

# From Casey to Quackery

FOR REASONS of vanity, man responds enthusiastically to any manifestation of interest and concern over his well being. When concern is expressed by a physician, a member of the medical profession and an initiate into the higher mysteries, man's enthusiasm knows no bounds and, if he is gullible, he becomes vulnerable to all kinds of fraud and quackery. Such is the contention of Jules Romains in his satiric farce on the medical profession, "Dr. Knock." Romains' satire in the play really has a double focus: first, upon the unscrupulous doctor, second, upon the public who swallow his pills and pronouncements with equal ease.

"Dr. Knock" will be presented by the McGill English Department in Moyses Hall on March 14, 15 and 16.

A healthy literary tradition venerates the physician for his genuine and unselfish service to the human race. Another equally vigorous tradition, however, employs satiric and corrective humor to warn physician and patient alike against the dangers of their relationship. Romains' play, working within this second tradition, presents the spectacle of a doctor who remains within the letter of the law but who manages to convince the population of a small French town that they are all dangerously ill and so creates for himself an extremely prosperous practice.

In recent years, two of Molière's comedies on this theme, "La Malade Imaginaire" and "Le Medecin Malgré Lui," have been performed in French by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The first play describes the predicament of a hypochondriac preyed upon by quacks, and the second has for its comic hero a fraudulent doctor. Romains' comedy "Dr. Knock," currently in rehearsal by the McGill English Department, treats the same themes in twentieth century terms.

All of these productions represent a healthy antidote to the current TV preoccupations with the medical profession. TV, of course, with Casey and Kildare presents the Victorian sentimentality of "fifty years in a buggy," but brings it up to date as "fifty years an intern in City Hospital."

George Bernard Shaw, too, aired his distrust of doctors in his comedy "The Doctor's Dilemma," and used the play to ride some of his hobby horses for vegetarianism and against vaccination. Bertolt Brecht, in "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," introduces a larcenous surgeon who has cut off the wrong leg of his patient.

Romains' Dr. Knock plays another time-honoured medical trick by working out a very profitable deal with the local pharmacist. Even in Chaucer's day, this arrangement was known

and deplored. In describing the physician's relationship with the apothecary, Chaucer drily comments, "Their friendship was nothing new."

Jules Romains' warning to beware of quackery and fads carries considerable weight today when fads are the fashion and when snake-oil salesmen make their pitch on TV with all the trumpery of pseudo-scientific jargon and gadgetry. The final irony of Dr. Knock rests in the fact that, after gulling his own colleague, he finally begins to believe his own advice.

## Old Comedy Seen At McGill

Dr. Knock, a 1923 comedy by Jules Romains that has the fustian air of the Edwardian about it, is the latest choice of the drama section of the McGill English Department.

The play had a special performance at Moyses Hall last night and opens officially tonight.

The comedy is a satire on the medical profession with the emphasis going to those near quacks who run health centres greatly to their own profit and glorification and to the no little enrichment of local hotel keepers, drug dispensers and the like.

The comedy is pretty close to being a museum piece. While we were watching it we would not have been surprised to see Jean Anouilh popping in from one wing and doffing his hat to a young George Bernard Shaw emerging from the opposite side of the stage.

The title character is a one-time quack who has lately qualified and is looking about for something good in the way of a practice.

He takes over the practically non-existent business of an honest but lazy medic in a small town and proceeds, mainly by flummery, to build it up into a sizeable spa.

The comedy takes an ironic

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turn when the honest doctor returns to collect his money and himself falls a victim of his colleague's blandishments.

That's it. A simple plot in three short acts but the play contains one or two very good characterizations.

Dr. Knock, himself, is too much of a stereotype to require much attention. We need only say that he was well done by Neil Shee.

Dr. Parpalaid, the original owner of the practice (a man as devoted to God's scenery and billiards as he is to medical science) is something else again. The character is a truly realized one and is strong enough to stand on his own feet.

Here again, the play was well served by the actor, this time Michael Frueh.

Madame Parpalaid, though a small role, was just as effectively acted by Aviva Slesin.

Perhaps, however, the best character in the whole thing is the local gentlewoman, Madame Pons. Every inch the minor aristocrat and professional do-gooder, she is a difficult part to play. Ann Purdon took her in full stride, though, and gave us a truly excellent piece of acting. We congratulate her on her accent, delivery and stage presence.

The rest of the cast gave good support to the leads and, indeed, played admirably for a student group.

Frank Faragoah's direction was sure and deft and Anne Hirno's sets and costumes were colorful.

Dr. Knock will be performed up to and including Saturday at Moyses Hall.

