

JILLIAN LINSTER

---

## The Physician and His Servant in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*

*The Croxton Play of the Sacrament features a physician who has regularly been characterized as a quack and buffoon. This paper combines the play's historical and cultural context with a close reading of the text to argue that the doctor himself is a legitimate medical practitioner; the combined clowning of his servant and the foolishness of his patient make the physician appear comical. By considering possible performance choices and the relationship of the audience to the play's action, I suggest a more complex reading of a scene and character that have previously been too readily dismissed.*

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* recounts the story of Jonathas, a Jewish merchant, who purchases a piece of Eucharistic bread from a wealthy Christian merchant, Aristorius. Jonathas and four friends proceed to torture the host in order to determine whether it is truly and actually the body of Jesus Christ. The experiments conducted by the five Jews — stabbing the host, crucifying it, casting it into a pot of boiling oil, and throwing it into a fiery furnace — result in their eventual belief and conversion by way of a miracle in which Jesus appears to them in the form of a child. During the crucifixion scene, Jonathas's hand is torn off; although a physician happens by and offers to treat the wound, Jonathas refuses his help. Jesus himself ultimately restores the hand to its original form. When Aristorius learns of the miracle and the Jews' conversion, he repents of his sin in selling the host to Jonathas, and both men vow to leave their mercantile trade and devote themselves to serving God by sharing the lesson they have learned.<sup>1</sup>

As fascinating as it is frustrating for the ways in which it defies easy categorization with other period performance pieces, the Croxton *Play* has received steady attention from literary scholars during the past century. David Lawton observes that the late medieval drama 'has occasioned valuable recent work drawing on the perspectives of cultural and performance studies' but warns against 'mythologies about the play, points at which scholarly conclusions have raced ahead of the

---

Jillian Linster (jillian.linster@usd.edu) is an instructor of English at the University of South Dakota.

evidence' and scholarship in which 'critique has not only failed to challenge but is built upon formative assumptions of earlier criticism'.<sup>2</sup> One such regrettable mythology concerns the scene featuring the physician character, Master Brundyche of Brabant, and his servant, Colle.<sup>3</sup> The Croxton *Play*'s apparent debt to earlier English folk drama traditions such as mummers', miracle, pageant, and Corpus Christi plays has determined the mode of approach for many readings of this scene during the past century, particularly in regard to Brundyche.<sup>4</sup> The physician almost automatically receives identification as a 'quack' or 'mountebank', terms with harshly negative connotations, implying he is a charlatan not actually capable of the medical care he advertises. Careful close reading of the text, however, does not support this interpretation of Brundyche; his common characterization is a prime example of what Lawton calls 'mythologies about the play, points at which scholarly conclusions have raced ahead of the evidence'.<sup>5</sup> Although scholars have identified Brundyche as a quack since at least the early twentieth century, the evidence within the text itself does not strictly support this verdict.

Recently scholars including Linda Ehksam Voigts and Elisabeth Dutton have discussed Brundyche's characterization, calling into question previously accepted interpretations of the physician.<sup>6</sup> Voigts and Dutton each carefully reconsider his role within the drama and the position of the physician in late medieval culture by comparing the Croxton *Play* scene to contemporary medical literature and estates satire.<sup>7</sup> Although Voigts's and Dutton's readings do 'challenge ... assumptions of earlier criticism', their significant claims can be further supported by additional explication of the physician's scene to lay an interpretive foundation that withstands the critical pitfalls Lawton describes. Building on and responding to Voigts and Dutton, I will demonstrate additional internal evidence for re-categorizing Brundyche and show that, although the scene featuring the physician and his servant is undoubtedly comedic, Colle rather than his master is the comic figure. In fact, Colle's preoccupation with his own wit makes him the unreliable 'professional' — in terms of both work and speech — rather than Brundyche. If, as Voigts and Dutton both suggest, an element of parody remains central to the doctor's character, this parody originates in Colle's representation of his master rather than the physician's own behaviour as he is written in the play. Considering this scene in the terms of medieval estates satire rather than folk drama and within its contemporary medical culture helpfully recasts the context for understanding these two characters. Close attention to the text shows that the doctor only becomes satirical through his servant's mediation.

The Croxton *Play* has not been decisively dated. Line 58 of the play text refers to 1461 as the date of the original miracle whose story the drama tells, and the general consensus among scholars is to identify it as a late fifteenth-century play; obviously, it was not written before the 1460s.<sup>8</sup> Neither can it have been written later than the only extant copy, which exists as part of a compilation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin. Tamara Atkin has completed the most meticulous and comprehensive effort at dating the surviving manuscript, concluding that 'the play was copied in the middle of the sixteenth century'.<sup>9</sup> This leaves a window of nearly one hundred years during which the play may have originally been composed. As Atkin points out, however, Norman Davis long ago suggested on the basis of linguistic analysis 'that a considerable time separated the original text from the surviving copy', and the majority of scholars place the play's likely composition date nearer to 1461 than to the date of the manuscript.<sup>10</sup> Inexact dating complicates readings of this play that attempt to place it within a cultural or historical context, but it does not preclude them.<sup>11</sup> The range of possibility has been reasonably limited by the work of the various scholars noted above, and substantial corroborative archival evidence from the same time period does exist, as Voigts's work successfully demonstrates.<sup>12</sup>

The doctor's scene (ll 525–652), however, represents an additional dating dispute. Hardin Craig first suggested that the action involving Brundyche and Colle was added at some point after the original writing of the play:

That the episode of the quack doctor is an addition to the original play is evident from the fact that it appears in the ballad stanza and in a livelier style than the rest of the play. This addition has appropriately or traditionally a comic proclamation written in rhymed tumbling measure of four accents, the rest of the episode being in the ballad stanza. This excrescence is indeed a tiny folk play inserted in the main story. It accomplishes nothing, and at the end the doctor and his boy are beaten away by the four Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Davis generally supports Craig's reading, agreeing that the 'comic buffoonery' of the scene 'has been thought, with good reason, to be an interpolation into a text originally wholly serious'.<sup>14</sup> Craig's and Davis's interpretation, however, has been challenged recently by several scholars who see the scene as something rather more than an 'excrescence' and read beyond stanza forms to consider the episode's content in relationship to the rest of the drama.<sup>15</sup> Dutton rejects Davis's 'wholly serious' reading of the text, identifying it rather as 'a farcical comedy laden with slapstick violence'.<sup>16</sup> Considering 'the action-packed nature of the main plot and

its farcically comic potential', Dutton asserts that 'Master Brundyche is more than a good joke'.<sup>17</sup> Atkin similarly confirms that 'there are good reasons for believing that the episode belongs to the play's original design' and offers a compelling reading of the scene as an intentional and 'effective piece of orthodox propaganda' in line with the play's central message.<sup>18</sup> In his 1975 edition of the Croxton *Play* David Bevington originally claimed, 'The play's single comic scene [ie, the doctor's] appears to be a late addition ... probably added for its horseplay rather than for any serious thematic purpose', but in a recent book chapter he reconsiders, asserting, "Comic relief" is too easy a nostrum'.<sup>19</sup> Bevington admits there is some 'plausible' connection between the doctor's scene and the main plot and concludes, 'We should not be surprised to find in *Sacrament* an episodic instance of this paradoxically comic suffering in the little story of Master Brundiche and his servant', in large part because the entire plot line of Jonathas's exertions upon the host is 'a ludicrous parody of Christ's suffering', buoyed by 'the irresistibly comic nature of an actor losing a limb or part of one'.<sup>20</sup> The analysis provided by Dutton, Atkin, and Bevington demonstrates an integral position for Brundyche and Colle within the play's themes and purpose, suggesting that any perceived stylistic or tonal differences may be merely emphatic or transitional rather than indicating the doctor's scene is a later addition to the text.<sup>21</sup>

The scene's date is important to appropriately contextualizing a close reading of the physician and his servant, because the medical culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was almost constantly shifting and evolving. In their expansive history *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800*, Conrad et al explain that the medical culture of fifteenth-century Europe has been vastly neglected and misunderstood.<sup>22</sup> There exist few major medical authors or treatises in this era, but this should not suggest that the quality of medical knowledge or training was not of high quality for its time. Conrad and his co-authors note that there were important 'changes taking place within the standard framework of medicine' and warn against a 'definition of progress ... laid down by the opponents of medieval medicine. Where enough material survives and has been properly studied, historians have discovered a vigorous medical culture'.<sup>23</sup> One of the key features of learned medicine in the fifteenth century, especially the latter half, was a 'growing rejection of authorities ... in favour of an emphasis on practice' as 'Pragmatism reigned'.<sup>24</sup> Rather than churning out theoretical tomes, medical literature of the late 1400s predominated in 'plague tractates, health guides, recipe collections', and individual case studies; herbals and books on distillations were also popular.<sup>25</sup> The medical literature of this era is, overwhelmingly, practical literature.

While the predominant mindset regarding medical practice may be evident in the extant texts, it is more difficult to sort out the tangled hierarchy of practitioners during this time period. By the end of the fifteenth century the range of English medical practitioners included physicians, clergymen, surgeons, barbers, midwives, cunning folk, and apothecaries, as well as individuals who served in more than one of these roles. Although the later Middle Ages saw the development of ‘a more formal hierarchy that separated professional from lay, surgeon from barber, and doctor from quack’, such changes occurred on a regional basis and to varying degrees; not all parts of Europe, or any given country, saw such formalization arise or take hold by 1500.<sup>26</sup> The geographical region, then, in which the play is set is essential to understanding the physician in the Croxton *Play of Sacrament*, as is the nationality of the medical practitioner himself.

In ‘Fifteenth-Century English Banns Advertising the Services of an Itinerant Doctor’, Voigts identifies a portion of a manuscript as an announcement advertising the services of an actual physician who occupied a position similar to Brundyche. Connections between the document and the Croxton *Play* are manifold. Voigts locates the play, as is standard, ‘with Croxton, probably near Bury St Edmunds’ and identifies the vernacular dialect of the manuscript that includes the banns as also coming from ‘the vicinity of Bury Saint Edmunds’, noting that ‘the place-names in *The Play of the Sacrament* tie the play, and especially the satire of the doctor, even closer to the dialect location’ of the banns manuscript.<sup>27</sup> Voigts furthermore identifies the banns manuscript as ‘written in the second half of the fifteenth century’, which corresponds with the approximate composition date of the Croxton *Play*.<sup>28</sup> Voigts’s work reclaims the legitimacy of the medical profession and a segment of its practitioners, establishing that the medical banns do ‘in fact advertise not a seller of prepared medicines, but rather a medical practitioner who undertakes diagnoses and “writes” appropriate medicines’.<sup>29</sup> Such characterization establishes a new way of viewing Brundyche and his behaviour in the Croxton *Play*.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the doctor advertised by Voigts’s banns, however, Brundyche appears to be foreign: Colle calls his employer ‘Master Brendych of Braban’ (l 533). Voigts explains that the duchy of Brabant was known for quality medical training and care in the late fifteenth century. Several known physicians practicing medicine in the British Isles during this time came from Brabant or had close associations with the duchy, and one of the most important medical writers of the fourteenth century was from Liège, a prominent city in Brabant.<sup>31</sup> Dutton, however, identifies Brundyche’s foreignness as a potential point of tension. The play’s East Anglian context meant it was performed for an audience ‘under economic threat

from outsiders', especially an increasing number of immigrants from the Low Countries, and someone identifying with Brabant would have been subject to 'the medieval stereotype of Flemish drunkenness'.<sup>32</sup> A doctor from Brabant was not facelessly foreign; audience members could readily recognize such a character, but they might view him in a positive or negative light, depending on individual preconceptions. Although existing scholarship has explored a drunken-stereotype Brundyche, recognizing the respectable, learned doctor also layered in his foreign identity deepens the complexity of his character. There is nothing in the play that suggests Brundyche is ashamed of or reluctant to advertise his foreign identity.

Advertisements like Colle's announcement and the medical banns Voigts explicates played an important communicative role in medieval England. Although the term 'banns' is now associated solely with marriage banns, 'a canon law requirement that a marriage could take place only after it had been announced in public on three successive Sundays', it originally meant 'public proclamations' in a much broader sense; the term derives from the Old and Middle English verb 'bannan'. Because such a document was brief in both length and use, however, banns texts were 'unlikely to be preserved', and very few survive. Aside from the doctor's banns, other known Middle English banns include 'those used in the later Middle Ages for what has been called "medieval theatrical marketing"', or the announcement of plays to be performed in the nearby area by a visiting theatrical troupe.<sup>33</sup> This 'marketing' for doctors' and theatrical banns occurs less in the modern sense of coercive enticement for capital gains and more out of a basic need to transmit information.<sup>34</sup> No one will know to show up for a play if the traveling theater company does not announce the scheduled performance; similarly, no one will know that an itinerant doctor is in town, or what they might see him for, if he does not announce his presence and outline his skills. The Croxton play includes both types of banns: a theatrical announcement that appears at its start and the announcement made by Colle, Brundyche's servant, in the doctor's scene.

The theatrical banns at the start of the play establish crucial context for the banns Colle will provide later. The eighty lines constitute something of a performance in itself, the pronouncement oscillating between two 'vexillators' along with at least one attending 'mynstrell' contributing a musical track (l 80). There must be truth in advertising, and the vexillators give a thorough summary of the plot including tantalizing details such as the amount of money Jonathas pays for the host and the types of torture the Jews subject it to: 'They grevid our Lord gretly on grownd, / And put hym to a new passyoun' (ll 37–8). They even promise the drama is based on a true story, claiming, 'At Rome þis myracle ys knownen welle kowthe' (l 56). Although the banns promote the promised play, there is nothing

misleading about the information they give. The vexillators pledge nothing that is not provided in the actual drama, and they do not offer any other sort of enticement to try to convince people to attend the performance other than promises of their own general edification.

Colle's announcement (ll 608–21) at Brundyche's prompting serves as a type of advertisement similar to the play banns. The initial part of the message is fairly straightforward. Colle, addressing the audience, tells them that they should consult his master if they suffer any illness: 'All manar off men þat haue any syknes, / To Master Brentberecly loke þat yow redresse' (ll 608–9). He promises that Brundyche will faithfully attend to them 'tyll ye be in yow[r] graue' (l 611), which, typically of Colle's wit, puns on the prospect of either life-long care or life-ending treatment. The physician's servant then continues with a long list of various ailments, itemizing for potential customers the types of things Brundyche can treat. Whether or not Brundyche is actually capable of doing, or even seeming to do, anything about any of these illnesses cannot be inferred from the speech, but the long list endows Colle with the power of suggestion. The humour in these lines lies in the bawdy nature of some of the ailments ('boldyro', a euphemism for male genitalia; 'colt-evil', an equine disease that causes swelling of those same parts) and in the nudging and winking that must have taken place among the members of the audience as they suggested that their neighbours needed to take up Master Brundyche's offer.<sup>35</sup>

In the final lines of his speech Colle boldly continues to up the comic ante. The reversal of line 619, 'Thowh a man w[e]re ryght heyle, he cowd soone make hym sek' (instead of 'though a man were right ill, he could soon make him well') seems an obviously intentional inversion, particularly as it provides the second line of a rhyming couplet. Brundyche does not let the unruly servant continue long before interrupting, but Colle slips in two final lines, informing the audience that his master lodges in a 'colkote ... besyde Babwell Myll' (ll 620–1). The reference to Babwell Mill has long been understood as a crucial clue in locating the 'Croxton' of the play as the one in Norfolk near Thetford and Bury St Edmunds, firmly identifying it as East Anglian and geographically connecting it to the doctor's banns discussed by Voigts, above.<sup>36</sup> The word 'colkote' is more problematic. Bevington mentions a 'local allusion' to a 'Tolcote' in the introduction to his edition of the play, yet the line in the play itself is printed 'colkote' and glossed as 'coal-shed'.<sup>37</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson, referring to Bevington's edition, suggests that Brundyche lives 'not in a coal-shed as the line has been erroneously glossed — but in a tollhouse', as a tollhouse ('Tolcote') then existed near Babwell Mill.<sup>38</sup> Atkin similarly invokes Bevington's introduction to identify the 'colkote' as a reference

to the Babwell Mill ‘Tolcote’ but also observes the word is spelled ‘colkote’ in Davis’s standard edition.<sup>39</sup> In more recent work, Bevington has clarified that ‘Colkote may be a copying error for Tolcote’ as ‘both Tolcote and Babwell Mill are in the vicinity of Croxton near the border of Norfolk and Suffolk’.<sup>40</sup> The three scribes of the play manuscript certainly made plenty of other recognizable copying errors, as noted throughout Davis’s edition.<sup>41</sup>

The colkote/Tolcote crux bears crucial significance for Brundyche’s character. Voigts and Dutton both retain the ‘colkote’ reading of the line and observe that lodging in a coal shed underscores the physician’s itinerary; surely he could not intend to dwell in such a structure for long.<sup>42</sup> If, however, Brundyche lives in a tollhouse, such a lodging has clear associations with greed — it is a building erected for the explicit purpose of taking money — and more closely aligns the doctor’s interests with those of the merchant Aristorius in the beginning of the play, willing to sell the sacred host for the right price. Still, Aristorius is a financially successful merchant with no apparent need for the money generated by his illicit sale; he pronounces himself at the play’s opening ‘most mythyf of syluer and of gold’ and ‘A merchaunte myghty of a royll araye’ (ll 87, 90). Jonathas, accordingly, approaches him in the terms of a fellow merchant, saying, ‘Wyth yow a bargin wold I make — / I wold bartre wyth yow in pryyte’ (ll 275–6). Brundyche, on the other hand, wears ‘A therde-bare gowne and a rent hose’ (l 570) and, whether lodging in coal shed or tollhouse temporarily or permanently, lives in modest means. Colle proclaims, ‘He is a man of all syence, / But off thryffte’ (l 529–30). Brundyche never speaks of acquiring wealth but offers ‘help’ to those in ‘nede’ multiple times (ll 623, 636). Whereas Aristorius entertains a man of like wealth with a morally suspect proposition, Brundyche works in the service of healing the sick. Seeking an income while practicing his trade does not make him inherently greedy.<sup>43</sup>

Before Colle can finish his announcement, Brundyche cuts him off and begins to take over the banns himself, saying, ‘Now, yff ther be ether man or woman / That nedethe helpe of a phesycian —’ (ll 622–3) as if he has decided that Colle cannot be trusted with the announcement and he needs to provide his own corrected version. Colle objects to this, interrupting his master to insist, ‘Mary, master, þat I tell can, / And ye wyll vnderstond’ (ll 624–5), but Brundyche decides to give up on the advertisement and changes the subject in his response to Colle; it seems if the banns cannot be done accurately, the doctor will not have them done at all. The text of the Croxton play itself thus reinforces the reading of the medical banns as a serviceable form of advertisement for a legitimate medical practice as well as supports the interpretation of Brundyche as a reasonable

medical practitioner. Voigts concludes that the doctor scene of the Croxton play and the historical medical banns together 'shed new light on late-medieval English medical practice' and suggests that 'we have not a folk play tradition in the figure of Master Brendyche of Brabant, but rather an instance of medieval estates satire'.<sup>44</sup> Dutton supports this opinion, writing that 'the striking parallels which Voigts finds between the Harley banns and Colle's proclamation give considerable weight to her assertion that the Croxton doctor is not the quack doctor of the mummers' plays, who is a buffoon with no pretence of medical knowledge, but rather an example of medieval estates satire, parodying the foibles of real doctors'.<sup>45</sup> Although this realignment of Brundyche's character with estates satire rather than the folk play tradition is a helpful start, it still places the doctor in a compromised position and describes him in prejudicially negative terms by rendering his performance 'parody' and his actions 'foibles'.

Jill Mann's book *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* remains the standard reference work on the genre. Mann qualifies her working definition of 'estates satire' by clarifying that it particularly concerns 'the role played by a person's work in determining the estate to which he belongs' and 'comprises any literary treatments of social classes which allow or encourage a generalised application'.<sup>46</sup> The particular metaphor employed here, 'the role played by a person's work', helpfully complicates the performances of Brundyche and Colle in the Croxton play because of the tension inherent to the play's dual function as a dramatic work intended for performance and a written text read as a literary work. Brundyche on the stage may play a role that represents the social and professional class indicated, but in turn the medical practice conducted by the character on stage informs and influences our understanding of that professional niche, or 'estate'. Just as examining an historical physician's banns illuminates Brundyche's character, looking closely at what Brundyche actually does in the play lends further insight into the medical profession of the late fifteenth century.

Brundyche is not on stage long, and his actions are few. There are no stage directions to indicate his entrance as there are for his servant, but internal evidence suggests when he would appear; Colle's last line before Brundyche's first is a plea to the audience to help the servant find his master, so the physician is not on stage until just before or as he speaks his first line. Brundyche asks his servant, 'thu boye' (l 573), what he prattles on about. Colle assures his master he has been saying complimentary things but then admits his comments have not all been truthful (l 580). Colle inquires after Brundyche's recent patient, and the physician explains she is no longer in pain. Colle seems to attempt to catch Brundyche in a witty jest by retorting, 'Why, ys she in hyr graue?' (l 584), but the physician

explains he has ‘gyven hyr a drynke made full well’ of ingredients commonly found in late medieval medicines (ll 585–7). The servant relentlessly teases his master, ‘Nay, than she ys full sauе’ as there is ‘non so cunnyng, be my fey’ between Dover and Calais (ll 588–92). This observation may be a remark on Brundyche’s foreignness, but it is also another jest, as there is nothing between the two port cities except the English Channel. Still, Brundyche remains unperturbed, simply stating, ‘Yea, and with pratt[y]ffe; / I have sauid many a manrys lyfe’ (ll 593–4). If Brundyche has a laughable fault, it is that he either does not understand or does not reprimand his unruly servant.<sup>47</sup>

When Master Brundyche next asks his servant for his ‘drynk profytalbe’ (l 597), the drink is not necessarily alcoholic; even if it is, a single drink does not make the doctor a drunkard. The *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) defines ‘profytalbe’ as variously ‘advantageous’, ‘helpful’, ‘physically beneficial’, ‘useful’, ‘efficacious, effective, healing’, and ‘yielding profits’.<sup>48</sup> Although several of these definitions could by extension imply alcoholic content, none of them specifically indicate it. The recognized ‘stereotype of Flemish drunkenness’ noted by Dutton makes a prejudiced audience likely to think the doctor is drinking alcohol regardless of whether he actually does, but no dialogue or action obviously implies drunken behaviour.<sup>49</sup> At this point the physician notices the ‘grete congregacyon’ of the audience (l 601). Asserting they ‘all be not hole, without negacyon’ and therefore may have use of his services, he asks his servant to ‘make a declaracion / To all people þat helpe w[ol]de haue’ (ll 602, 606–7). When he garners no clients that way, Brundyche asks whether Colle ‘Knoest any abut þis plase?’ (l 626). The physician’s request for the proclamation and his inquiry about whether his servant knows anyone in the area supports the idea that he is a traveling medical practitioner.

At Brundyche’s inquiry, Colle helpfully announces,

Ye[a], þat I do, master, so have [I] grase!

Here ys a Jewe, hyght Jonathas,

Hath lost hys right hond.

(ll 627–9)

The Jews, who have shown profound concern with keeping their experiments on the sacrament secret, have apparently not completely succeeded in hiding their activities. Although their previous retirement from the stage upon the loss of Jonathas’s hand gave Colle and Brundyche opportunity to appear, the servant now points the way to his master, who personally informs the injured Jonathas,

Syr, yf yow need ony surgeon or physycyan,  
 Of yow[r] dyse[se] help yow welle I cane,  
 What hurtys or hermes so-euer they be.

(ll 635–7)

These are the only lines Brundyche speaks to the Jew, who responds abruptly and rudely. Brundyche's address to the injured man is perfectly polite; he calls Jonathas 'sir', he provides his credentials as both surgeon and physician, and he offers his help only 'if' Jonathas has need of his services. Brundyche receives harsh remonstrance in return. Jonathas tells the physician, 'Syr, thu art ontawght to com in thus homly, / Or to pere in my presence thus malepertly' and orders him to 'Voydeth from my syght' (ll 638–40). The obvious exaggeration of these words in regard to the physician, however, ends up reflecting more about Jonathas's own anxiety than his target's behaviour. According to the *MED*, 'homly' has a variety of connotations of striking congruence with this scene, including associations with the home, religion, and the body.<sup>50</sup> The word suggests Jonathas finds Brundyche's presence on his doorstep uncomfortably intimate on multiple levels. When he overreacts so angrily to the physician's offer of assistance, he reveals his own feelings of guilt at being caught, quite literally, red-handed.

Perhaps unwisely, Brundyche leaves further pleading up to his servant. Colle only fuels Jonathas's indignation when he insists, 'Syr, þhe hurt of yow hand ys knownen full ryfe, / And my maste[r] have savyd many a manes lyfe' (ll 642–3). The servant's insistence on the widespread knowledge of the loss of Jonathas's hand further irritates the Jewish merchant. The *MED* explains that 'ryfe' not only means 'in great numbers' or 'widely' but also 'good' or 'pleasure', a connotation that only adds insult to injury by implying that not only have people heard of his wounding but also they are pleased about it.<sup>51</sup> This moment of tension between Colle and Jonathas reveals an underlying discrepancy between the knowledge to which each of these men can lay claim. While Jonathas ostensibly has taken great trouble to maintain secrecy, he tortures the host upon a stage with an audience in full view, a fact Jonathas remains unaware or in denial of. Colle, however, regularly addresses the audience directly, even drawing them into the action. As Gibson writes, 'The performed play's the thing ... The texts of medieval drama are less books than the trace elements of living performance'.<sup>52</sup> The role of the audience, not just as spectators but also as participants, is crucial to this scene. When Jonathas and Colle exchange these lines, the audience recognizes that Colle includes them while Jonathas specifically excludes them, making the servant a far more sympathetic character and serving to further demonize the Jews when they drive Colle and Brundyche offstage a few lines later.

Crucially, Colle, not Brundyche, speaks the lines that cause Jonathas to order his friends to chase the two men away. Although the servant begins with a shrewd appeal to the merchant's keenly developed sense of profitability — 'Men that be masters of scyens be profytale' (l 647) — Colle further suggests, 'In a pott yf yt please yow to pysse, / He can tell yf yow be curable' (ll 648–9). Although urinalysis was a key and well-respected part of fifteenth-century medical practice, even then it was nonsense that such a technique would be relevant to the healing of a wound such as a severed appendage, as Dutton notes.<sup>53</sup> The servant, Colle, however, proposes this diagnostic tool (not the physician himself), so the suggestion cannot be viewed as an instance of the doctor's folly or foolishness. At a final command from Jonathas to 'Gyff them ther reward' (l 652), the stage directions state, '*Here shall pe iiij Jewys bett away pe leche and hys man*', and the physician and his servant are permanently removed from the stage.<sup>54</sup> This action foreshadows the Jews' own (self-imposed) exile that will come at the conclusion of the play, making that banishment perhaps a more fitting consequence for their actions after they inflict the same punishment on Colle and Brundyche.

All in all, the most questionable action Brundyche takes on stage is his swig of 'drynk profytale', which, as noted, proves little grounds for great assumption. Brundyche does not act like a fool; he does not make unfounded promises or proffer preposterous potions. Even with the aid of modern medicine, he would be unable to 'heal' Jonathas's severed hand in the same way Jesus does at the end of the play. All the doctor promises, however, is to 'help yow welle' (l 636), which may very well be possible were he given the chance to try. Severed limbs and appendages would have absolutely been the sort of thing that fell within the purview of a late medieval surgeon and physician, and such a practitioner would have knowledge of how to help heal the wound, if nothing else.<sup>55</sup> Colle attests his master is both a physician and 'allso a boone-setter' (l 541), and Brundyche himself offers his services to Jonathas as 'surgeon or physycyan' (l 635), as mentioned above. It was not uncommon in this time period for a single person to practice as both a physician and a surgeon; for instance, Voights provides the example of the fifteenth-century banns advertising an East Anglian doctor who was also 'a practitioner of both physic and surgery' and had the ability to stop 'all manner of bleedings'.<sup>56</sup> As Voights suggests, the Croxton *Play* depicts an 'actual doctor', not a boasting buffoon attempting to perform miracles like the 'quack doctors in mummers' plays and Shrovetide plays'.<sup>57</sup> As depicted in the play's text, Brundyche is a qualified medical professional with actual healing abilities to offer the wounded Jonathas.

The moment of obvious comedy as Jonathas's henchmen chase the doctor and his jesting servant off the stage may obscure the deeper commentary present in the interaction between Brundyche and the Jewish merchant. Scholars such as Victor I. Scherb note the comparison present in the Croxton *Play* between the physical healing offered by Brundyche and the spiritual healing offered by Jesus.<sup>58</sup> For Scherb, the course of events in the play demonstrates a rejection of physical healing in favour of spiritual redemption; Brundyche serves no practical function, and Jesus restores Jonathas's severed hand. But Brundyche does not try and fail, because he is not given the opportunity to attempt any healing in the first place. Jonathas rejects him outright at his first offer of aid. The scene cannot be considered an instance of the failure of contemporary medicine when no medicine is practiced.

The scene does show, however, the 'doubting Jew' doubting even more. Not only does Jonathas doubt the sanctity of the communion wafer to the extent that he is willing to torture it, but in rejecting Brundyche he shows his disbelief in learning and medicine. To think that Brundyche might have been able to help in some way with Jonathas's bloody stump is not outrageous, but it is ridiculous for a man with a bloody stump to refuse to let a ready and willing doctor attempt to provide aid. The audience has just heard Colle's 'banns' announcing his master's skills and abilities. Although the servant ridicules the doctor earlier in the scene, he also admits to telling falsehoods. When Brundyche, just come onstage, asks, 'What hast thou sayd in my absense?' his servant replies,

Nothyng, master, but to yowr reuerence  
 I haue told all þis audiense —  
 And some lyes among.

(ll 577–79)

Depending on how the character plays these lines, Colle's confession to lying either can be directed to his master — as the two lines previous, and thereby an admission of his tendency to prevarication — or can be directed as an aside to the audience, as a confession that he lies to his master. In either case Colle himself openly admits that he cannot be considered an honest or forthright source without Brundyche present to hold him accountable. Dutton points to 'the elements of parody clearly present in Colle's quips', locating any distortion in this scene with the servant, not the master; Colle is the jester, not Brundyche.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, chasing off the two men and continuing to torture the host does not demonstrate any wisdom on Jonathas's part. He has no way of knowing that Jesus, in whom he does not yet believe, will appear and miraculously heal him. Jonathas's heedless rejection of the physician's services only underscores the play's message regarding the doubter's foolishness.

Jonathas's lack of faith in Brundyche echoes his lack of faith in transubstantiation. He rejects the services of a healer because he has no interest in curative treatment. In his torture of the host, which the play soon proves to be the body of Christ, the Jewish merchant is focused on testing, wounding, and destroying, not healing. Before Colle and Brundyche appear on stage, Jonathas has already been given obvious signs of the host's divine nature: It has bled profusely and inexplicably torn off his hand. He cannot let the physician attempt to heal him, because if Brundyche can, it means Jonathas's wounds are entirely human. By refusing the doctor and continuing to test the host until a miracle occurs and Christ appears, the Jewish merchant shows the extent of his doubt. He doubts that the host can be the flesh and blood of Christ, and so he tortures it; stopped halfway through his experiments by a grievous wound, he doubts whether it is only bread and so resists addressing its damage through secular means. In many ways, Jonathas's injury itself is just as miraculous as the healing later conducted upon it. If the doctor successfully treated the wound, the action would prove the loss of the Jew's hand was a mere human accident and not the divine vengeance of a holy God angered by a non-believer's sacrilegious brutality. The Croxton *Play* undoubtedly comes down on the side of orthodox Christian belief in the miracles and conversions of its final scene. But the means by which it reaches that conclusion are about more than religious divides. The play speaks to the human reality of doubt as it teases out layers of perception, performance, and the subjective nature of knowledge in the interactions of Brundyche, Colle, and Jonathas.

## Notes

---

I am deeply grateful for the insightful feedback and guidance I received from two anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Early Theatre*. I would also like to thank Kathy Lavezzi for early encouragement and Danielle Magnusson for manuscript research assistance.

- 1 'The Play of the Sacrament', Norman Davis (ed.), *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (London, 1970), 58–89. All quotations from the play (standardly referred to as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*) cite this edition.
- 2 David Lawton, 'Sacrilege and Theatricality: The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.2 (2003), 284, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-33-2-281>.
- 3 The physician's name is alternately spelled 'Brundyche', 'Brendyche', and 'Brentberecley' within the text itself; for consistency's sake, I use 'Brundyche'. 'Colle' is also the name of the farm dog in Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale'. For more on the servant's name, see Elisabeth Dutton, 'The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama* (Oxford, 2012), 70 n 15, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566471.001.0001>.
- 4 See, for example, R.J.E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Oxford, 1923); Sir Edmund Chambers, *The English Folk-Play* (Oxford, 1933); Neville Denny (ed.), *Medieval Drama* (New York, 1973); Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1974); David Bevington (ed.), *Medieval Drama* (Boston, 1975); and Greg Walker (ed.), *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2000).
- 5 Ironically, Lawton himself perpetuates the myth under discussion here in his own brief gloss of the scene: 'Then occurs the scene which will become famous in the mummers' play, here textually recorded for the first time in English: the entry of a quack doctor, Mayster Brendyche of Braban (Magister Phisicus), "Called pe most famous hesy[cy]an / Pat euer sawe vryne [urine]" (ll 535–6), and — in an echo of, say, the Wakefield Cain play — his mocking servant Colle'. Lawton unquestioningly accepts the categorization of Brundyche as 'quack', although he does accurately characterize Colle as 'mocking'. Lawton, 'Sacrilege and Theatricality', 287.
- 6 Linda Ehksam Voigts, 'Fifteenth-Century English Banns Advertising the Services of an Itinerant Doctor', Florence Eliza Glaze and Brian K. Nance (eds), *Between Text and Patient: The Medical Enterprise in Medieval & Early Modern Europe* (Firenze, 2011); Dutton, 'The Croxton *Play*'.
- 7 See Voigts, 'Fifteenth-Century English Banns', 274; Dutton, 'The Croxton *Play*', 59.

- 8 Norman Davis dates the tradition of this sort of Eucharist-torture tale to a Parisian miracle reported to have taken place in 1290; Introduction, *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (London, 1970), lxxiii. In addition, Davis, Introduction, lxxxv, says the play ‘may have been composed not long after 1461’; Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 756, says it ‘appears to have been written ... during the late fifteenth century, not long after the year (1461) in which the miracle is supposed to have taken place’; Gail McMurray Gibson, *Theater of Devotion* (Chicago, 1989), 34, says, ‘The play itself was presumably written soon after 1461’; Tamara Atkin, *Drama of Reform* (Turnhout, 2013), 45, wisely citing lack of evidence, situates the play ‘sometime at the end of the fifteenth century’; Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 56, calls it ‘an early or possibly pre-Tudor play’.
- 9 Tamara Atkin, ‘Playbooks and Printed Drama: A Reassessment of the Date and Layout of the Manuscript of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*’, *Review of English Studies* 60.244 (2008), 205, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgn100>.
- 10 Ibid, 204; see Davis, Introduction, lxxxiv; for more information, see note 8, above.
- 11 Dutton accurately observes that ‘the Croxton *Play* cannot be definitively placed in a context, and because it has such a curious textual transmission, and so little is certain about the circumstances in which it was performed, the meaning which it may once have held for those who read it or saw it played are exceptionally difficult to determine’; ‘The Croxton *Play*’, 55–6. As Dutton demonstrates, such conditions open the play up to further interpretation rather than limiting its possibilities.
- 12 Voigts insightfully compares a banns manuscript advertising the services of an itinerant physician in the second half of the fifteenth century to ‘surviving examples of contemporary banns advertising theatrical performances’, the careers of two ‘other itinerant medical practitioners in 15th-century England’, and the ‘satirical treatment’ of the physician in the Croxton *Play*; ‘Fifteenth-Century English Banns’, 245, 267.
- 13 Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1955), 326–7.
- 14 Davis, Introduction, lxxv–lxxvi.
- 15 Midway between Davis (1970) and Dutton (2012), in 1989 Gibson sowed the first seeds of doubt by labeling the scene ‘the *so-called* interpolated episode’; *Theater of Devotion*, 36 (emphasis mine).
- 16 Dutton, ‘The Croxton *Play*’, 55.
- 17 Ibid, 58.
- 18 Atkin, *Drama of Reform*, 22 n 21, 27–8.
- 19 Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 755–6; David Bevington, ‘Staging and Liturgy in *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament*’, Wim Hüskens and Peter Happé (eds), *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1660* (Leiden, 2016), 247, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004313958\\_012](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004313958_012).

- 20 Bevington, ‘Staging and Liturgy’, 248–9.
- 21 The scene is certainly not a scribal addition from the time at which the extant manuscript was copied, as two different scribes share the copying of its lines. Per Davis, Scribe A is responsible for lines 525–644, while Scribe C finishes the doctor’s scene in lines 645–52 (and goes on to copy the remainder of the play); Davis, Introduction, lxxvi.
- 22 Lawrence I. Conrad, Michael Neve, Vivian Nutton, Roy Porter, and Andrew Wear, *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge, 1995), 198–200.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 202.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 27 Voigts, ‘Fifteenth-Century English Banns’, 252, 254, 268–9.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Voigts does not extensively explore Brundyche’s character, as the main purpose of her study is providing a close reading of and context for the previously unidentified text containing the banns and not the play itself.
- 31 Voigts, ‘Fifteenth-Century English Banns’, 272.
- 32 Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.
- 33 Voigts, ‘Fifteenth-Century English Banns’, 251–2.
- 34 Matthew Sergi has recently provided evidence that the ‘primary purpose’ of play banns may have been to serve as ‘*fundraising appeals*, ceremoniously and publicly delivered to those donors who were likely to help cover production costs, or to otherwise provide financial support to the subsequent plays’ (5); the combined evidence of Sergi and Voigts demonstrates that the relationship between communication and economics in regard to late medieval banns was highly complex. See Sergi, ‘Beyond Theatrical Marketing: Play Banns in the Records of Kent, Sussex, and Lincolnshire’, *Medieval English Theatre* 36 (2014), 5.
- 35 On the bawdy puns, see Walker’s gloss to his edition of the play.
- 36 See Davis, Introduction, lxxxiv–lxxxv; Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 34; Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 56; Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 756.
- 37 Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 756, 776.
- 38 Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 34, 37.
- 39 Atkin, *Drama of Reform*, 44, 44 n. 100.
- 40 Bevington, ‘Staging and Liturgy’, 247.
- 41 The manuscript is not currently imaged online, and the archive does not allow it to be photographed. Danielle Magnussen of Trinity College Dublin graciously

- examined the scribal hand for me; she concludes the word as written in the text is ‘colkote’ and feels certain it is a scribal error (personal correspondence, 5 May 2017).
- 42 Voigts, ‘Fifteenth-Century English Bans’, 273; Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.
- 43 The play’s focus on the merchant Aristorius at its opening and its emphasis on greed as a key element of his sin may have influenced much of the extant scholarship that interprets Colle’s boast about his master’s profitability (l 647) as a similar weakness.
- 44 Ibid, 274.
- 45 Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.
- 46 Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), 3.
- 47 The necessary implication does not have to be that Brundyche is too stupid to understand or too lazy to take action; it may be, for instance, that he is too busy or cannot be bothered with his servant’s puerile nonsense.
- 48 *Middle English Dictionary Online (MED)*, s.v. ‘prōfitāble (adj.)’, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED34814>.
- 49 Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.
- 50 *MED Online*, s.v. ‘hōmlī (adj.)’, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED21087>.
- 51 Ibid, s.v. ‘rife (n.)’, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED37483>. The multiple senses of ‘rife’ anticipates the way in which our modern word ‘well’ can imply both thoroughness (‘I know her well’) and goodness (‘That is all well and good’).
- 52 Gail McMurray Gibson, ‘On the Performance of Medieval Drama’, *Medieval Perspectives* 14 (1999), 7.
- 53 Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.
- 54 According to its definition in the *MED Online*, ‘leche’ had no particularly negative meaning at this time but rather served mainly as a synonym for ‘healer’ or to differentiate a physical healer from a spiritual one; *MED Online*, s.v. ‘lēche (n.3)’, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED24922>.
- 55 On medical practice in this time period, see Conrad et al, *The Western Medical Tradition*.
- 56 Voigts, ‘Fifteenth-Century English Bans’, 273, 248.
- 57 Ibid, 273–4; for the origins of the false categorization of Brundyche as a ‘quack’, see E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), 206–14.
- 58 Victor I. Scherb, ‘The Earthly and Divine Physicians: *Christus Medicus* in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*’, Bruce Clarke and Wendell Aycock (eds), *The Body and the Text: Comparative Essays in Literature and Medicine* (Lubbock, 1990), 161; see also Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 38, and Atkin, *Drama of Reform*, 27–8.
- 59 Dutton, ‘The Croxton Play’, 59.