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Playhouse Calls: Folk Play Doctors on the Elizabethan Stage

The Doctor of Folk Tradition

It remains uncertain whether the English folk drama known as the mumming play coexisted with the drama of Shakespeare's age. Flourishing in the United Kingdom and elsewhere since the 1700s, this curious event enacts a 'hero combat' wherein a champion (often St George) boasts of his battle skill to an enemy (often a Turkish or Egyptian knight). After one opponent has killed the other, a doctor, sometimes at the urging of a young or old woman, raises the dead combatant; several unrelated characters then give brief comic speeches; the play ends with a collection of money for the players.¹ While it is impossible to say with certainty that Elizabethans practiced this folk custom, we ought to consider that elements of the play may date back to older, if now-vanished, forms of popular entertainment. On the continent, analogues to the mumming play claim a widespread and very ancient existence. Chambers writes of folk-plays representing combat, doctor, and cure existing throughout Europe, surviving still in Greece and the Balkans in the early 1900s.² In 1928 a folklorist reported the existence, in the French Pays Basque, of an entertainment in which a barber shaved 'the Master Grinder' (knife-sharpener) and cut his throat. The doctor who is summoned to bring the grinder back to life enters with a speech about his wide travels, not unlike the typical entrance lines of the mumming play doctor.³ In Russia the comic doctor, with 'a long and complex pedigree in the world of popular entertainment', appears in Christmas folk plays, where he resuscitates a knight killed by the Czar's champion.⁴ In the Western Russian folk ritual that is the basis for Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* a doctor attempts to revive a dead virgin. In Hungary the folk-doctor appears in wedding plays, where he enters with a cure, like his mumming counterpart, at the turning point near the play's end.⁵ These doctors tend to share certain features with their colleague in the mumming play: they have a medicine that will bring the dead to life; they brag about their achievements, travels, or high fees; they use an often preposterous medical jargon. Several

scholars have offered evidence that such a doctor existed in late medieval or early modern folk activities, whether in the mumming play or some other custom, and that he found his way into Elizabethan playhouses. This paper will further that line of argument.

Known evidence of the doctor in European popular or folk drama in the fifteenth century survives in several German texts. Here the doctor takes on several roles, perhaps chiefly in the *Arztspiel*, or doctor play. Although this does not involve combat, it presents a learned, boastful doctor curing, or pretending to cure, peasants with a special medicine. The audience hears jokes about the peasants' stupidity, their urine samples, and the ingredients of the prescribed medicine.⁶ Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century scripts of German carnival plays (*Fastnachtspiele*) also survive in which comic doctors treat patients for carnival misbehavior such as overeating and sexual misconduct.⁷ Closer to the mumming play are a few performed texts of Christmas plays from the 1400s, one of which, *Das Neithartspil* (Neithart's Play), strengthens the theory that not only the doctor but something very like the mumming play existed in the later middle ages.⁸

In this entertainment Neithart, a wealthy land owner, starts a fight in which he, his knight, and a poor man kill one another. Enter the Devil to take them all to hell. When the peasant's brother calls out to heaven for aid, another peasant says, 'I know a doctor who will always heal our wounds. The doctor's name is Master Laurein'. The doctor arrives with a bottle, proclaiming, 'I, Laurein, have a good drink. Any peasant who is wounded and sick, and drinks from this little bottle, will recover, I say this for certain'.⁹ The dead take the elixir and return to life; the now amicable knight and Neithart go off for a drink, and the play ends with a joking speech from the Presenter. The brief description of the doctor and his stylized appearance with the cure suggest a formulaic quality about this action: the German audience of the fifteenth century apparently knew what to expect. Considering the well-known commercial, political, and theatrical associations between Germany and England in the late middle ages, it is reasonable to suppose that this familiar figure also could also have existed in England, as mountebank, a folk drama type, or even as part of an oral mumming play tradition. If so, this doctor could have existed among the allusive resources of the earliest modern English playwrights. In fact it appears that by 1590 in England the doctor was already somehow associated with St George, as witness a familiar text, Book One of *The Faerie Queene* in the Aesculapius episode. A recently published analysis of this episode (in canto 5, stanzas 28–44) finds a mumming play analogue in the Redcross Knight's

(St George's) battle with the Saracen Sansjoy. When Sansjoy falls, apparently dead, an 'old woman' (Night) pleads with the ur-doctor, Aesculapius, to cure him. As the Saracen's mistress, Duessa resembles the 'king of Egypt's daughter' who does the pleading in some mummers' versions. Spenser appears to be drawing significant parallels with the mumming play or something like it, though of course the attempted resurrection fails.¹⁰

Hundreds of written scripts of the mumming play exist in Britain and other English-speaking countries, and though none can be dated before 1700, tantalizing hints like this one in Spenser suggest that Elizabethans were familiar with the hero combat, doctor, and cure scene. Although the principal subject of this article is the figure of the doctor, it is worth considering whether he might have existed as we know him in the mumming play during the Elizabethan period, when doctors on stage often seem to echo his behavior.

The earliest report of this play comes from Ireland in a letter apparently written in 1685:

[O]n our new green last evening there was presented the drollest piece of mummery I ever saw in or out of Ireland. There was St George and St Dennis and St Patrick in their buffe coats and the Turk likewise and Oliver Cromwell, and a Doctor and an old woman – who made rare sport till Beelzebub came in with a frying pan upon his shoulder and a great flail in his hand threshing about him on friends and foes, and at last running away with the bold usurper whom he tweaked by his gilded nose – and then came a little Devil with a broom to gather up the money that was thrown to the Mummings for their sport. It is an ancient pastime they tell me of the citizens.¹¹

The cast of characters, while a bit heavy on saints, matches the familiar figures in later such entertainments; mention of Cromwell so soon after the Protectorate indicates the temporal adaptability of folklore. But if the 1685 account is reliable – it survives in a transcription from about 1800 – it was already an 'ancient pastime' for some part, if not necessarily all, of the British Isles.

Since mummers' 'texts' belong to an oral tradition, they would have existed mainly in the memories of the actors; no early written account could be said to constitute the authentic version. Reginald Tiddy's historic collection made available a good many post-1700 versions, and the once-familiar classroom anthology of Joseph Quincy Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, provided 'St George plays' from Oxfordshire and Leicestershire for students everywhere. The Oxfordshire play was recorded in 1853 from someone who began acting his part in 1807, following in the footsteps of his father, who

played the part for many years before that.¹² The Leicestershire text, of about the same vintage, has a 'Turkish Knight', unlike the Oxfordshire. Both plays contain a comic doctor. A measure of how surface details may change with time is revealed in a fairly recent text of the Netley Abbey mumming play, where Turkish Knight has become 'Turkey Snipe' and, as in other texts, St George has become King George.¹³ The hero may bear still other names in mumming plays of Newfoundland, which begin early in that colony's history.¹⁴ A consistent feature, however, despite the change of names, is the doctor, with his jokes, boasts, and cures. Even in the untheatrical New England colonies of the mid-1700s one resident remembered that a band of 'vagabonds' used to visit Boston homes on 'some holiday' with a play in which 'One fellow was knocked down and lay sprawling on the carpet, whereupon another called for a doctor who would revive the fallen man'.¹⁵

If the early history of the mumming play is uncertain, any explanation regarding its theme (if any) or cultural function has met with skepticism. Those who suppose 'pagan' origins for the play have echoed Tiddy's early theory that it derives from a fertility ritual.¹⁶ Of course, while Tiddy's research was underway, scholars habitually tied folk customs to rituals, especially those of fertility. Later, covering much of the same ground as Tiddy, E.K. Chambers laced his *The English Folk Play* with mentions of pagan fertility rites, thereby securing this approach in English literary and folklore study for decades to come. As late as the 1980s, the mumming play was defined as 'A men's seasonal ritual intended to promote fertility, expressed basically in terms of an action of revitalisation, in which the performers must be disguised to prevent recognition'.¹⁷

While at some level, given the frequency of this play in farming communities, the fertility theme is scarcely avoidable, a number of its elements seem to point in other directions. Take the combat itself. Usually a light- and dark-skinned opponent fight; either may be the victor. It seems to make no difference among the many surviving play texts whether the 'St George' hero wins or dies. In the Leicestershire play the Turkish Knight wins, but the 'Turkey Snipe' loses to King George in the Netley Abbey play, as does the Black Prince ('a black Moroccan dog') in the Antrobus (Yorkshire) Soulaking play.¹⁸ The 'point' of the play or (if any) underlying ritual must tie in with the fact that invariably both opponents, however different, must live. Difference is suggested as inevitable, perhaps essential to society. This feature formerly led Thomas Pettitt to conclude that the mumming play expresses 'the interdependent relationship between agrarian classes', and certainly this view sounds

plausible for '*Das Neithartspil*'.¹⁹ As one folklorist has put it, folk drama 'is about consolidating the values of the community, about reproducing the local community and allowing it to continue'.²⁰ In ritual's logic, reviving the dead combatant might also enable acceptance of the misfits and grotesques – those who proceed with their brief comic speeches before collecting the money: Beelzebub with his frying pan, Littlewit with his big head, and others.

It is reasonable to believe that this apparently silly entertainment or its precursor once had a serious underlying purpose, even if only to beg money. In early recorded instances the mummers entered private residences, bringing the larger community, as it were, into the home: recall the 'vagabonds' enacting combat on the carpet of respectable Boston parlors. Although nowadays mummers' performances often occur in public areas like taverns, a few, like the Antrobus play, at least as of the 1970s, make the rounds to people's homes in the old way. One participant claimed that people in farmhouses *must* let the mummers in, since it is considered bad luck not to.²¹ Similarly, in 1930 a Kentucky mountaineers' mumming play, performed at a folklorist's request after a lapse of thirty years, opened with the announcement, 'I reckon folks all knows hit air bad luck to talk with the dumb show folks or guess who they air'.²² The supposition of bad luck supports comparing the play with a ritual, specifically one that performs its work in the community rather than, say, the farmers' fields. Victor Turner finds that such 'obligation', as opposed to 'optionality' (typical, eg, of modern mumming plays, in which the actors must ask permission to enter the house), signifies true ritual 'liminality', the participatory stage in 'the social process whereby groups become adjusted to internal changes'.²³

The decline of orality in the culture would explain the volume of mumming play texts existing after 1700, while the far greater likelihood of memorial preservation before that date would have made written scripts unnecessary. Some of the most persuasive evidence for a pre-1600 play has turned up in literary texts during the century before Shakespeare, beginning with the moralities and pageants of the 1400s. In this respect Peter Happé notes the apparent use of masks in recorded St George plays; he also finds traces of the 'cure' (the revival by the doctor) in *Mankind*, a connection also made in earlier scholarship. In *Wit and Science* Wit is killed and then cured, while comic doctors appear in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* and several other earlier Tudor plays.²⁴ E.K. Chambers cites, as evidence for the mumming play's early existence, the figure of the doctor who cures Constantine in the Cornish play of Saint Meriasek (1504). He also finds a London procession of March 1553

with a scene in which Jake-of-lent's wife begged his physician to save his life, 'and he shuld [give him] a thowsand li. for ys labour'.²⁵

A Doctor in the House

Later in the sixteenth century the doctor finds his way into more familiar plays. One folklorist has linked Jonson's Volpone playing mountebank to the folk-play doctor in his lines boasting of his travels and cures.²⁶ Another scholar proposes that the mumming 'cure' scene prompted Theseus's remark in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concerning the dead Pyramus: 'With the help of a surgeon he might yet recover' (5. 1. 297). Since the Pyramus-Thisbe play jokes about lower-class attempts at high theatre, a fair reading of this line is that Theseus expects the mechanicals to produce something as trite and unsophisticated as the stage doctor's cure. The mumming play also seems to inform Thomas Randolph's less familiar play *Aristippus* (1626), as Aristippus, killed by a brewer named Wildman, is resurrected by 'Signior Medico del Campo'.²⁷

The elements of doctor and cure exist or survive in other Renaissance plays, including at least a dozen by Shakespeare. When Francois Laroque praises Shakespeare as 'a genius at making dramatic use of all the flotsam and jetsum of myth and the vestiges of folklore', he repeats a view expressed by Janet Spens as early as 1916, though she and other scholars venturing on this line of inquiry have seldom examined Shakespeare's work for traces of the folk play doctor.²⁸ One such trace is the figure of the 'fifth-act physician', so designated, though without reference to the mumming play, in a study by Philip Kolin. This character usually shows up to attempt a cure late in a play (sometimes in Act 4) – in other words, at a point corresponding to the doctor's entry in the mumming play. Kolin's examples in the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries include the physician to the hyperbolic 'Turkish Knight'-type Tamburlaine, victim of his own inner choler. The doctor in Marlowe's play can only furnish a diagnosis, no cure. The mad Ferdinand's doctor, entering late in *The Duchess of Malfi* belongs to a Jacobean fraternity of soul-doctors that also includes Alibius in *The Changeling*.²⁹

Before turning to the doctor in Shakespeare, I wish to mention some hitherto unobserved instances from other playwrights of the time. The presence of these stage doctors, added to those that other scholars have discussed, suggests that during the sixteenth century this figure had become a convention – I suggest by way of folk entertainment. The fifth-act doctor's function sufficiently resembles that of his colleague in the folk play to support the theory

that playwrights consciously imported the character from the mumming play, or from an entertainment strikingly like it.

In Thomas Dekker's *The Honest Whore, Part One* (1602?), showing influence from *Romeo and Juliet*, Doctor Benedict works as something of an intriguer, as do a number of these doctors. In the first act he has already drugged the Duke of Milan's daughter at the Duke's request to prevent her marrying Hipolito, son to the Duke's enemy. By act 4 the Duke solicits the doctor to poison Hipolito too; but then he makes the serious error of refusing to pay the doctor's fee as promised. The prescient doctor – or is he just angry over his fee? – goes at once to Hipolito, tells him his beloved is alive, and tells the lady that, contrary to what she has heard, so is Hipolito. In act 5 Friar Anselmo, disclosing the news of these revivals, urges that the marriage bring peace to the two hostile families. The doctor's cure, then, extends not just to the lovers but to the central conflict in the world of the play, resolving the bitterness between two noble families. This movement from cure of body to cure of community appears a common feature in most of the plays under discussion, especially the comedies and tragicomedies.

From about the same time, George Chapman's *The Gentleman Usher* (1604) concludes with a similar medical miracle when the heroine Margaret, despondent because she must marry Mister Wrong and lose Mister Right, has disfigured her face with a corrosive ointment. For Chapman's audience, of course, a life without marriage amounted to death for a woman. Fortunately Doctor Benevenius brings life out of this death by administering an elixir and a 'recreful mask' (5.4.132) that will restore the desperate woman to her beloved, face intact.³⁰ Duke Alphonso handsomely compensates the doctor 'both with gold and honor' (line 145). Cured both in spirit and body, Margaret anticipates a renewal of her society that will come with a providential marriage. Both Dekker's and Chapman's plays end in the way of a thousand other comedies, with marriage and celebration; my point is that in both a doctor acts to enable the marriage by overcoming death. *The Gentleman Usher*, incidentally, incorporates the typical Elizabethan conglomeration of disparate theatrical traditions: Sarpego reenacts his schoolboy role as a Plautine parasite; act 1 scene 2 contains a court masque of an enchanter; then come 'rude sports' as broom-man and -maid and rush-man and -maid enter, heralded by the centuries-old call to 'make room': 'A hall, a hall; whist, still, be mum, / For now with silver song they come' (2.1.225–6). How many of the spectators, back in their home villages and manor houses, would have heard the same call to be 'mum' during a folk play featuring a doctor?

Benevenius was not Chapman's first stage doctor. In the comic masterpiece, *All Fools* (1599), the surgeon Pock performs the physician's role in the climax of the subplot dealing with the absurdly jealous Cornelio. That episode, in 3.1.334–423, begins when Cornelio bursts on the scene responding to taunts from the braggart Dariotto, who hints that he has slept with Cornelio's wife. Each combatant has only the briefest challenge before Cornelio wounds Dariotto. Someone sends for a surgeon, Pock, who introduces some bawdy humor into the moment, with puns on his name (Pock-pox): this name 'has made many doctors'; it is 'of an ancient descent'; the pedigree comes 'Out of France'. Pock also enjoys using the kind of medical jargon sometimes spoken by mumming doctors: 'I'll make your head as sound as a bell, I will bring it to suppuration, and after I will make it coagulate and grow to a perfect cicatrice'. This will cost the usual exorbitant doctor's fee – in this case, forty crowns (inevitably, a pun on pox and crowns).³¹ Dariotto typifies the predatoriness toward women that permeates his society, so although Pock appears only in this scene, his 'cure' can be seen as starting the resolution of the play. No revival of the dead occurs, but the 'cured' Dariotto will next appear in the final scene, exposed as part of the stage-full of 'fools' who have gotten their comeuppance.

Middleton and Rowley's *A Fair Quarrel* (1615?) invites particular attention because its cast includes both a physician and a surgeon. Since the former is a dishonest man who takes advantage of Jane's embarrassed condition to force himself on her, one point of the doubling up is that no elixir can cure this community; a more radical cutting and suturing are required. Late in the play, when the colonel appears to have been mortally wounded in his duel with the captain, the surgeon enters with a mouthful of delightful jargon of the kind, though not the amplitude, spoken by Chapman's Pock: chilis, cava vena, oesophag, syncope, tumefaction, calaphena, opponax; 'the wound, I can assure you, inclines to paralism, and I find his body cacochymic' (4.2.27–27).³² When, a few scenes later, the colonel appears onstage alive, a miracle seems to have happened not unlike the folk doctor's restorations. The surgeon enjoys the privilege of announcing his success in his usual grandiose terms (5.1.380) before receiving his fee from a surprised and grateful captain. Partly as a result of the surgeon's work the captain's cousin will now marry the colonel's kinsman, one of several events bringing a restored amicability to the two families torn by the duel. If recognized as a mumming play figure, the surgeon also casts a satiric light on the duel in this anti-dueling play, reducing it from an affair of *noblesse* to the crude level of the mumming play brawlers.

Shakespearean Physic

The meaning of the folk play's combat, doctor, and cure requires a theory adequate to the play's emphasis on revival and reconciliation – themes that Spenser and the dramatists just considered appear to have recognized in appropriating the doctor with his cure. Spenser's Aesculapius episode in *The Faerie Queene* touches the heart of the mumming play symbolism, reinforced by wordplay throughout Book 1 on Holiness-Wholeness. Because St George enacts the social drama of the English church and people on the path to holiness, the reconciliation lies with God rather than with human combatants. The cure, from Christ as the true doctor of souls, is withheld in the Legend of Holiness until the hero rises from near death in the dragon fight, with the water from the holy well and the balm flowing from the tree (canto 11), allusions to the rituals of baptism and the eucharist. In *The Gentleman Usher*, *The Honest Whore*, and *A Fair Quarrel* the cure or revival achieves a more earthly reconciliation between warring families just as the former combatants leave the stage arm in arm in the mumming play. As earlier noted, both Renwick and Pettitt have proposed that at the heart of the mumming play lies a symbolism, not of fertility, as in the Tiddy-Chambers tradition, but of the interdependence of self and other in the community. Such centering in the community, along with the formulaic structure, would support viewing this play as in some sense ritual, distasteful as that word is to many current scholars of folk drama.

Acts of conflict and reconciliation call for a theory resembling Victor Turner's well known ideas on ritual as a community activity aimed at restoring balance in the social order.³³ Much of what Turner says in his *From Ritual to Theatre* could easily apply to the ritual traces or 'liminoid' features of the folk play. In a pure ritual process like the 'shaman's journey', 'the initiand is broken into pieces then put together again as a being bridging visible and invisible worlds'. Most famously, Turner defined ritual as a process of transformation whereby an authentic reordering comes about in a community. As it evolves in history, ritual tends especially to produce, he says, performative genres like stage drama, mumming, Halloween masking, and fiestas – all 'liminoid' activities.³⁴ Certain aspects of mumming indeed preserve true liminal, ritual characteristics, such as the sense of danger and obligation. Recall the Kentucky mountaineer's warning that bad luck falls to anyone trying to identify the actors in the play. Might it not be that in healing the social breaks (between classes, sexes, families), ritual and some of its theatrical liminoid derivatives seek to heal the social and familial fractures represented in the dramas of Lear

and *Pericles*? Old Dr Ball in the Oxfordshire St George play claims to cure ‘All pains within and pains without’.³⁵

Of course, Aristotle’s idea of catharsis in drama offers an alternative explanation for the presence of physicians in Elizabethan plays. Furthermore, Shakespeare himself apparently shared a widespread belief in the therapeutic value of art, for if he speaks through his narrator in *Lucrece*, the tragic heroine finds ease from suffering, if not a cure, in contemplating the painting of Troy: ‘It easeth some, though none it ever cured, / To think their dolour others have endured’ (1581–82). Yet the entry of his fifth-act physicians with their medicines fits the pattern observed in other plays of his time. Shakespeare’s stage-doctors, both early and late, include inept Doctor Pinch and the pharmacist abbess in *Comedy of Errors* (4.4, 5.1), the apothecary and Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, the doctors in *King Lear* (4.7) and *Macbeth* (5.1, 5.3), the medically adept Marina and Cerimon in *Pericles* (3.2, 5.1), Doctor Cornelius in *Cymbeline* (5.5), the doctor who cures the jailer’s daughter in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and for good measure Doctor Butts, the King’s physician in *Henry VIII* (5.2). To these healers, add the slightly displaced physician-types in several plays, and the arguable cases of some pre-fifth-act doctors like Caius in *Merry Wives of Windsor* and Helena in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. The late-appearing doctors in Shakespeare especially imply that some activity similar to the mumming play cure existed in the late 1500s. Their speeches and cures often bear a marked resemblance to those of their later folk-play counterparts.

Shakespeare’s double doctors, Pinch and the abbess, appear in a plot centered on doubles. Although the stage directions call Pinch a schoolmaster, when Adriana brings him on stage (4.4.50), she calls him ‘Doctor Pinch’ and his first gesture is to feel his ‘patient’s’ pulse. His failed exorcism yields, in the next scene, to the Abbess, with her physic based more wisely on the reciprocal needs of body and soul. In a speech laced with the jargon of medicine so exaggerated by the folk doctors, she finds her patient a victim of bad digestion leading to cholera, but curable by ‘wholesome syrups, drugs, and holy prayers’ (5.1.74, 104). If the ensuing resurrections (mother, father, twins, each believed dead by the other) do not exactly depend on a magic potion, they serve as a climax akin to that of the folk play, reuniting the interdependent self and other, the living and the dead. This doctoring also sets up the comic ending and resolves the discord in the larger community (money misunderstandings, scandalous behavior) much as weddings and legal trials do in other comedies.

Traces of the cure scene occur in other early plays: the lovers in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* receive a restorative potion; in *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Laurence’s

medicine fails, preventing the desired union. In view of the likelihood that the actor who played the Friar doubled with the one who played the Apothecary later in the play, we can read both characters as contributing to the multiple ironies of failed ‘cures’ and frustrated revivings.³⁶ *Macbeth*, known for its varied uses of earlier English dramatic resources,³⁷ contains both Christian allusions (the ironic Last Supper and the washing of hands) and folklore (witches, bearbaiting). The doctor of folk plays could comfortably enter practice with Macbeth’s doctor, who cannot minister to a mind diseased, and with the English doctor in 4.3, attending the king-physician who cures the king’s evil. King Edward, of course, healing by divine right (‘How he solicits Heaven, / Himself best knows’ 4.3.150), would have appealed to James I’s insatiable religiosity. When Macbeth’s doctor cannot treat his queen, he confirms the spiritual morbidity afflicting Macbeth’s kingship. ‘More needs she the divine than the physician’, says that doctor of his royal patient (5.1.82). The mumming play doctor often puts a comically high fee on his cure, but Macbeth’s doctor departs wishing to put miles between himself and Dunsinane: ‘Profit again should hardly draw me here’ (5.3.62). The theme of community wholeness, too, so integral to the folk play and surviving in the plays of Dekker and Chapman, resonates in Macbeth’s lines to the doctor:

If thou couldst, doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease,
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo
That should applaud again. (5.3.50–4)

The ‘sweet oblivious antidote’ Macbeth seeks (5.3.43) – a drug like the one that cures the dead combatant in the folk play – appears ironic here since it should return the dead *from* oblivion, just as Friar Laurence’s drug should have done.³⁸ In both cases the failure of the anticipated cure adds power to the play’s tragic reversal.

The varied elements of traditional drama in *Macbeth* show the playwright sharing with other Elizabethan dramatists a skill in using ‘a subversive tradition, taken from the people, which could be used to express sophisticated criticism and dissent’.³⁹ Describing this tradition, Sandra Billington refers here to the mystery and morality dramas; folk drama also belongs with these resources (though along with them it is sometimes ‘subversive’ sometimes not). Soul-dead Macbeth, the Turk-like tyrant, proves ineligible for resuscitation.

By way of contrast, a sympathetic doctor, using the elixir of music, attends the quarto King Lear's revival and repentance (4.7).⁴⁰ In *Pericles*, too, Marina's 'sacred physic' (5.1.73) requires music to cure the wandering king. The princess must restore both spiritual and emotional life to a soul near dead, not with Macbeth's self-inflicted evils, but with those of Fortune's battering engine. During a scene of great solemnity Shakespeare doubles the fifth-act cure with another restoration, of Thaisa at Ephesus. As the king is restored to his land, woman returns ('Flesh of thy flesh') to her mate. Cerimon, student of physic (3.2.32), had earlier brought her corpse to life with, again, the aid of music (3.2.89, 91).

In the last plays such supernatural physic belongs to Paulina and Prospero as well. Nor should we forget the doctor who, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at the end of act 4, cures the jailer's daughter of her love for Palamon, so hopelessly above her class. Folk dancing, especially Morris dancing, occupies several characters in this play, so the doctor serves as another instance of this folk-art register. Walter Cohen reminds us that 'The Doctor who prescribes [the jailer's daughter's] cure earlier ministered to King Lear and rather more unsuccessfully to Lady Macbeth'.⁴¹ Cornelius in *Cymbeline* furnishes an example of a fifth-act doctor who more closely fits the folk-play doctor's role. To Cornelius's news that the queen has died, Cymbeline responds in tones of patience that contrast with Macbeth's despair:

Who worse than a physician
Would this report become? But I consider
By med'cine life may be prolong'd, yet death
Will seize the doctor too. (5.5.27-30)

In a romance so rich in folk motifs, the lines cast a pall of reality, as the doctor's arrival seems to portend death, not cure. But the portent then turns back on itself when Cornelius proves after all to be the reviving doctor that the audience might have expected. Cornelius has substituted a sleeping potion for the poison the queen would have given Imogen. Yet just before he reveals the switch, Posthumus, convinced that Imogen has died, unaware that she stands before him disguised as a page, knocks her down because she has dared to interrupt his lamentation:

Posthumus. Shall's have a play of this? Thou scornful page
There lie thy part.
Pisanio. O, gentlemen, help

Mine and your mistress! O, my Lord Posthumus!
 You ne'er killed Imogen till now. Help! help!
 Mine honour'd lady! (5.5.228–32)

The lines of Posthumus and Pisanio replicate the standard pattern of the folk play: one character knocks another down; someone cries out that the fallen character is dead and calls for help. A short time later the doctor revives the victim – here with the information that resolves both the lovers' and Pisanio's misunderstandings. Posthumus's 'Shall's have a play of this?' may even be a sly clue from a playwright who enjoys embedding plays in his plays. Are we about to see a mumming play? The court does indeed see a combat and revival, followed by a union not just of man and woman but of the warring nations to which each belongs.⁴² The problematic end of the political plot, with Cymbeline agreeing to pay the Roman tribute, does not resolve itself easily in representational terms, but if we think of this play as akin to folk drama, it requires that the boastful, opposed nations leave the stage arm in arm.

Along with other dramatists of his time, Shakespeare employs the essentially comic fifth-act physician (again to use Philip Kolin's convenient tag) in comedy, to confirm the comic ending, or in tragedy, to undercut any expectation of a comic resolution. The frequency of these doctors, some comic, some serious, who bring the dead to life and otherwise help bring reconciliation into the play's world, supports the view, shared by many since Chambers, that this figure was familiar in some kind of popular entertainment, most likely a play not unlike the mumming play extant since the early 1700s. At the very least, if the doctor had yet to join the mummers, he was a standard comic type in popular entertainment, a sort of free radical who eventually attached himself to the mumming play. In Shakespeare and other dramatists, the evocation of the folk play, or at least the doctor figure, derives from a whole fabric of allusive potential. A fifth-act doctor, a dead combatant, and a resurrection constitute a signal to an audience, from a popular source, comparable to the display of couples chasing through the woods on Midsummer Eve. Although the argument of this article is not immune to the charge of question-begging (using the presence of folk-play elements on the stage to argue both the existence and influence of that play), the presence of certain details in Elizabethan drama cries out for recognition. Consideration of these details offers the delight of widening the boundaries of the possible in interpretation. The details themselves may survive not only as terms of a playwright-to-audience code, but as the tacitly acknowledged trace of a ritual of social healing.

Notes

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- 1 Among scholars agreeing that the mumming play had an earlier existence are Alan Brody, *The English Mummers and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* (Philadelphia, 1970); E.C. Cawte et al, *English Ritual Drama: A Geographic Index*, Publications of the Folklore Soc., 127 (London, 1967); Alex Helm, *The English Mummers' Play*. Folklore Society Mistletoe Series, 14. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1981); Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 3rd ed (Cambridge, 1987). I should state that the British mumming play is a site of significant debate nowadays: see Eddie Cass, Michael Preston and Paul Smith, *The English Mumming Play: An Introductory Bibliography*, Folk Lore Society Books, Bibliographies No. 2 (London, 2000). Steve Tillis, *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Westport CT, 1999) thinks scholarship has been excessively concerned with origins of the play (179), and other current scholars most involved with the subject agree (eg, Eddie Cass and Michael Preston, whose preferred label, 'mumming play', I use, and whose particular skepticism about the ritual origins of the play knows no bounds). On the web, see the invaluable site of the Traditional Drama Research Group centered at the University of Sheffield, <www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/tdrg>. François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge, 1991), assumes too confidently the play's existence during the 1500s (50–5, 83, 124). I wish to emphasize that I deal chiefly with the doctor. REED volumes yield no evidence of this figure, but in the 1500s the Dublin Tailors' Guild provided the St George's Day pageant with costumes for 'the Emperor, with two Doctors, and the Empress, with two knights and two maydens'. In 1552 a charge for 'paynting the emperors hed' raises the question whether the doctors may have ministered to a beheaded emperor. See John J. Webb, *The Guilds of Dublin* (Dublin, 1929), 90–1.
 - 2 E.K. Chambers, *The English Folk Play* (Oxford, 1933), 198–229.
 - 3 Violet Alford, 'The Basque Masquerade', *Folklore* 39 (1928), 80.
 - 4 Elizabeth A. Warner, 'The Quack Doctor in the Russian Folk and Popular Theatre', *Folklore* 93 (1982), 166.
 - 5 Zoltán Ujváry, 'Der Arzt-Zauberer in den dramatischen Spielen', *Österreichisches Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 41 (1987): 'Das Auftreten des Arztes und seine Rolle bedeuten im Ablauf der Ereignisse so einer Szene einen Wendenpunkt; er treibt die Handlung voran, ein anderes Mal bildet sein Wirken den Abschluss des Spiels' (127). The doctor ushers in the 'Wendenpunkt' (turning point) of the play in a number of the English plays I discuss.

- 6 Carl I. Hammer, Jr., 'The Doctor in the Late Medieval "Arztspiel"', *German Life and Letters* 24 (1971), 244–56.
- 7 Martin W. Walsh, 'Quacks, Empirics, Spiritual Physicians: The Dramatic function of the *Medicus* in 15th and 16th Century *Fastnachtspiele*', *Fifteenth Century Studies* 8 (1983), 239–74.
- 8 Adelbert Keller (ed), *Fastnachtspiele aus dem fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (1853; rpt. Darmstadt, 1965), I, 197. This is Keller no. 21, a source mentioned by Thomas Pettitt, 'English Folk Drama and the Early German *Fastnachtspiele*', *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982), 1–34, who notes similar instances of combat and doctor in nos. 57 and 66.
- 9 *Ich weiss ein arzt, derselbig sol
Unser wunden imer hailen rein
Der arzt haisst maister Laurein.*
.....
*Ich Laurein hab ein guts getrank.
Welcher paur is wunt und krank
Und trinkt aus dem fleschlein, im wirt pas.
Fur ein warheit sag ich das.*
- I wish to thank my colleague Frank Baron for help with the German.
- 10 Richard F. Hardin, 'Spenser's Aesculapius and the English Mummings' Play', *Spenser Studies* 15 (2001), 251–3.
- 11 Quoted in Helm (above, n 1), 7. A problem is that the 1685 account was transcribed by one Thomas Croker in a manuscript of 1800 and does not itself survive. There is no evident reason not to take the copyist at his word, but see Tom Pettitt, 'Cork Revisited: A Reconsideration of some Early Records of the Mummings' Plays', *Traditional Drama Studies* 3 (1994), 15–30.
- 12 R.J.E. Tiddy, *The Mummings' Play* (Oxford, 1923); J.Q. Adams (ed), *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas* (Boston, 1934), 353–6. Tiddy wrote this book before his 1916 death in the war. He apparently lacked the detailed knowledge of early English and European drama underlying the work of Chambers and others.
- 13 Brody, *The English Mummings and their Plays*, 31–6.
- 14 See Herbert Halpert and G.M. Story (ed), *Christmas Mummung in Newfoundland*, 2nd ed (Toronto, 1990).
- 15 Halpert and Story, *Christmas Mummery*, 52.
- 16 Halpert and Story, *Christmas Mummery*, 70, 90.
- 17 Helm, *The English Mummings' Play*, 6; see also Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, 54.

- 18 On the Soulcaking play see A.E. Green, 'Popular Drama and the Mummers' Play', in David Bradby et al (ed), *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* (Cambridge, 1980), 139–66. Tillis notes that the St George figure 'dies' in as many as a third of the known texts (182).
- 19 Thomas Pettitt, 'Early English Traditional Drama: Approaches and Perspectives', *RORD* 25 (1982), 10. This remains, in my view, the most valuable starting point for a literary scholar's research on the English mumming play. Pettitt himself seems to have shifted his views on the subject somewhat (see above, n 11).
- 20 Ruairí Ó Caomhanach, 'Irish Folk Drama', *The Magazine for Traditional Music* (Article MT010), 16 December 1998, <www.mustrad.org.uk/articles>. Tillis (see above, n 1), also very recently, urges his and others' view that the theme of the mumming play is 'a sense of community' (193).
- 21 Green, 'Popular Drama', 158.
- 22 Quoted in Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 2nd ed (New York, 1978), 268, from Marie Campbell, 'Survivals of Old Folk Drama', *JAF* 51 (1938), 10–24.
- 23 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), 42, 21.
- 24 Peter Happé, 'The Vice and the Folk-Drama', *Folklore* 75 (1964), 161–93. On *Mankind* see Walter K. Smart, 'Mankind and the Mumming Plays', *MLN* 32 (1917), 21–5, which focuses on lines 426–68 of the play. Smart cites and clearly follows the views of E.K. Chambers in *The Medieval Stage* (London, 1903).
- 25 Chambers, *The English Folk-Play*, 169, 155.
- 26 Brody, *The English Mummers and their Plays*, 57.
- 27 Kenneth Friedenreich, 'Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Mummers', *American Notes and Queries* 20 (1982), 98–9; Martin Walsh, 'Thomas Randolph's *Aristippus* and the English Mummers' Play', *Folklore* 84 (1973), 157–9. For yet another, more involved comparison between an Elizabethan play and this folk play, see Roger deV. Renwick, 'The Mummers' Play and *The Old Wives' Tale*', *JAF* 94 (1981), 433–55.
- 28 Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, 191. Efforts toward anthropological study of the literature of this period include Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore, 1978) and François Laroque (above, n 1). Laroque discusses the play sparingly. Deserving more recognition as an early anthropological critic, Janet Spens, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Relation*

- to Tradition* (Oxford, 1916), 35–52, observes some traces of folk plays in Shakespeare, though she does not mention the doctor.
- 29 Philip C. Kolin, *The Elizabethan Stage Doctor as a Dramatic Convention*. Salzburg Studies in English Literature (Salzburg, 1975), 30–1, 121. This 1973 Northwestern University dissertation provides an ample inventory of stage doctors, but there is no attempt to link them with the Mummers' doctor, briefly mentioned on 8–9.
- 30 Chapman, *The Gentleman Usher*, John Hazel Smith (ed), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln NE, 1970).
- 31 Chapman, *All Fools*, Frank Manley (ed), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln NE, 1968), 3.1.376, 379, 381, 411–13.
- 32 Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *A Fair Quarrel*, R.V. Holdsworth (ed), New Mermaids (London, 1974).
- 33 Turner's theories evolved over three decades, from his early field work with Ndembu ritual to the fruitful study of drama and ritual with Richard Schechner in one of his last books, *From Ritual to Theatre* (see above, n 23). Rituals assist the community in dealing with change. During ritual, participants are in a state of liminality ('thresholdness'), a condition that takes them out of the prevailing social structures into 'communitas', where social differences are temporarily suspended, leading to a renewal of the group's or congregation's sense of mutual dependency. 'Communitas tends to be inclusive – some might call it "generous" – social structure tends to be exclusive, even snobbish, relishing the distinction between we/they and in-group/out-group, higher/lower, betters/menials' (51). Modern civilization creates 'liminoid' activities (eg, theatre, sports, political rallies), in which some traits and functions of liminality survive.
- 34 Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 79, 42.
- 35 Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, 354.
- 36 Dominic Grace, 'Romeo and the Apothecary', *Early Theatre* 1 (1998), 27–38, considers the Friar-Apothecary doubling. Caroline di Miceli, 'Sickness and Physic in Some Plays by Middleton and Webster', *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 26 (1984), 41–78, notes the identical functions of doctor and apothecary in Jacobean tragedies.
- 37 See Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation* (Princeton, 1977), 118–44. Technically the cycle plays that so invest *Macbeth*, having corporate sponsorship and doctrinally informed playwrights, are not folk drama; but they include many elements that must have originated in folk entertainment, such

as the quarreling couple (Noah and his wife) and the ranting jealous husband (St Joseph).

- 38 When Simon Forman ends his famous note on the play with the sentence, 'And the doctor noted her [Lady Macbeth's] words', his use of the definite article could imply that 'the doctor' was for him a familiar character.
- 39 Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991), 254.
- 40 In the folio version of *Lear* the doctor and the music therapy vanish, perhaps because the author had second thoughts about 'the way the Doctor, in the first version, took charge of a situation which is surely for Cordelia to handle'. M. M. Mahood, *Bit Parts in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1992), 167.
- 41 Cohen (intro), *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt (ed), (New York, 1997), 3197.
- 42 Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (San Diego and New York, 1965), says a 'healer' or 'preserver of life' in the romances is associated with 'natural society', citing Cerimon and, in this play, Pisanio, having 'an association by proxy with the medical profession in the drug he gives to Imogen' (144). Knowledge of the folk doctor removes the need for a proxy. William Barry Thorne, '*Cymbeline*: "Lopp'd Branches" and the Concept of Regeneration', *SQ* 20 (1969): 143-59, in a general study of folk motifs in this play, links Cloten's fate with the Sword Dance folk entertainment, in which the Fool is beheaded and revived by the doctor (155).