

The transformation of medicine by the magic of music in the romances of Shakespeare

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Medicine in the late plays of Shakespeare evolves into something rich and strange. The physician, transformed into a magus enlightened through his 'secret studies', becomes capable of invoking supernatural forces in his cure of souls and bodies as the magic of his invocations is infused with the magic of music. The magic of this therapist has been much discussed^{1,2}, but this paper is directed to the role of the magic of music in the romances of Shakespeare.

The contribution of music to the magus's magic is best viewed in the context of the revival of the tradition of the ancient occult philosophy which was promulgated by the Neoplatonists at the Medici Court of Florence. This was stimulated by the recovery of the texts of Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the translation of Marcilio Ficino (1433–1499) and his follower Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). The addition of music to the magic of the old occult tradition was elevated by Ficino, son of a physician and himself a practising physician. Two strands were involved in the development of the magic of music in the growth of magic itself: one was the concept of the music of the spheres, the harmony of the universe; the other the concept of the power of music to influence the human mind and soul. The one part, the philosophical basis of music's power, was derived from Pythagoras' observations (born c 580 BC) based on the relation of the length of strings of instruments to the musical notes which they produced when vibrating. From this he had evolved the idea that the explanation of the universe is to be sought not in matter but in musical numbers and their relationships. The other part of the concept, of music as therapy, followed in part from Ficino's writings influenced by Plotinus, the third century Neoplatonist. Ficino had accepted the Stoic notion which postulated a cosmic affect (*spiritus mundi*) permeating the entire universe and furnishing a pathway between the heavens and the world. At the same time the spirit was an instrument of the incorporeal soul. Sound affected the spirit more than sight because it transmitted movement and itself was moving, whereas sight merely reproduced the static surface of things. In this way, Agrippa in *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533) united the two strands: 'Thus no songs, sounds and instrumental music are stronger in moving the

emotions of man and in inducing magical impression than those composed in number, measure, and proportion as likenesses of the heavens'³. Music is effective in so far as it mirrors the harmony of the music of the spheres.

THE LIMITATIONS OF ELIZABETHAN MEDICINE

The steps towards this transformation of medicine by music included Shakespeare's dramatization of the inadequacy of the conventional medical thinking of his day. In *Macbeth* (1606) this limitation is emphasized when the astute doctor of physic confirms that Lady Macbeth's illness and sleepwalking are 'beyond my practice... More needs she the divine than the physician' (5.1.59, 74). Indeed, the earliest use of magic by a physician or his representative in a Shakespeare play had already been shown in *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602–1603) in the 'cure' of the King of France's illness by Helena. Although herself not a physician, she was the daughter and disciple of the famous deceased physician Girard de Norbon, friend of the King. The King's fistula had plagued him despite all his physicians' help, and he had been given up by both the Galenic and the rival Paracelsian doctors. Helena had hoped to cure the King by prescriptions inherited from her father, but the King refused medicines that had not worked in the past. So she quickly adds another power. She proposes that the King 'to my endeavours give consent/Of heaven, not me, make an experiment' (2.1. 153–154)—the use of mysterious astrological and magical powers to reinforce the effects of medicines. The prompt healing of the King's fistula seems to the old Lord Lafew indeed miraculous, but the rites she used are not disclosed.

THE MAGIC OF MUSIC IN THE ROMANCES

However, when we consider the first of the romances of the late period, *Pericles* (1607–1608), it is clear that the enlightened physician Cerimon, a lord of Ephesus, has achieved the privileged status which 'virtue and cunning' confer in 'making a man a god'. Cerimon has acquired his medical prowess by studying physics, 'through which sacred art/By turning o'er authorities,... can speak of the disturbances/That nature works; and of her cures; which doth give me/A more content in course of true delight' (3.2.32, 37–39). He had become endowed to practise the

new magical medicine incorporating the magic of music, and thus we are prepared for its appearance. When the body of Thaisa, wife of Pericles, washes up on the shore of Ephesus, in the trunk in which she had been cast into the sea after giving birth on board to her daughter Marina, Cerimon prepares to raise her from the dead encouraged by a passage he had read of Egyptian medicine—which is more than a hint that he was familiar with aspects of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. But of primary importance is the music which Cerimon invokes to accomplish his resuscitation of Thaisa. He instructs his servants ‘Well said, well said, the fire and cloths/The rough and woeful music that we have,/Cause it to sound, beseech you’ (3.2. 87–89). Impatient because the music stops, Cerimon berates the violist: ‘The viol once more! How thou stirrest, thou block!/The music there!’ and announces: ‘Gentleman, this queen will live!’ (3.2. 90–92). The onlookers consider Cerimon has worked a miracle through divine intervention: ‘The heavens, through you, increase our wonder, and sets up/Your fame forever’ (3.2. 95–97). It is the magic of music which accounts for his intervention and alters the nature of medicine.

The music which helped rescue her mother from death also contributes to Marina’s treatment of her father Pericles, distressed and guilty at the loss of Thaisa and at having handed over the newborn babe Marina to Cleon, Governor of Tyre, for her future education. But most important is the revelation of how the magic of music creates its therapeutic effect. Marina had been trained in ‘music’s letters’ in the years of separation from her family. She is described as the one who ‘sings like one immortal’, and is implored to use her ‘sacred physic’ to treat Pericles. She first sings to him and later talks to him, whereby they come to recognize each other as father and daughter. As Pericles puts it: ‘O come hither,/Thou that beget’st him that did thee beget’. The climax is reached when Pericles asks ‘But what music?’ that the bystanders cannot hear. Pericles, astonished, can only say, ‘The music of the spheres! List, my Marina . . . Rarest sounds! Do ye not hear? . . . I hear/Most heavenly music!’ (5.1. 229–233).

The harmony of the music of the spheres has charmed the dysharmony of Pericles’ soul. He is ‘cured’ when he hears the celestial music which is not heard by mortal humans, since ‘this muddy vesture of decay doth close it in’ as Lorenzo explained in *The Merchant of Venice*. The illuminated therapist enables the suffering patient to transcend the body and receive the healing effects of the harmony of the universe.

The expectation that music would be needed in the transformation of the lost and dead back into glowing healthy life is so well established in Shakespeare’s last plays that music plays its part in *The Winter’s Tale*, although Hermione is not dead. She is presented as a recently painted statue by the Italian artist Julio Romano (d 1346) after her

long stay in Diana’s temple. In restoring her to her husband Leontes, Paulina invokes the aid of music:

Music! awake her! strike!
 ‘Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach;
 Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come . . .
 Bequeath to death your numbness; for from him
 Dear life redeems you. You perceive she stirs
 (5.3. 98–103)

to which Leontes exclaims: ‘O, she’s warm!/If this be magic, let it be an art/Lawful as eating’ (5.3. 111–111). He is not certain whether black or white magic was involved in her restoration to life, or perhaps it is only a fairy tale. In this awakening of the living statue of Hermione by Paulina there is introduced a clear contrast between spiritual (*magia*) and demonic (*goetia*) magic. Shakespeare appears not interested in labelling the kind of magic that was needed to perform this miracle, but King Leontes indeed is so enraptured by the revival of his lost wife that he is indifferent to anything except the music of Paulina’s invocation.

Much has been written on the magic of *The Tempest* (1611), but I confine myself to the last transformation of the role of the physician with his use of ‘solemn music.’ From the first appearance of Prospero, he is the authentic magus in his ‘magic garments’ beyond ‘the liberal arts’, ‘being transported and rapt’ in ‘secret studies’. He is master of an island ‘full of sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not’, commanded by him and performed by Ariel his airy spirit, who is aided by lower spirits.

Prospero at first uses this heavenly music to comfort Ferdinand for the assumed loss of his father and at the same time to calm the tempest. It was the music of Ariel’s songs, especially ‘Full fathom five they father lies’ that crept by Ferdinand on the waters, ‘Allaying both their fury and my passion/With its sweet air’. The solemn music Prospero will call for later in the play as he confronts the shipwrecked nobles and their followers is not for vengeance but to hear the penitence of wrongdoers.

The magic of music of stringed instruments is touched on in *The Tempest* in the reference to ‘the miraculous harp’ with which Amphion had created Thebes, and its allusion to the harp with which biblical David has exorcized the evil spirits that invaded Saul after God had abandoned him.

But Prospero does require heavenly music to work his last magic: ‘I have required some heavenly music—which even now I do—/To work mine end upon their senses that/This airy charm is for’ (5.1. 51–54), which is followed by the appropriate stage direction ‘Solemn music’. Thus Prospero speaks to the charmed circle of Alonso with Gonzalo, Sebastian, and Antonio explaining that ‘A solemn air, and the best comforter/To an unsettled fancy/Cure thy

brains... For you are spell-stopped'. The music having cured the discord of their souls, all confess their faults and their evil behaviour is forgiven.

The limited medical therapists of his contemporaries were not suitable for Shakespeare's dramatic needs. They have been transformed in these romances into mysterious and powerful magicians in the hermetical mould and are armed with music appropriate for these romantic tales.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEDICINE INTO A MEDICAL UTOPIA

We do not know what led Shakespeare to write this late series of romances, although many solutions have been proposed. They range from the effects of the court life of James I with its masques and entertainment, or the threatened stability of the new Stuart dynasty, to postulated changes in Shakespeare's personal life and the need to write of reconciliation of families of lost wives and daughters. Whatever the reason, in the course of these last romances, medicine for Shakespeare is transformed from its traditional inheritance of Galen's concepts into the practice of a magical art by an enlightened magus. The Shakespearean strain defines this movement in which illness is healed when the disorder of the ailing patient is transformed by the magical effect of the music of the spheres invoked by the magus, joining heaven and earth. Pico had defined the magic of the magus as 'nothing other than to marry the world'—that is to marry the earth to heaven.

Many critics from Coleridge to Northrop Frye have identified Prospero with Shakespeare as the real magician but it is always dangerous to identify the author with his characters. There is a sense of deep irony in Prospero's renunciation of his powers and return to the reality of Milan where his 'Every third thought shall be my grave' (5.1.312). This is reinforced in the epilogue when the actor playing Prospero, now without his magic garments, pleads:

'Let me not... dwell/In this bare island by your spell/... Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant/And my ending is despair,' since, as he points out, 'what strength I have's mine own/Which is most faint'. This can only emphasize that the real magic is the creation of the dramatist.

Gonzalo had envisioned a utopian 'commonwealth' only if he were in control of the island where he would not allow the 'name of magistrate/... No occupation, all men idle, all;/And women too, but innocent and pure/No sovereignty—... /I would with such perfection govern, sir/T' exceed the golden age', but Prospero had constructed a medical utopia with the magic of music. We shall never know what Shakespeare personally thought of his medical utopia in these visionary plays, where the sick are cured by being helped to perceive the harmony of the universe. He certainly knew that utopia, entering the language in Sir Thomas More's work of that name (1516), existed nowhere 'and had never been seen or known to exist in reality'. Medicine had not reached that wished-for return of the golden age when the magic of music infused and completed the magic of the magus's therapy. It was Shakespeare, creator of the Prospero of *The Tempest*, and the other magi with their musical medicine, who were to demonstrate dramatically what medicine might become.

Acknowledgment All citations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, edited by G Blackmore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

REFERENCES

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- 2 Yates F. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964
- 3 Tomlinson G. *Music in Renaissance Magic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989: 63