

THE DOCTOR AND THE STAGE

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"He must have a clean appearance, and wear good clothes, using a sweet-smelling scent, which should be a totally unsuspecting perfume... In facial expression he should be controlled but not grim. For grimness seems to indicate harshness and a hatred of mankind, while a man who bursts into guffaws and is too cheerful is considered vulgar and vulgarity especially should be avoided." This advice by Hippocrates to the budding doctor makes a startling contrast with a speech in *The dumb lady*, a play by the 17th century dramatist John Lacy, a speech said by an old doctor to a physician on the threshold of his career: "First, have always a grave, busy face, as if you were still in great care for some great person's health, though your meditations truly known are only employed in casting where to eat that day. Secondly, be sure you keep the church strictly on Sundays, and in the middle of the sermon let your man fetch you out in great haste, as if it were to a patient. Then have your small agent to hire forty porters a day to leave impertinent notes at your house, and let them knock as if it were upon life and death. These things the world takes notice of, and you're cried up for a man of great practice, and there's your business done.....".

The contrast between these two pieces of advice is the contrast between a worthy preceptor formulating what he considers to be a correct bedside manner, on the one hand, and a materialistic adviser for whom the medical profession is just another way of earning money and must therefore be approached in the same

spirit as the selling of merchandise, on the other hand. The contrast is great, but both sets of advice have something in common. Both insist on the doctor's need to do some play-acting, in order to create a suitable type of public image. This theatrical element, which the medical profession shares with other professions, notably the legal one, has been commented upon by perceptive men throughout the ages. Such men have also observed that the physician and the surgeon, in spite of the dogmatism and high claims of some of them, have their failures as well as their successes, and that in the long run the doctor must inevitably lose his battle. A highly cynical ballad of the 18th century is clearly the fruit of this kind of observation:

*"I, John Lettsom,
Blisters, bleeds and sweats 'em;
If after that they please to die,
I, John, lets 'em."*

In the past, when rascally and incompetent doctors seem to have been very common, some observed that a sick doctor rarely tried to cure himself with his own prescriptions, or, as Rabelais put it, "Our bodies we commit to the physicians, who never themselves take any physic."

Moreover, as in other professions, there have always been doctors, competent or incompetent, whose venality has been notable, and indeed notably at variance with the nobility of the medical ideal. The case against the venality, both real and imagined, of the medical profession has never been put as devastatingly as in G. B. Shaw's outrageous preface to his play, *The doctor's dilemma*, a very long essay from which I shall quote just a few sentences: "That any sane nation, having observed that you could provide for the supply of bread by giving bakers a pecuniary interest in baking for you,

should go on to give a surgeon a pecuniary interest in cutting off your leg, is enough to make one despair of political humanity. But that is precisely what we have done. And the more appalling the mutilation, the more the mutilation is paid. He who corrects the in-growing toenail receives a few shillings: he who cuts your inside out receives hundreds of guineas, except when he does it to a poor person for practice." Obviously, Shaw is being unfair, though one cannot just dismiss him, but the passage is important because it shows what is often behind the thinking of the outsider who is looking at the medical profession. Now most dramatists have been non-medical — the most eminent exception being Anton Chekhov — so when we examine the doctor as seen by dramatists down the ages, we are really seeing a series of laymen's views, prejudices and all, and we must also remember that until comparatively recent times, some of the very foundations of medicine were unscientific and at times the frontiers between the trained doctor and the quack were not always clear.

The earliest European drama is the Greek, but I must confess my failure to find doctors as characters in both Greek and Latin drama, with the exception of one in the *Manaechmi* of Plautus, the play on which Shakespeare was to base his *Comedy of errors*. In this play Sosicles is mistaken for his twin Menaechmus and reacts angrily, so angrily in fact that he is thought to be mad. This causes Manaechnus's father-in-law to send for a doctor. With his flair for realistic portrayal, Plautus makes the father-in-law, like anyone very anxious to see the doctor arrive, moan that the doctor is taking an unconscionable time to come: "My bottom's numb with sitting, and my eyes sore with watching out for him. Hurry up, man; can't you move faster than an insect?" The doctor himself has bedside manners that verge on the adulatory; he even promises to sigh over his patient every minute of the day. He is the pompous type who does not stop to ask himself whether his jargon will be understood by his pa-

tients and is probably out to impress. When he asks the father-in-law whether it is a case of possession or hallucination, and whether there are "any symptoms of lethargy or hydropsical condition", he gets the answer he deserves: "I've brought you here to tell me that, and to cure him." The unlucky man is then presented not with Sosicles but with the other twin, Menaechmus, and all his solicitous questions get impatient answers, so that he immediately diagnoses a mental disturbance and says, "It'll take bushels of hellebore to get the better of this malady." The doctor's scene is not very long, but it is enough to establish him as a three-dimensional character who is funny without being grotesque.

The long stretch of the Middle Ages is a poor period for drama in all European countries, and the drama that one does find is either based on episodes from the Bible or else has abstractions and not real men and women for its characters, so it is not surprising that I have been unable to discover any doctors in mediaeval drama, though a more thorough search than I have been able to carry out may reveal one or two. I hope you will therefore forgive me for drawing your attention to the portrait of a doctor drawn by a writer who was not, from a technical point of view, a dramatist but whose rich genius had a strong element of the dramatic in it. In the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* Geoffrey Chaucer gives a balanced characterisation of a Doctor of Physic, whom he praises for his knowledge of etiology and of all the classical literature on medicine, as well as his skill in curing, but whose fruitful alliance with the apothecaries and love of gold he openly satirises. I shall quote some couplets from Chaucer's description:

*"He knew the cause of everich maladye,
Were it of hoot or cold, or moiste,
or drye*

.....
*The cause y-knowe, and of his harm
the rote,
Anan he yaf the seke man his bote.
Ful redy hadde he his apothecaries,
To sende him drogges and his letuaries,*

*For ech of hem made other for to winne;
Hir frendschipe nas nat newe to beginne.*

.....
*Of his diete mesurable was he,
For it was of no superfluitee.
But of greet norissing and digestible.
His studie was but litel on the bible.*

.....
*He kepte that he wan in pestilence.
For gold in phisik is a cordial,
Therefore he lovede gold in special."*

Like Plautus's doctor, Chaucer's is viewed critically and gets what the poet believes to be his due, but he is not caricatured. He is far from being the grotesque figure we shall find in a number of plays written in later times; indeed what is most admirable about Chaucer's description is its great restraint, seen at its best in the ironic closing couplet.

The Renaissance brought about great advances in medicine, but many doctors were slow to keep abreast of them, their knowledge of sonorous aphorisms in Greek and Latin being often far superior to their ability to prescribe the necessary medical remedies. Naturally this aroused the laughter and scorn of the extraordinary intellectuals which this period produced. One should not therefore be surprised to find in Italy, the cradle of European intellectual rebirth, such an acute-brained and cynical man as Niccolò Machiavelli satirising the medical profession in his *La mandragola* (The mandrake), the most brilliant example of the Italian *commedia erudita* of the 16th century.

Like Machiavelli, Christopher Marlowe could write a bitter type of comedy. *The Jew of Malta*, for instance, contains satire as biting as the Italian dramatist's. But Marlowe was above all a writer of tragedy. The play that made his name, *Tamburlaine*, is tragedy of an epic, highly rhetorical type which describes very colourfully the irresistible career of the great Scythian emperor. When, towards the end of this play's Part 2, Marlowe comes to Tamburlaine's death, he naturally has to treat it as heroically as his life. We therefore see the emperor's physician telling him of his sickness in the typical grand

Marlowian verse, although a modern audience would certainly be moved to smile, if not to laugh, by the opening reference to Tamburlaine's water:

*"I view'd your urine, and the hypostasis
Thick and obscure, doth make your
 danger great:
Your veins are full of accidental heat
Whereby the moisture of your blood is
 dried:
The humidum and calor, which some
 hold
Is not a parcel of the elements,
But of a substance more divine and pure,
Is almost clean extinguished and spent,
Which, being the cause of life, imports
 your death.
Besides, my lord, this day is critical,
Dangerous to those whose crisis is as
 yours:
Your artiers, which amongst the veins
 convey
The lively spirits which the heart
 engenders,
Are parched and void of spirit, that
 the soul,
Wanting those organons by which it
 moves,
Cannot endure, by argument of art."*

It is clear from this speech that even in the late 16th century, some doctors were still ready to confuse medicine with astrology. Not that Marlowe is satirising him; far from it. This doctor is in fact being presented with all the dignity which a royal physician acquires by reflection from his illustrious patient.

But Marlowe's doctor, as one can see by his terminology, is a traditionalist, a Galenist, who would naturally have scorned the new empirical school which had evolved during the Renaissance. As Herbert Silvette says in *The doctor on the stage* (Knorville 1967) during the 17th century – to which one can add the late 16th century – one finds "both ancient and modern opinion coexistent in some of the popular literature of the day, but with this distinction: the old is introduced with the deference usually paid to hereditary knowledge, while the new is treated as a fit subject for satire and farce."

It is a pity that Shakespeare never gave a medical man a very important part in his plays. The most notable Shakespearean character with a knowledge of medicine is Helena, the heroine of one of the dark comedies, *All's well that ends well*, who is not technically a doctor but the daughter of a lately-deceased and very famous doctor from whom she seems to have learned a considerable amount about medicine. Helena puts her knowledge to excellent use, for the King of France is grievously ill, of a fistula Shakespeare tells us, and all his doctors have pronounced him incurable.

Among her father's papers, the beautiful Helena has found directions for the cure of the disease from which the King is suffering, so she goes to Paris where she can also see again the Count Bertrand de Rousillon, her patroness's son, with whom she is in love. When the purpose of Helena's visit is announced to the King, not surprisingly he remains sceptical at first — after all the girl was not an FRCP or even a humble MD — but Helena presses him hard and promises a cure within forty-eight hours. I feel sure that no other doctor, off-stage or on it, ever said "You will be cured within two days" in such an elaborate fashion:

*"Ere twice the horses of the sun shall
bring
Their fiery torches his diurnal ring:
Ere twice in murk and occidental damp
Moist Hesperus hath quenched his
sleepy lamp,
Or four-and-twenty times the pilot's
glass
Hath told the thievish minutes how they
pass,
What is infirm from your sound parts
shall fly,
Health shall live free, and weakness
freely die."*

If the cure fails, Helena will die, but if she succeeds, her fee is to be a very unusual one: the right to have any husband she may choose from among the king's subjects. The king is cured, Helena chooses the Count Bertrand as her husband. Not

surprisingly, Bertrand does not like the idea of having a wife forced on him, but his main objection to her shows the lowly social status of the physician at the time:

*"I know her well;
She had her breeding at my father's
charge:
A poor physician's daughter my wife!
Disdain
Rather corrupt me ever!"*

Poor Helena has to go through a good deal of unhappiness before she gets her full fee.

The doctor in *Macbeth* is a very minor character who appears briefly in two scenes, one of them the famous sleep-walking scene. He is a very sensible doctor who realises that Lady Macbeth's illness is psychological not physical, or as he puts it, "she is troubled with thick-coming fancies / That keep her from her rest." He also knows that Lady Macbeth can cure herself: "Therein the patient/ Must minister to himself." Macbeth flies into one of his insane rages, and when he leaves the stage, the doctor wryly remarks: "Were I from Dunsinane away and clear/Profit again should hardly draw me near." This impression of sound common-sense has already been created by his behaviour during the sleep-walking scene, in which Shakespeare adds something to the doctor's characterisation in almost every speech he utters, such as the curiosity not due merely to professional reasons which makes him urge the Gentlewoman who waits on Lady Macbeth to tell him what she has overheard her mistress mutter during her sleep-walking, and which make him jot down what he himself hears Lady Macbeth say. The terrible revelations of what he overhears leads him to sum the situation up epigrammatically: "More needs she the divine than the physician." His modern counterpart would have suggested a psychiatrist rather than a theologian, but the diagnosis would have been almost identical.

Cornelius, a character in the late comedy *Cymbeline* is another Shakespearean doctor I shall glance at. He appears in just

one scene where he is asked by the villainous queen to supply her with poison. Unlike many of the doctors who briefly appear in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, Cornelius is not an unscrupulous assistant of royal murderers. In fact he is suspicious of the queen's purposes and does his duty by asking her bluntly why she wants it:

“But I beseech your grace, without
offence, —
My conscience bids me ask —
 wherefore you have
Commanded of me these most
 poisonous compounds...”

Unlike some professional men, medical or non-medical, he does not satisfy his conscience by putting a formal question and accepting the answer, however unconvincing, that he gets. What he does is to give the queen a drug which produces the outward symptoms of death and leaves the stage satisfied with himself, for as he says in an aside, he is “the truer/So to be false to her.”

Another admirable doctor can be found in Thomas Dekker's *Match me in London*. Don John, the King of Spain's brother, suddenly asks his doctor whether he is prepared to poison a man. The poor doctor replies, “Your lordship's merry,” and when he learns that the victim is to be the queen's father, he replies, “'Tis my certain death to do it” and gets the brutal rejoinder, “And thy certain death to deny it.” Like Cornelius in *Cymbeline*, however, he gives the victim only a drug that puts him to sleep, and then goes to confess the matter to the king. The doctor, I must remark, does not get the slightest reward, or even a word of thanks. That may be why many of the doctors in the plays of this period are villains.

Very different are the effects of another great man's requests to a physician in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*. In the first act of this tragedy, we find the Machiavellian Sejanus trying to cajole the physician Eudemus into betraying professional secrets. He starts off by asking him which of his women patients “is the most pleasant lady in her physic,” a question to

which Eudemus bashfully refuses to answer. Sejanus reacts coarsely:

“Why, sir, I do not ask you of their
 urines,
Whose smells most violet? or whose
 siege is best?
Or who makes hardest faces on her
 stool?”

Eudemus, however, remains cautious, and even when Sejanus openly offers him a bribe, he makes the classic reply:

“But, good my lord, if I should thus
 betray
The counsels of my patients, and a
 lady's
Of her high place and worth; what might
 your lordship,
Who presently are to trust me with
 your own,
Judge of my faith?”

We soon realise, however, that Eudemus is no Cornelius. When Sejanus offers to make him “a man made to make counsels,” he becomes eager to arrange an assignment in his own garden between Sejanus and his patient Livia, and even prepares a poison for the killing of Livia's husband. As Sejanus says of Eudemus, “ambition makes more trusty slaves than need.”

Possibly even more villainous than Eudemus is Lecure in *Thierry and Theodoret*, a play by Beaumont and Fletcher. Lecure is physician to Brunhalt, an evil and lascivious queen-mother who has been expelled from the Court of one of her sons, and goes to make mischief in that of her other son, Thierry. When Thierry is about to get married, Brunhalt is afraid that her influence will disappear, so the unscrupulous Lecure suggests a way of wrecking the marriage on the marriage night itself. He will give Thierry a potion, he says:

“Which when given unto him on the
 bridal night
Shall for five days so rob his faculties
Of all ability to pay that duty

*Which new-made wives expect, that
she shall swear
She is not matched to a man."*

The plan succeeds all too well, but Brunhalt and her cronies now want to kill Thierry. Lecure again proves himself useful. He gives Thierry a poisoned handkerchief which has the horrible effect of preventing Thierry from closing his eyes and soon brings about his painful death. The wicked, however, also come to a sticky end, though Lecure dies a somewhat unsatisfactory death by his own hand off-stage.

Another bad doctor, a catspaw in the hands of the evil Brachiano and Flamineo, is Doctor Julio in Webster's dark tragedy, *The white devil*. I shall not bother you with what he is told to do, but perhaps I should quote what Flamineo, the Machiavellian villain who hires him, says about him to his face: "A poor quack-salving knave, my lord; one that should have been lashed for 's lechery, but that he confessed a judgement, had an execution laid upon him, and so put the whip to a non plus..... He will shoot pills into a man's guts shall make them have more ventages than a cornet or lamprev: he will poison a kiss....." The rest of the speech is so coarse, that I will refrain from quoting it. As you can see, however, from this speech and from what we have said about other villainous doctors, these Renaissance physicians certainly lived a very strenuous life. The impression one gets from these plays is that they did everything except cure people.

It is with some sense of relief that one turns from these rascals to other doctors who not only refrain from misusing their profession but also actively practise it for the good of their patients. One good example is Friar Anselmo, a character in the first part of Thomas Dekker's *The honest whore*. This friar is the superintendent of Bethlehem Monastery supposedly in Milan, although it was obviously meant to remind contemporary audiences of the Bethlehem hospital in London, the famous Bedlam. Friar Anselmo is a good man interested in the welfare of his pa-

tients, though naturally his treatment of them is the one thought to be suitable for mental patients at the time, which included chaining, whipping and dieting. As the friar says of his patients:

*"They must be used like children,
pleased with toys,
And anon whipped for their unruliness."*

And one of his former patients says: "I was a mad wag myself here, once, but I thank Father Anselmo, he lashed me into my right mind again." Much subtler are the methods of Dr. Hughball, in Richard Brome's *The antipodes*, though his patients seem to be neurotic and are far from being violently insane. Hughball uses a psychological shock treatment. Indeed, one of the other characters thus says of him:

*"And not so much by bodily physic (no!
He sends few recipes to th' apothecaries)
As medicine of the mind, which he
infuses
So skilfully, yet by familiar ways,
That it begets both wonder and delight
In his observers, while the stupid patient
Finds health at unawares."*

One of his patients is Peregrine who has a morbid restlessness which makes him yearn to be travelling all the time. Hughball cures him by creating an environment, with the aid of a company of actors, which deceives Peregrine into thinking that he has been transported to the antipodes, where everything is the reverse of what it is in Britain; for instance, rogues are rewarded, lawyers are in rags and poets in fine clothes. This topsy-turveydom leads Peregrine to conclude that there is no place like home. Another patient, who is a very jealous husband, is cured by being made to witness at night a feigned attempted seduction of his wife, who emerges from the encounter with flying colours. This sounds like, and is, the application of elementary psychology, but at least one is here seeing a doctor attempting a cure which is not based on rigid formulae.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the greatest dramatist interested in the medical profession is not an Englishman but the French Jean Baptiste Moliere. He and George Bernard Shaw must be reckoned to be of all dramatists the two who have detested doctors most. For Moliere doctors are but quacks who have achieved respectability, whose only ethical concern is to exclude other doctors who do not belong to their own confraternity, who do not care a hang for their patients but care a great deal for their fees. This little dialogue from *M. de Porceaugnac* already gives an idea of the scorn felt by Moliere. A physician is asking a countryman about a relative who is a patient of his:

Phys.: How many times has he been bled?

Countr.: Fifteen times, sir, — within this fortnight.

Phys.: And does he not mend?

Countr.: No, sir.

Phys.: That's a sign his distemper is not in his blood."

In another play, *L'amour medecin* (Love the best doctor) again the doctors are not spared, the emphasis being on what Moliere regards as being their supreme cynicism. In the play, Sganarelle's daughter, Lucinda, pretends to be ill so that her lover, of whom her father disapproves, may visit her disguised as a doctor. But first four real doctors are summoned. We are prepared for their entrance by what the maid says: "What do you want with four doctors, master? Isn't one enough to kill the girl off?" When the doctors arrive, the maid tells one of them that another patient of his has died. The doctor, however, refuse to believe her: "It is quite out of the question. Hippocrates says that such maladies last either 14 or 21 days, and it is only 6 days since he fell ill." This rigid dogmatism in the face of facts was something that Moliere could not stomach. The doctors are left alone to hold their consultation. They talk and talk..... about the excellence of their horses or about a medical controversy

utterly unconnected with Lucinda's case. By the way, they still have not even seen their patient. The whole dialogue is of course a caricature, but some of it rings true. One of them says of a Dr. Artimius: "Of course his treatment, we know, killed the patient, and Theophraste's ideas might have saved him, but Theophraste was in the wrong all the same. He should not have disputed the diagnosis of a senior colleague." The same man narrates how he quarrelled with a doctor who did not belong to the same faculty, a quarrel which went on until the neglected patient died. His comment is: "When a man's dead, he's dead and that's all it amounts to, but a point of etiquette neglected may seriously prejudice the welfare of the entire medical profession." When the doctors are finally asked for their opinion, they give it without having examined Lucinde. They prescribe anodynes, bleedings and purgings, but they will not commit themselves about the certainty of a cure. Lucinda may, in spite of everything, die but, to quote one of them, "Far better die according to rules than live on in spite of them."

Before leaving Moliere, I must mention one more play of his, *Le medecin malgre lui* (A doctor against his own will) in which Sganarelle is tricked into impersonating a doctor and is used by Moliere to parody medical jargon. I shall quote one speech:

"Now as these vapours... pass along the left side, where the liver is, to the right side, where the heart is, one finds that the lung, which in Latin is called annyany, being connected with the brain, which in Greek is called nasmus, through the hollow vein, which in Hebrew is called cubile, encounters these vapours as they pass along and these fill the ventricles of the scapula, and since these vapours... I beg you to follow my argument... and since these vapours have a certain malignity... which is caused by the secretion of humours engendered in the concavity of the diaphragm, the result is that these vapours... ossabandus, nequeys, nequer, potarinum, quippa milus. That is the real cause of your daughter's dumbness." And

when the girl's father protests that the liver is not on the left side and the heart not on the right, Sganarelle is not at a loss, "Yes, that is what it was like once, but we have changed all that, and nowadays we practise medicine in an entirely new fashion." It is, I suppose, a remark which all doctors make at least once in their lifetime, either defiantly or defensively.

The last word on Moliere was said by Shaw: "Until there is a practicable alternative to blind trust in the doctor, the truth about this doctor is so terrible that we dare not face it. Moliere saw through the doctors; but he had to call them in just the same."

Coming to the eighteenth century, we meet one of the most genial of Italian dramatists, Carlo Goldoni, who learned much from Moliere but does not seem to have shared his views about the medical profession. In one of his best comedies, *La famiglia dell'antiquario* (The family of the antiquary), in fact he gives us a somewhat pathetic portrait of an elderly doctor who is a hanger-on in a noble household. At the end of the play, however, the doctor redeems himself by playing an important part in setting right a serious domestic trouble.

Another of Goldoni's doctors, in *Il bugiardo* (The liar), is completely different. He is a successful man with two daughters whose reputation, however, is being damaged by a slanderer. In his dismay, he cannot help using medical terminology: "Oh, wretched me! Poor house! Poor reputation! This is an illness which Hippocrates and Galen cannot teach me to heal! I shall, however, discover a system of moral medicine, which can strike at the trouble's root. The essential thing is to make haste, to prevent the illness from making too much headway and from establishing itself. *Principiis obsta, sero medicina paratur.*" The doctor is a serious man, not quite the stereotyped heavy father, though towards the end he does threaten to send a daughter, who has behaved imprudently, to a convent. Still, he is only behaving in the way fathers were supposed to behave at the time. In this

same play, we also find a medical student, Florindo, in love with Rosaura, one of the doctor's daughters. Florindo is gently caricatured by Goldoni. In one scene, where he is sent to look after Rosaura, who has fainted, he timidly touches her hand, is in raptures, and immediately swoons as well.

Another 18th century dramatist, the Irish Richard Brinsley Sheridan, gives a caricature of a doctor in his farce, *St. Patrick's Day*. The sentimental Dr Rosy helps an Irish lieutenant win the hand of Laura, whose father is strongly opposed to the match. As in the plays of Moliere and in those of other dramatists, the doctor's free entry to people's houses makes him an excellent fellow-plotter. In a soliloquy Rosy thinks nostalgically about the days when he courted his wife, and expresses himself grotesquely by means of medical imagery. He is a pompous and rhetorical man who drives even his friends crazy with his inconsequential talk. His big scene comes when he has to persuade the tyrannical father that he has been poisoned. He pretends to see black spots on the man's nose and to be unable to hear him properly. Indeed he moans over the man so much as to provoke from him the appellative of "Dr Croaker". He is hardly consoling when he says he can do nothing to cure the man, but that he will certainly see justice done on his murderer. Of course, all this is an excuse for Dr Rosy to fetch the lieutenant disguised as a German quack doctor — a trick which Sheridan borrowed from Moliere. Still, I imagine that only the ordinary doctor's still fairly low social standing even late in the 18th century can have made such a ruse acceptable to the contemporary audience.

At this point I feel I must crave your indulgence, for I must make a great leap from the late eighteenth to the second half of the 19th century. My only excuse is the relative unimportance of drama during the Romantic period, with the one great exception of Germany and the absence of medical characters from the German plays of this period I am familiar with. The second half of this century brings us to one of the greatest dramatists

of all times, the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen who revolutionised drama by making it realistic and a great tool in the hands of social reformers. His *Ghosts* has an obvious interest for the doctor, but there are no medical characters in it, so I shall draw your attention to two other plays of his, *The master builder* and *The wild duck*. In these two plays, Ibsen presents doctors as people of whom he obviously approves, practical men and spokesmen of the common sense point of view. Unlike his disciple, Shaw, whose views we have already glanced at and will examine further later on, Ibsen does not regard doctors as parasites or even as menaces to society. Dr Heraldal, in *The master builder*, is a good family doctor, a friend as well as a physician. In his dealings with Solness, the master builder, he is tactful as far as possible, but does not shirk asking searching questions if he deems them necessary. He has a certain dry humour and will stand no nonsense. Solness, a married man, is infatuated by his female clerk but tries to make it sound as if it is just the other way round. He tells the doctor, "I can see that she's conscious of me when I look at her from behind. She trembles and shrinks if I just come near her. What do you think of *that*?" To which the doctor replies, "Hm — that can be explained all right." During the same conversation, Solness gives what is clearly an unconvincing explanation. The doctor does not beat about the bush and tells him, "No, I'm dashed if I understand a word." Again Solness reveals himself as being very unsure of himself. He is scared stiff of the new generation which, he says, will one day come knocking at his door. The doctor, realising that in such an eventuality the danger will come not from the new generation but from within Solness himself, poo-poo's his fears: "Well, good gracious, what about it?" At this point in the play there is literally a knock at the door. The girl who enters will prove to be Solness's undoing, but the action makes it clear that this undoing has been willed unconsciously by the master builder himself.

Relling, the doctor in *The wild duck*;

is not only as blunt as Heraldal but also capable of throwing aside the conventions of politeness in order to save his friends from the dangerous, morbid idealism of Gregers Werle. At one point, Gregers speaks metaphorically of the stench he can smell in Hjalmar Ekdal's house. Relling immediately butts in, saying, "Excuse me, it couldn't be you yourself, I suppose, who's bringing the stench with you from the mines up there?" Relling ends by even threatening to throw Werle down the stairs. Lather he gives his diagnosis of what is wrong with Werle, "Acute inflammation of the conscience" which he considers to be "a national disease; but it only breaks out sporadically." Relling's fears about Werle prove to be only too well-founded, and all his efforts to warn Hjalmar are futile.

The other very great dramatist of the late 19th century is our doctor dramatist, Chekhov. Oddly enough — but perhaps not so oddly — Chekhov's three highly interesting medical characters (I am ignoring Chebutykin in *The three sisters*) are not admirable persons, and one of them almost qualifies for the post of villain of the piece. This unpleasant fellow is Yevgenij Kostantinovich Lvov, a character in Chekhov's first full-length play, *Ivanov*. Lvov is a young, newly-qualified doctor, an idealist as dangerous as the non-medical Werle in Ibsen's *The wild duck*.

Dorn, in *The seagull*, is different in most respects from Lvov. He is fifty-three and, far from being an idealist, he is a cynic about everything, including his profession. Perhaps the listless rural society in which he finds himself — remember this was the last period of the Czar's rule in Russia — had squeezed out of him any enthusiasm he may have had once, but his *malaise* seems to have even deeper roots.

His attitude to medicine emerges beautifully in a couple of scenes. The old Sorin, who is unwell, would like some medical treatment, but Dorn's reaction is, "Treatment! At sixty!" When pressed, he grudgingly says, "Oh, all right then, take some valerian drops." In a later Act, Sorin is very ill and complains that he is being neglected by Dorn. Dorn's reply shows the

same lack of interest as before: "Well, what would you like to have? Valerian drops? Soda? Quinine?" Dorn, who feels that life is a tremendous cheat, cannot fathom how Sorin wishes to hold on to it. The only help he tries to give the old man is to exhort him to suppress the fear of death.

The most fascinating of Chekhov's doctors is certainly Astrov in *Uncle Vania*. He is a complex character, half-way between Lvov and Dorn both in age and in temperament. In his late thirties, his handsome looks have been impaired by sheer hard work and by his heavy drinking. He himself says that having lived for so many years among the queer people of his province, he himself has become a little queer himself; his feelings have grown duller, and he does not love anyone. Because he knows he is a heavy drinker, he is troubled by the death of one of his patients during an operation. He has lost the capacity to love anyone, his one great passion being for inanimate objects: trees

In the plays of George Bernard Shaw, the attitude to doctors marks a return to the bitter satire of Moliere. Even if some of Shaw's medical characters are more complex than Moliere's, there is a caricatural element in practically all of them. Shaw fired his first broadside in an early play, *The philanderer*, in which we find an eminent physician, Dr Paramore, who has made his name as the discoverer of a liver disease named after him. Colonel Craven one of Paramore's patients, has had the disease diagnosed and has been given only a year to live. In the second Act Paramore has been reading the B.M.J. offstage. Suddenly he comes in, with an expression of despair on his face. He is asked whether he has received bad news and replies, "Terrible news! Fatal news!" We find out that he has read in the B.M.J. that Paramore's disease has now been discovered not to be a disease at all. Not unnaturally Colonel Craven is both jubilant and hurt that Paramore should regard this as horrible news, but Paramore is only rude to him. Shaw also satirises the grumbling of all research workers that they do not get enough funds for their

research. While he had been given only three dogs and a monkey on which to experiment, in "enlightened republican France" one doctor had been given two hundred monkeys, and another three hundred dogs at three francs apiece to do research on Paramore's disease. In a fit of rage, Paramore threatens to rediscover the disease, because, as he says, "I know it exists; I feel it; and I'll prove it if I have to experiment on every mortal animal that's got a liver at all."

In *The doctor's dilemma*, Shaw's criticism of doctors and medical practice is dominant, and in fact Shaw wrote a very long preface to the play when he published it. In this preface, Shaw comments indignantly on the different opinions held by doctors, differences which do not prevent them from supporting each other in public. He writes: "Yet the two guinea man never thinks that the five shilling man is right: if he did, he would be understood as confessing to an overcharge of £1. 17." This notwithstanding, in public doctors seem to agree, though, he adds, "Even the layman has to be taught that infallibility is not quite infallible, because there are two qualities of it to be had at two prices." Doctors, Shaw says, dare not accuse each other of malpractice because they are not sufficiently sure of their own opinions, and the effect is "to make the medical profession a conspiracy to hide its shortcomings."

Thus in *The doctor's dilemma* we find that Sir Colenso and his colleagues, though they are strongly of the opinion that an eminent colleague of theirs is constantly endangering patients by his ignorance, do not dream of denouncing him publicly. There is an abundance of satire in the play. We thus find that Dr Scutzmacher has made a fortune as a G.P. by putting on his plate: "Advice and medicine sixpence. Cure guaranteed." Not very subtle satire, perhaps, but it clearly shows what Shaw thought about the venality of doctors. Another man, a surgeon, has, we hear from one of his colleagues, "worked hard at anatomy to find something fresh to operate on; and at last he got hold of something he calls the nuciform sac, which

he's made quite the fashion. People pay him 500 guineas to cut it out." Like Paramore's disease, however, there is a great possibility that the nuciform sac exists only in this medical man's imagination. Professional envy is beautifully satirised. Walpole, the nuciform sac man, comes to congratulate Sir Colenso on his new knighthood, but makes it clear that he is happy for Colenso as a man not as a professional, since he thinks that the medical treatment that has made Colenso famous is nothing but rot.

The doctor's dilemma is not merely a satire. It is, in fact, an unusual play for Shaw, a tragicomedy. The dilemma of the title is that faced by Sir Colenso. Whom will he save: a very good man but a worthless doctor, or an unscrupulous rascal who happens to be a great artist? The dilemma grows greater because Sir Colenso falls in love with the artist's wife. He finally resolves it by declining to treat the artist and handing him over to an eminent but highly unscientific colleague who will in all probability kill his patient, as in fact he does. The play ends very ironically. The fifth-rate doctor whose life is saved gets out of his wretched practice and prospers in government employment, whilst Sir Colenso discovers that the beautiful widow regards him as an uninteresting middle-aged man, and has in fact remarried. This makes him exclaim: "Then I have committed a purely disinterested murder." I must add, however, that Sir Colenso's motive in "murdering", as he puts it, the artist has not been merely selfish; one strong motive has been his desire to free the wife from what he regarded as being a wretched existence. By making him discover that the woman has been happy, in spite of her husband's scoundrelly behaviour, Shaw jibes at those doctors who believe that they should regulate their patients' lives as well as their health.

When one examines the plays written in our own age, one is bewildered by the sheer number of works, works of all types: drawing-room comedies, thrillers, surrealist plays, plays of social criticism..... Medical characters can be found in a fair number of them. Just to mention a few,

there is the doctor who has committed murder in the thriller *Bonaventure*, the shrewd Scottish doctor in Brighouse's *Hobson's choice*, the alcoholic Dr Farley in N. C. Hunter's Chekhovian *A day by the sea*, the young doctor faced with the difficult task of treating a case of suspected criminal assault on a young girl in Michael Hasting's *Yes, and after*. One of the most interesting, however, is Dr Copperthwaite in *The happy haven*, a satirical black comedy by the contemporary dramatist, John Arden. This doctor is the superintendent of a home for old people, all of whom have been failures of one sort or another. He represents the efficient but fairly impersonal administrator, fully aware of the need for good public relations. Thus, in his opening speech, addressed to the audience, he is careful to point the home's amenities, using language which is a parody of publicity brochures. When towards the end of the play, the home is visited by a group of distinguished visitors, Arden again takes delight in parodying the inane commentary of administrators to visitors which all of us know all too well on similar occasions. To listen to a sample: "To the right my Operating Theatre, and ancillary departments, as you might say, perfection of function is in itself beautiful — but of course, Sir Frederick, you know all this already — Mr Mayor and ladies, we see over there the Sir Frederick Hapgood Ward, opened last year by Sir Frederick himself, there's a large bronze plaque in the foyer commemorating the occasion, and of course the Annigoni portrait of the late Lady Hapgood, which we account one of the Happy Haven's most treasured possessions." Copperthwaite is not just an administrator; he is also a research scientist, using the inmates as his guinea pigs, and through him Arden attacks the depersonalisation of the inmates of certain institutions. One of the inmates says of him that whilst he was glad to apologise to the captain of his football team for having failed to score, his patients are "all his worms. And he says, 'Turn, worms, turn,' and he thinks we have got no choice."

At the end of the play, they manage to get their back on him cruelly. He has

