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The First Medical Practitioners in English Drama: Medical Knowledge and Quackery in *The Play of the Sacrament* and in John Heywood's *The Foure PP*

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With us ther was a doctour of phisik;
In al this world ne was the noon hym lik,
To speke of phisik and of surgerye
For he was grounded in astronomye.
[...] Ful redy hadde he his apothecaries
To sende hym drogges and his letuaries,
For ech of hem made oother for to wynne
Hir frendshipe nas nat newe to bigynne.
(Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*,
“General Prologue”, ll. 411-14; 425-28)

In her volume devoted to mountebanks and theatre, M.A. Katritzky deals with a lot of plays featuring doctors and quacks, including the characters of *Unguentarius* from some German and Slavic mystery plays. While devoting just a few lines to Heywood's *The Foure PP* (Katritzky 2007: 127, 151), though, she does not mention *The Play of the Sacrament* at all¹. The complete omission of this latter play appears particularly strange, since its Master Brundyche (or Brendyche) of Braban represents the first medical practitioner in English drama, while the Potycary in the latter play is the first

¹ What follows is the revised version of a paper presented at the 13th Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval, Giessen, July 2010.

of the profession indicated by his name. Both of them are the forerunners of a long series of such theatrical characters up to modern times, including the quack doctors of folk drama (see Millington 2003). Although they belong to what was to be diversified subsequently in two different guilds and professions, they seem to work along quite similar lines of behaviour. They boast of their trades and skills, obtaining, though, a very negative reception on stage (which appears to mirror their contemporary spectators' as well), as if they already were portrayed through a well established stereotype. Indeed both plays present these characters in a deeply parodic and satiric way which through a process of overt degradation transforms their supposed knowledge into despicable quackery.

What follows aims at showing both characters in the light of early modern medical science in order to verify possible relationships between medicine on stage and the state of scientific knowledge in English society. Judging from the two plays taken into account, English quackery – which was not yet widely spread between the second half of the fifteenth century and the 1530s – did not need the help of any continental influence to be efficacious, at least on a rhetorical level.

1. THE PLAYS

The Play of the Sacrament

The protagonist of the play is sir Jonathas, a Jewish merchant, who together with his servants performs a 'New Passion' on a consecrated host sold to him by sir Aristorius, a Christian merchant.

Much criticism has recently been produced about *The Play of the Sacrament*, especially because of the supposed date of transcription which has shown to be much later than the period of composition, in any case later than 1461, the year in which – according to the text – the narrated events take place. The analysis of the scribal hands made by Norman Davis, the editor of the play for the Early English Text Society, concludes that three different scribes worked at the manuscript: "Hands A and B seem to be of the early sixteenth century [...] C must obviously be contemporary in spite of its somewhat earlier air" (Davis 1970: lxxii). And after examining the codicological features of the manuscript, Tamara Aitkin has very recently highlighted the relevance of the sixteenth-century reception of the play, surmising – though with no certainty, due to the lack of further evidence – that a possible

time of transcription of the play might even be mid-sixteenth century (Aitkin 2009). As a result, nowadays nobody considers the play as transcribed during the fifteenth century, even if the original text may well be dated earlier than its surviving copy. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, that a lot of questions have arisen about why transcribe such an early play in the sixteenth century, with its quite unique topics (the desecration of a host by a group of Jews, who at the end convert to Christianity and are pardoned). Some answers have attributed the event to the start of the Reformation in England. As David Lawton remarks,

The play has occasioned valuable recent work drawing on the perspectives of cultural and performance studies. Questions of staging and of representation have been juxtaposed with questions about the social and institutional function of the Eucharist, the nature and regulation of orthodoxy, and the identification, suppression, or expulsion of ethnic or religious difference. (Lawton 2003: 284)

Much of last century's criticism interpreted the presence of the Jews in the text as a metaphor for the Lollards, whose faith denied the presence of Christ in the host. But recently stress has been laid on the negation of this assimilation, underlining that the Jews in the play stand actually for themselves, and not for a Christian minority. It is the case of Lisa Lampert, who ends her article by writing:

The Croxton Play represents more than a generic "Jew"; it gives insight into local East Anglian perceptions of the Jew developed and sustained over several centuries as part of larger structures of anti-Semitic myth. (Lampert 2001: 255)

The role of the Jews in the play as the cultural 'Other' is the focus of Chemers's article (2007), while other perspectives have instead privileged the role of the Eucharist in late medieval society (see Strohm 2005). Another relevant study, in my opinion, was published by Michael Jones as early as 1999: it stands out for its focus on the religiously controversial 1530s, when – the author hypothesizes – the play was copied for a specific "recontextualization". His article searches the "use to which the Croxton play [...] was put in the Henrician Reformation", concentrating "on reception rather than production" (Jones 1999: 224, 241), thus studying the possible role such a play might have had in the debate about transubstantiation. Jones envisages a Reformist angle in the re-appreciation of the play, because of the Jews' doubts about the real presence of Christ in the consecrated wafer, parallel to those of the Reformers'².

² André Lascombes' article (1998) and Janet Dillon's (2000) deal rather with performance aspects of this complex play, and so does an old study of mine (1986), whereas Scherb privileges the role

The Foure PP

The play, printed around 1544 but probably written in the late 1520s (or early 1530s)³, has no plot proper, it being the ‘transcription’ of a four-character dialogue concerning which of them is superior, for the length of 1243 lines. Three of the four protagonists (a Palmer, a Potycary, and a Pardoner) take long turns in the first part of the play to show their individual superiority, until the Pedler – the last to arrive on stage – decides that the controversy will be decided on the basis of a lying contest, which in the end he declares won by the Palmer because of his apparently inconspicuous and misogynistic comment about women, in spite of the long – and truly wondrous – tales narrated by the Potycary and the Pardoner. The taller tale is the Pardoner’s, but the Potycary also vies for victory by narrating an extraordinary cure he performed to save one of his female patients.

Before and after the contest, the characters debate about the best way to obtain salvation. The Palmer defends his going on pilgrimages, the Pardoner his selling of relics, the Potycary his ambiguous and sometimes deadly remedies that send souls to heaven. After the Palmer’s victory, the latter starts talking about individual talents and virtues (ll. 1137-86), and at the very end of the play, the Palmer prays God to guide all people “In the fayth of hys churche universall” (l. 1234).

It is evident that much more than the ending of a merry interlude is at stake not only in the words here quoted, but also in the whole text. The topical relevance of *The Foure PP* has often been foregrounded: when the play was probably written, King Henry VIII was resolute on his divorce from Catherine of Aragon (and in January 1533 he married Ann Boleyn), thus going well beyond the breaking point with the Catholic Church. Therefore the interlude obliquely includes both political and religious controversial themes, once more showing how its author was able to offer his “conservative” plays by “subliminally” embedding his catholic orthodoxy in them.⁴ Critics have always stressed the presence of More’s influence in Heywood’s drama and Axton and Happé conclude their presentation of the sources of the play by saying that “The defence of pilgrimage and the dramatic authority given to the Palmer’s final utterances align Heywood’s point of view with that of More

of Christ as divine “medicus”, even if highlighting that the *Play of the Sacrament* “marks the first appearance of a physician in English vernacular drama.” (1990: 161).

³ See Axton & Happé, eds., 1991: 42 and 45. All subsequent quotations of the play are from this edition.

⁴ See Greg Walker’s interpretation of Heywood’s *The Play of the Wether* (1991: 167). For an analysis of orthodoxy in *The Pardoner and the Frere* see Caputo 2008.

in *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and indicate roughly contemporary date of composition c. 1528-30” (Axton and Happé 1991: 45) ⁵. Candace Lines also agrees that *The Foure PP* “echoes the orthodox position More asserts in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*” (Lines 2000: 420).

In the present paper all these very relevant topics must necessarily be set aside, given its emphasis on other issues, but one cannot but underline that both plays – either copied or written at the dawn of the Reformation – shed light on the topicality of English drama, to which medicine and science also belong.

2. LEECHES AND APOTHECARIES

Master Brundyche and Colle

In *The Play of the Sacrament*, after the frantic “New Passion” through which the Jews try to verify the dogma of transubstantiation, when Jonathas’ hand remains stuck to the host and to the post where the latter has been nailed, leaving the Jew with a bleeding stump, a physician arrives, rather a “leech”, preceded by Colle, his assistant. The SD says “*Here shall þe lechys man come into þe place sayng*” (l. 525). The ‘interlude’, as this episode has often been called, lasts till l. 652, therefore for 127 lines out of a total of 1007 (a number which also includes the 80 lines of the Banns). The episode has been considered spurious and added to a pre-existing text, but actually, instead of being out of place, it plays many a role in the text ⁶. Actually it connects the represented miracles to the audience (so far, contrary to most cases of medieval English drama, the presence of spectators has not been acknowledged), i.e. the story told on stage to the offstage reality, thus moving the action from Aragon, where the miracle of the Eucharist is supposed to have taken place in real time, in 1461, to Croxton (or any other place hosting the performance), or rather uniting the two. It also seems to remind the audience of other possible doctors featuring in folk plays.

⁵ See also the notes to the text of the interlude, pp. 247-62.

⁶ Lawton (2003: 292) observes that “In the *Play of the Sacrament*, the sections relating to the doctor and his boy are the most metrically complex in the play. I suspect that this is enough to give the lie to the notion that they are unoriginal ‘interpolations’ in the ‘original play.’” In her turn, Reid-Schwartz also accepts the episode as integral to the play and to its commercial language: “By incorporating these two characters into the plot, the play once again depicts the insidious power of commerce to infect whatever it touches and turn life into a repeating expression of its own economy” (1994: 11).

Even if the leech is presented at the beginning as “a man off all syence” (l. 529) by Colle, the further information the assistant passes to the audience does nothing but pile up satirical features on Brundyche. The latter spends his time in taverns in the company of women (“He syttyth with sum tapstere in þe spence”, l. 531), likes playing games but, although he is “þe most famous phesy[cy]an / Þat euer sawe vryne” (ll. 535-6),

He seeth as wele at noone as at nyght,
And sumtyme by a candelleyt
Can gyff a judgymnt aryght---
As he þat hathe noon eyn. (ll. 537-40)

The doctor’s skills, therefore, are soon deflated. Mayster Brundyche of Braban (this is his name revealed at l. 533) is also a “boone-setter; [...] In euery tauerne he ys detter” (ll. 541-3): the qualification of bone-setter (letting one think of him in his surgical capacities) is soon turned into a disqualification, degraded as it is to a negative trait connecting him to dice playing (a game that was considered unlawful and morally dangerous). In spite of being revered with the title ‘Master’, usually referred to university graduates, Brundyche does not look like a proper physician, according to the description made once again by Colle:

He hath a cut berd and a flatte noose,
A therde-bare gowne and a rent hoose;
He spekyt neuer good matere nor purpose;
To þe pylleré ye hym led! (ll. 569-72)

Apart from the menace of the pillory (for which, and for the general disparaging treatment reserved to the ‘doctor’ McMurray Gibson evokes an anti-Flemish attitude)⁷, we envisage a poorly dressed person incapable, especially, of correct medical discourse, since he is said never to speak “good matere nor purpose”. His appearance rather marks him as a village healer, or a country medicine vendor, certainly not a physician from a university, especially if we consider that university doctors had to follow a certain etiquette and wear garments fit to their high social status. Chaucer’s physician was elegantly and richly dressed, according to his rank: “In sangwyn and in pers he clad

⁷ “Part of the local topical comedy of the scene lies in the Flemish nationality of the money-grabbing physician who lives – not in a coal-shed as the line has erroneously been glossed – but in a tollhouse. Resentment against the virtual commercial invasion of Flemings in late medieval East Anglia sometimes ran high. The prejudice against the Fleming in the play is, in fact, both more real and more repellent than the highly stylized characterization of what would have been for fifteenth-century Englishmen the exotic and unknown Jews” (McMurray Gibson 1989: 36-7).

was al, / Lyned with taffata and with sendal” (General Prologue, ll. 439-40).

At the time the study of medicine was highly esteemed and, even if as late as the 1530s, Desiderius Erasmus so much praised the profession as to call it “this noble science” and “the right excellent science of Phisike” (1537: Aii^r and Aii^v). In his turn, John Cotta, writing in 1612, again speaks of “the dignitie and worth of Physicks skill” which consists in the “wise and prudent use” of medicaments in the “hands of the iudicious dispenser” (1612: 1). The praise of medicine went together with the praise of physicians, since “God hath not appointed the phisicians to be rayled upon, but honoured & rewarded: yea, esteemed of princes” writes William Bullein (1558: fol. iiiii^r).

Physicians had, of course, to comply with their deontological duties, among which there were discretion, wisdom, and correct apparel. According to Johan Oberndorf,

And as he [the physician] is secret and discreet, so is he likewise Sober and Temperate, that he may be fit & readie to visite his Patients [...]

So in his attire there is no superfluous Curiositie, Courtlike Pomp, far-fetched & foolish Finicalsitie; no nor Diogenicall nastinesse, and Lazarlike slouenie: but therein he laboureth to be decent, comely and frugall. (Oberndorf 1602: 8)

Master Brundyche’s clothes, then, do not seem appropriate for a real doctor, being – as they are – “thread-bare” and “rent”, in other words they cannot be described as “comely apparell” befitting a physician, on the basis of what John Securis claims (1566: Aiiii^r). In portraying the ideal of the early modern physician, Oberndorf goes on contrasting him with the many empirics and country healers whose behaviour he strongly attacks:

And being as lascivious as a Sparrow in Spring, hee [the empiric] maketh no bones to corrupt and sollicite to vncleannesse young beautifull Maidens [...] yea, and comely Matrons and Wives, if he may handsomely come into their Chambers: blushing no whit to spend many houres in Carousing in Tauernes, and dalliance among Curtezans. (Oberndorf 1602: 10)

Spending his time in a tavern, drinking and ‘dallying’ with a tapster is exactly what our ‘hero’ does, according to Colle’s words quoted above. Furthermore, his speech, in Colle’s words already mentioned, is never about “good matere nor purpose”, therefore resembling Oberndorf’s picture of an empiric’s prattle:

Among other things hee laboureth to excel in Garrulitie, and much Babling; his Tongue being like a Lambs Tale [sic], or Aspenleafe, which never lyeth still, but is always wagging. And since he cannot come neare others in sound Learning, Iudgement, and Skil in his Art, he will be sure to goe forte beyond them in Childish, Foolish, Vnsavourie, Tedious, and Tiersome [sic] Loquacitie. (*ibid.*: 11)

On top of everything, those who pretend to be doctors, love “the Chesse, the Dice, a Cup of neat Wine” rather than their “Booke”, so that in case of necessity they can be found “either in the Tauerne, or at the Bowles, or at some Feast or Meeting of Good Fellows” (*ibid.*: 13). It is true that Oberndorf must have written his work in the second half of the sixteenth century (only the date of the English translation is known), but what he says about his contemporary pretenders to medicine seems indeed tailored on Master Brundyche. From Colle’s words, the audience get a picture of a man certainly not devoted to study and discipline, on the contrary “to too much iesture and mirthe”, so that he can reasonably be “taken for a lewde person” (Securis 1566: A iiiiv).

After all this, Master Brundyche of Braban’s name must also be put into question: does his title correspond to reality? The list of *Dramatis Personae* at the end of the manuscript labels the character as “Magister phisicus”, thus conferring on him a university degree, but from what seen above he does not seem likely to have studied at a ‘school of physics’, therefore that title appears as usurped, a type of usurpation that still happened in the 1560s if John Securis admonishes “That no Phisition do take upon him the name of anye degree of Schole, as bachelour, maister of Arte, or doctor: or cause or permit any writer or printer so to terme him, unless he can approue it to be so in dede by any universitie.” (Securis 1566: Bvi).

As for Master Brundyche’s skill in casting urine and Colle’s sarcastic comment, evidently as early as the second half of the fifteenth century urine analysis had become suspicious, in spite of it being one of the most widely spread medical practices. Certainly, as medicine progressed (but very slowly, so that scientific medicine can be said to have arisen only in the eighteenth century), the examination of urine became deeply despised. It suffices to quote the complete title of a well known treatise against all the misuses and abuses of this practice: Thomas Brian entitled his work

The pisse-prophet or Certaine pisse-pot lectures. Wherein are newly discovered the old fallacies, deceit, and juggling of the Piss-pot Science, used by all those (whether Quacks and Empiricks, or other methodicall Physicians) who pretend knowledge of Diseases, by the Urine, in giving judgement of the same. (1637)

Notwithstanding contrary opinions, though, the analysis of urine continued to be practiced for a long time and as late as the end of the seventeenth century many quacks (and doctors, too) advertised their skills in examining urine. A self-appointed “high German doctor” distributing handbills towards the end of the century advertised that even those who were suffering from long illnesses should “bring their Urine and he [the doctor] will give his Judgment in all Distempers, and resolve you if the Disease be curable or not”

(Anon., C112f9[2]). Furthermore, the usual oblong glass flask used to contain a patient's urine became the symbol printed on many advertisements to signify the medical practice (see Anon., 552A32[21]), in the same way as it is present in late medieval manuscripts and in the woodcuts of early sixteenth-century printed books (e.g. in Hieronymus Brunschwig's *Liber de arte distillandi*, 1512: 191^r and 196^v)⁸.

Even when Master Brundyche arrives on stage, Colle does not stop slandering his master: in fact, he underlines his master's lack of medical skills through a subtle rhetorical joke when he says that "I dare well saye / Betuyn Douyr and Calyce þe ryght wey / Dwellth non so cunningg, be my fey" (ll. 589-91) and that all his master's cures are devoted to "wydowes, maydese and wife" (l. 595).

Later in the play, the leech offers his help to sir Jonathas both as a physician and a surgeon ("Syr, yf yow nede ony surgeon or physycyan, / Off yow[r] dyse[se] help yow welle I cane", ll. 635-7), thus showing that he is neither, perhaps, since at the times physicians did not mix with surgeons at all and did not operate any surgical cure to their patients, while surgeons were not allowed to give medical prescriptions to theirs. Actually, given the situation of sir Jonathas, who has just lost his hand, the help of a surgeon might be better than a physician's, but this is not accepted and both master and servant are menaced to be "chastised" if they do not go away (l. 645). Still, just before leaving the stage, Colle makes a final attempt in order to have their offer admitted and, as a last resource, he recurs to a well-established medical routine, the examination of urine:

Men that be masters of scyens be profitable.
In a pott yf yt please yow to pysse,
He can tell yf yow be curable. (ll. 646-9)

Once again Master Brundyche is inscribed in the number of the 'men of science' and the examination of urine, exactly as with physicians and medicasters of later times, is proposed as the unavoidable means to know a patient's diseases.

⁸ The two woodcuts can be seen (accessed 27 February 2010) at http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/Images/1200_pixels/brunschwig_p191r.jpg and at http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/Images/1200_pixels/brunschwig_p196v.jpg respectively. Unfortunately the English translation, published in 1527, does not reproduce these images. Brunschwig, who published his book *De Chirurgia* in 1497, was fairly famous: one is struck by the resemblance of his name to that of our leech, even if no relationship between the two can be documented.

Heywood's Potycary

In Heywood's *The Foure PP* soon after the Pardoner has summarized the on-stage situation in the following way:

Pardoner [...] In came thys daw with hys invencyon,
Revelynge us – hym selfe avauntynge –
That all the soules to heven assendynge
Are most bounde to the potycary
Bycause he helpeth most men to dye;
Before whiche deth, he sayeth in dede,
No soule in heven can have hys mede. (*The Foure PP*, ll. 359-65)

the Potycary is questioned by the Pedler, in an apparently ingenuous way:

Pedler Why, do potycaries kyll men?
Potycary By God, men say so, now and then.
Pedler And I thought ye wolde nat have myst
To make men lyve as longe as ye lyste.
Potycary As longe as we lyste, nay, longe as they can!
Pedler So myght we lyve without you than.
Potycary Ye, but yet it is necessary
For to have a potycary;
For when ye fele your conscyens redy,
I can sende you to heven quykly. (ll. 366-75)

The whole category of apothecaries, then, is presented as dangerous rather than helpful to mankind, a judgment very similar to the notoriety of the correspondent Shakespearean character in *Romeo and Juliet* some decades onward. In other words apothecaries are popularly believed to deal with poisons, rather than practicing cures. The negative aura surrounding Heywood's character, then, appears as a long-lived commonplace.

We do not see the Potycary in his shop, on the contrary we (and the other characters onstage) meet him on the road, so to speak, where he nevertheless is ready to sell his products. What is shown, therefore, resembles a provincial salesman (whose selling techniques the Potycary overtly employs) rather than one of the triad of medical figures given by physicians, surgeons and apothecaries.

Apothecaries, who became a professional guild only under James I in 1606 when annexed to the Grocers, and completely only in 1617 with the name of "Society of apothecaries", played a very important role in the medieval and early modern world. They were in charge of preparing medicaments on the basis of a physician's bill or recipe. Therefore they mixed herbs and the

products of distillation and sold them, but were not allowed to cure a patient directly. John Securis defines apothecaries as “the ministers of the phisition”, those who “are gatherers of herbes, oyntmente makers, cookes, playster makers, clyster geuers”, together with surgeons, i.e. “scarifiers, letters out of blood, etc.” (1566: Dii^v). For this reason he accuses apothecaries as follows: “They play the phisitions them selues, they geue and minister medicines of their own deuise (god wote a mad deuise) indifferently unto all men: yea, and the more ignorant they are, the more bolder they be.” (1566: Diiiiⁱ). “To play the physician” is then the major accusation, i.e. to usurp both title and profession.

About a century later the anonymous *The Accomplisht Physician, The Honest Apothecary, and The Skilful Surgeon* (1670) nearly equates apothecaries to quacks, even if the booklet recognises the utility of the former to help physicians, who

Must be instructed in al the Artifices and dexterous wayes of præparing Simples, mixing and dispensing them into compositions, of dissolving Gums, expressing of Oyls, and Juyces, præserting and candying of Flowrs, Herbs, Stalks, and Rinds: powdering and rasping of Woods and Barks [...] (Anon. 1670: 58)

From this passage one can deduce the activities considered proper of an apothecary, while the latter is condemned when ‘playing the doctor’. On one of the last pages of this book, apothecaries are disparagingly named “Hermaphrodite Apothecary-Doctor[s]”, because of their continuous attempts at substituting physicians in curing the diseased, so much so that ironically the writer wishes “a Knighthood o’ th’ burning Pestle” were invented and bestowed on the category (Anon. 1670: 93). From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, then, the social and popular perception of apothecaries did not change much, due – perhaps – to the fact that the age of scientific medicine was at its dawn and cures and remedies had not yet changed.

3. DISTEMPERS AND MEDICINES

I haue gyven hyr a drynke made full well
Wyth scamoly and with oxennell,
Letwyce, sawge and pympernelle. (*Sacrament*, ll. 585-7)

says Master Brundyche, mentioning one of the period’s curing products (i.e. a drink, the others being mainly powders, pills, ointments and plasters), made of four simples and a compound (to prepare “oxenell” – oxymel – honey was mixed with vinegar). “Scamoly” (scammony) is a strong purga-

tive and we may presume that the general effect of the cure was to purge the patient. All the ingredients (including oxymel) are mentioned in the anonymous *A Leechbook Or Collection of Medical Recipes of the Fifteenth Century*, some of them – as in the case of “lettuce and sage” and “pimpernel and sage” – as known combinations ⁹. Among blood-letting, administering an enema or a vomiting substance, Master Brundyche chooses to resolve his patient’s unnamed illness (very probably diagnosed as an ‘oppression’ or ‘stoppage’ of some vital organ of the body) with a purgative. Later on, during his “proclamation”, Colle enlists the illnesses his master can cure:

All manar off men þat haue any syknes,
 To Master Brentberecly loke þat yow redresse.
 What dysease or syknesse þat euer ye haue,
 He wyll neuer leue yow tyll ye be in yow[r] graue.
 Who hat þe canker, þe collyke, or þe laxe,
 The terycan, þe quartan, or þe brynny[n]g axs –
 For wormys, for gnawyng, g[r]yndy[n]g in þe wombe or in þe boldyro –
 All maner red eyn, bleryd eyn, and þe myegrym also,
 For hedache, bonache, and therto þe tothache –
 The colt-euyll, and þe brostyn men he wyll undertak,
 All tho þat [haue] þe poose, þe sneke, or þe tyseke –
 Thowh a man w[e]re ryght heyle, he coud soone make hym sek. (ll. 608-19)

It is evident that names of different diseases are here juxtaposed especially for their phonetic effects (mainly alliteration and assonance), therefore the list does not pretend to be ‘scientific’. However, nearly all the distempers named in Colle’s lines correspond to what can be found in the *Leechbook* ¹⁰. The attitude of Colle at the end of his proclamation is still what he has shown at the beginning, i.e. serious disrepute of his master, accused of making people fall ill with his medicines, instead of curing them.

As for the Potycary in *The Foure PP*, he soon starts by highlighting the most disparaging commonplace about his own profession: “I can sende you to heven quyckly.” (l. 375), he says, and later, with identical self-irony and bluntness: “My craft is suche that I can ryght well / Sende my fryndes to heven and my selfe to hell.” (ll. 406-7). Of course one has to remember the presence (in this play and in *The Pardoner and the Friar*) of the Chaucerian hypotext of the “Pardoner’s Prologue”, an influence that goes well beyond the

⁹ Looking up these words in the *Middle English Medical Text* corpus (MEMT, 2005), it appears clearly that they are widely used terms in many remedybooks of the fifteenth century. For example, “lettuce” occurs 13 times in the 35 remedybooks collected in MEMT, “saugē” 50 times, while “pi/ympernelle”/“pinpernel/le” is present 7 times in the same texts.

¹⁰ See also Norri 1992: 400 ff.

characterization of the Pardoner himself and his own words, and also marks the general attitude of the four protagonists, when they present themselves to one another and to their audience. Their rhetorical strategies draw on Chaucer and, broadly speaking, also on the French tradition of the anonymous trade “dits” and on Rutebeuf’s “Dit de l’herberie” as a form of monologues directly addressed to an audience. This sort of self-irony is absent from *The Play of the Sacrament*, where the presence of Colle is necessary, but sufficient, to deflate his master’s boasts.

The Potycary does not list illnesses, but medicines or, rather, substances out of which to make medicines, and instead of naming common simples, he proclaims his possession of rich drugs and compounds. He also seems covetous since he stresses the value of his merchandise, thus showing the permanence of Chaucer’s words about medicine people’s greed: “For gold in phisik is a cordial / Therefore he lovede gold in special.” (General Prologue, ll. 443-4). Heywood’s Potycary boasts that “Rycher is one boxe of this tryacle / Then all thy relykes that do no myrakell.” (ll. 584-5) and that “Here lyeth muche rychesse in lytell space: / I have a boxe of rebarb here, / Whiche is as deynty as it is dere.” (ll. 591-3). He also uses words which show his profession in a direct way, when he speaks of a “dram” (l. 595) and of a “scryppull” (l. 614), two units of weight pertaining to his own job¹¹.

The first substance he mentions is “tryacle”, which was famous and considered absolutely necessary against all sorts of poison. It was particularly expensive, given the high number of its ingredients and because the best treacle came from Venice. Then we have “rebarb” (l. 592) and “syrapus de Byzansis” (l. 612), mixed with a list of high sounding names:

Here be other, as diosfialios,
Diagalanga and sticados,
Blanka manna, diospoliticon,
Mercury sublyme and metridaticon,
Pelitory and arsefetita,
Cassy and colloquintita (ll. 616-21)

preceded by “diapompholicus” (l. 606) and followed by “Alikakabus or Alkakengy” (l. 628). Here, as in Colle’s proclamation, alliteration is at work together with the rhyming scheme of the speech. All substances, with their

¹¹ “Dram” and “scryppull” also appear as recurrent words in MEMT: 16 and 108 times, respectively (in their multiple spelling variants). It is interesting to note that the vast majority of cases for “scrupple” is to be found in the *Antidotarium Nicolai* only, a text which was composed in Latin between 1150-1300 and translated into many languages before 1500. Its original Latin version was also used in universities.

Greek-sounding names, appear as belonging to a more learned medicine than the leech's in *The Play of the Sacrament*¹².

On the whole, the Potycary presents himself as a knowledgeable professional, well aware of his rank in society and of the instruments of his craft. Like the Pedler and the Pardoner he is there to sell something: he is there mainly to extol his “medycynes” good for a lot of diseases. His quack-like attitude surfaces especially at the end of all his speeches, when he declares that

Suche be these medycynes that I can
Helpe a dogge as well as a man.
Nat one thyng here partycularly
But worketh universally, (ll. 630-3)

In spite of his learned words, he sells nothing but cure-alls like Master Brundyche. Furthermore, the pompous list of medicines is later deprived of value when he offers a more modest “boxe of marmelade” (l. 642), as though all his compounds were just familiar jams. It is on telling his “tale of marvel” that he reveals his real activities as a usurper of a physician's role, when he confesses to have cured a young lady suffering from falling sickness, by giving her a “glyster” (l. 731). It is exactly at the end of his tale that the Potycary's speech resembles a later quack's handbill offering a list of testimonials of the efficacy of the cures enhanced in the printed text. When he invites his audience to ‘go and see’ the marvellous results of his cure, the Potycary states that the girl who received the “glyster” was by him “left [...] in good helth and lust - / And so she doth contynew, I truste” (ll. 767-8). Leaving aside the sexual innuendoes of the Potycary's story and the rhetorical and actorial richness of his speech when telling it, here his pretended role as a physician is worth noting. In the end he is actually a “Hermaphrodite Apothecary-Doctor”, like those so much despised in the seventeenth century.

4. FINAL REMARKS

On considering the diseases and the remedies listed by both Master Brundyche and Heywood's Potycary, it is evident that the authors of the two plays relied on their audiences' medical knowledge, in order to make their characters appreciated in every detail. Such knowledge already belonged to popular lore, since leechbooks had circulated in British culture for centuries at the

¹² For the modern correspondence of these substances, see Axton & Happé eds. 1991: 256-7.

time (Bald's Leech-Book "is believed to have been written between 900 and 950 A.D.", Talbot 1967: 18). Moreover, herbals as well were known and used (Talbot mentions the *Codex Hertensis 192* "of English origin, dating from the ninth century" and the "*Herbarium* of Pseudo-Apuleius, made about 950 A.D.", *ibid.*: 20), so that the elementary and basic notions available to physicians and apothecaries may be judged as widespread, and also shared by larger social groups, first of all by women. The number of university graduates in medicine was not sufficient to cope with the high demand coming from the whole country, and therefore the "irregular practitioners" were many even in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (see Pelling 2003). In 1421, as the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* witness, "senior members of the two university 'scoles of fisik' begged the parliament [...] to introduce a national system of licensing" (Rawcliffe 1997: 120), asking that

no man, of no maner estate, degree or condicion, practise in Fisik from this tyme forward bot he have long tyme y-used the scoles of fisik withynne som unversitee, and be graduated in the same. That is to sey, but he be bachelor or doctour of fisik, having letters testimonyalx sufficeantz of on of those degrees of the unversite in whiche he toke his degree yn. Undur peyne of long emprisonement, and paynge xl li [£40] to the Kyng: and that no woman use the practise of fisik under the same payne. (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*, IV: 158, quoted in Rawcliffe 1997: 120)

The petition had no success and it was only in 1518 that the College of Physicians began its history, with a bill promulgated by Henry VIII. And apothecaries had to wait longer in order to see their profession officially recognized in 1617. Surgeons, on the other hand, were united to the Barbers in a single company in 1540. But the very slow and uncertain advancement of scientific medicine in the period contributed on one side to the prosperous spread of all sorts of irregular medical practitioners – very similar to the protagonists of *The Play of the Sacrament* and of *The Foure PP* – and, on the other, to the popular satiric reception of these figures.

While the author of the interlude *Thersites* has a woman cure young Telemachus of the worms through charms and witchcraft in a rather grotesque and absurd way (cf. Axton 1982: 10), John Heywood and the anonymous playwright of *The Play of the Sacrament* did nothing but hold their "mirror up to [the] nature" of their social environment and of its medical lore. They highly succeeded in showing their 'heroes' at their best during their rhetorical efforts to convince their onstage audiences, but at the same time at their worst for their propensity to cheat the diseased, and – finally – in letting them share a common lot of rejection and social condemnation.

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ABSTRACT

Mayster Brendiche of Braban in the anonymous *Play of the Sacrament* and the Poticary in John Heywood's *The Foure PP* are the first medical practitioners in English drama. The article studies both characters in the light of early modern medical science in order to stress the relationship between medicine on stage and the state of scientific knowledge in English coeval society. After discussing issues raised by recent criticism, especially about *The Play of the Sacrament* as being transcribed in the early Reformation, the article examines the two characters according to contemporary medical literature which enlists the characteristics of the good physician and of the seemly apothecary. It results that in the two plays neither character complies with the conduct lines of their respective professions, since the plays present them as negative and despicable quacks, in spite – or rather just because – of their verbose behaviour. Well before the spread of quackery in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then, early English drama had already exposed and satirized the typical quack.