece (photo: Studio Diamant)¹⁵.

turning back the patient's eyelids, applied his salve to the interior of the eyes... Neoclides shrieked, howled, sprang towards the foot of his bed and wanted to bolt*... Thereupon he came and seated himself at the head of Plutus' bed, took a perfectly clean rag and wiped his eyelids; Panacea covered his head and face with a purple cloth, while the god whistled, and two enormous snakes came rushing from the sanctuary... They slipped gently beneath the purple cloth and, as far as I could judge, licked the patient's eyelids... Plutus rose up; he could see.

However, several times theater takes a critical approach to medical practice. This is found even in Greek Drama, especially in fragments from lost comedies. For example, Philémon, a comic poet contemporary to Menander (4th century B.C.), writes:

*Every doctor feels bad if no one else feels bad**.
Only a doctor and a judge have this privilege:
to kill without been punished.*

In *Faust*, the great philosophical drama by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the main hero—who had practiced medicine in the past, helping his father in a period of a great epidemic—is surprised by the expression of the respect of his co-citizens for his aid, since he remembers with remorse his unsuccessful efforts to treat the patients:

*Here have I often sat and mused alone***,
And racked myself with fasting and with praying,
For rich in hope... to stay the Death
I thought, Heaven's Lord to mercy bringing,
And now the crowd's applause rings in mine ears like scorn!
O couldst thou read what in my heart is hidden!
Father and son, no more than babe unborn,
Merit the fame that seeks them thus unbidden.
My father was a worthy gentleman,
To fame unknown, who sought with honest passion,
Yet whimsical device, as was his fashion,
Nature and all her holy rounds to scan;
In the Black Kitchen's murky region,
Cloistered with masters of the craft,
He, guided by prescriptions legion,
Concocted nauseous draught on draught...
There was the medicine. The patients still expired ;
None asked the question : Who got well ?
Thus have we wrought among these hills and valleys,
With hellish letuaries, worse havoc than the malice
of that same desolating pest.
Myself to thousands have the poison given ;
They pined away and yet my fame has thriven,
Till I must hear their shameless murderers blessed.*

* This "treatment" was actually a punishment for Neoclides'

** Translated by A.G. Yalouris

*** Translated by Albert G. Latham

In *The doctor's dilemma* by George Bernard Shaw the main hero is a doctor who has developed a revolutionary new cure for tuberculosis. However, due to limited staff and resources, he can only treat a few patients. When some pressing demands for therapy appear, the doctor faces strong ethical doubts and is in a big dilemma, since by selecting one patient must leave another untreated.

A very caustic satire of medical practice appears in the play *Knock or The Triumph of Medicine* by Jules Romain. The homonymous hero is a canning doctor who starts practice in a country town and very soon manages to make everybody in it believe that they are sick and need to be chronically followed by him (Fig. 16). At the end of the play he describes to his predecessor the "triumph" of his medicine as follows:

In a few minutes it will ring ten o'clock which means that it is the time for all my patients to have their second daily measurement of rectal temperature. So, in a few minutes two hundred fifty thermometers will enter to...*

Just at this time the conversation is omitted by the entrance of a new person.

CONCLUSION

Human disease has inspired several arts including the theater. Theater has seen disease as a critical point in human life and has presented its consequences in several ways. It is not without value for a clinical doctor to be aware of these references. One of the main dangers in clinical practice of nowadays is -to my opinion- that doctors tend to adopt a more "technocratic" and less "human" approach to their patients. Seeing their job through the eye of an artist or an author may



FIGURE 16. Louis Jouvet in the film *Knock* directed by Guy Lefranc in 1951¹⁶.

help them balance these two tendencies in a better way.

Of course medical references in the whole history of theater are numerous and cannot be included in a single article. The aim of the present work was only to present some of them in order to show the variety and extension of the topic. Some more focused and detailed references to it may be prepared in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. http://www.nt-archive.gr/TELIKA_PRODUCTS/screen/photos/YE1967_05_PH011_sc.jpg
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* Translated by A.G. Yalouris