



A.P. CHEKHOV AND RUSSIAN LITERATURE

А.П. ЧЕХОВ И РУССКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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The imaginary doctor and his speech mask in the works of A.P. Chekhov and in Russian humorous literature at the end of the 19th century

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Abstract. The proposed study delves into the depiction of an imaginary doctor in mass humor during the late 19th century and in Chekhov's early work. Its aim is to provide an explanation for Chekhov's innovative humor, which stands out in comparison to that of his contemporaries. The work's scientific novelty lies in the clarification of the concept of "speech mask in literature". This refers to a hybrid of two languages, one inherent to the hero and the other appropriated from someone else, presented in a dialogic manner. Chekhov's contemporaries such as Leikin, Amfiteatrov, and Shcheglov created simplistic comic scenarios in their works. The intentions of these authors were aimed solely at entertaining and distracting readers from their daily worries. Chekhov takes a complex stance on mass humor. On one hand, he must adhere to its demands in order to publish his stories in magazines. On the other hand, he subverts existing conventions by complicating his heroes' speech characteristics through a speech mask. Chekhov not only entertains his readers, but also provides depictions of provincial customs and various social types. The image of the doctor in Chekhov's mature works is ambivalent and only indirectly related to the imaginary doctor from his humorous pieces.

Keywords: humor, popular literature, image of a doctor, speech mask, social type

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Мнимый доктор и его речевая маска в произведениях А.П. Чехова и русской юмористике конца XIX в.

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Аннотация. Рассматривается фигура мнимого доктора в массовой юмористике конца позапрошлого века и в раннем творчестве Чехова. Целью является выявление новаторства Чехова-юмориста, которое проявляется на фоне произведений его коллег. Научная новизна работы связана с уточнением определения ключевого понятия «речевая маска в литературе». Она трактуется как диалогизированный гибрид двух языков – органично присущего герою и присваемого им чужого. За счет их интерференции рождается смешовой эффект. Современники Чехова (Лейкин, Амфитеатров, Щеглов) создавали в своих произведениях непритязательные комические ситуации. Авторские интенции в них ограничивались задачей позабавить читателя, отвлечь его от будничных забот. Чехов занимает двойственную позицию по отношению к массовой юмористике. С одной стороны, он должен был учитывать ее требования, чтобы опубликовать свои рассказы в журналах. Вместе с тем Чехов преодолевает существующие шаблоны и стереотипы за счет усложнения работы с речевой маской героя. Писатель не только развлекает читателя, но еще и создает картины провинциальных нравов, а также характеристики различных социальных типов. Образ доктора в зрелых произведениях Чехова отличается амбивалентностью, он опосредованно связан с фигурой мнимого доктора из его юмористических произведений.

Ключевые слова: юмор, массовая литература, образ доктора, речевая маска, социальный тип

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Introduction

The image of a Doctor in art is as ancient as the medical profession itself. This image is to be found in almost all cultures of the world. Its comic aspect is, perhaps, the most common: *For society, the image of a doctor was primarily mythological. The global folklore tradition <...> portrayed him as a familiar object of comic and even offensive mockery* (Bogdanov, 2005, p. 384). The doctor

was a *commedia dell'arte* stock character, and he often appeared in the literature of classicism. For instance, everyone knows of Molière's comedy “Le Malade Imaginaire” (“The Imaginary Invalid”).

In Russian literature, this personage developed a recognizable shape in the late 19th century. In this form, the Doctor enters the Russian mass literature. The Mock Doctor was one of the facets of this comic image. His was a ludic behavior and what literary scholars call *a speech mask*. Like a real mask, the speech mask hides the true face of the speaker (Coulmas, 2019). The concept of speech mask became the focus of attention of many a Russian philologist, e.g., Yu.M. Lotman (Lotman, 1979), A.V. Kuks (Kuks, 2010), T.A. Chebotnikova (Chebotnikova, 2011), etc. For instance, M.V. Shpilman defines a speech mask as *a special type of communicative strategy that involves a temporary and situational reconstruction of someone else's linguistic image, which the speaker appropriates for a specific purpose; it imitates someone else's speech behavior, i.e., the manner of speech or vocabulary, and suggests a different linguistic worldview* (Shpilman, 2006, pp. 6–7).

In this study, we concentrate on another aspect of this phenomenon: the speech mask is a dialogized hybrid that results from the divergence between the personage's own speech and someone else's. Its hybrid nature comes from the relative constancy of the personage's speech as opposed to the dynamicity of the speech mask, which can be removed to reveal the true face of the personage only to be put on again. A speech mask becomes visible only against the background of the personage's own inherent discourse. The speech mask in fiction differs from that in real life. Authors create one with a certain purpose in mind, i.e., to serve a certain artistic task. To sum up the definition, *a speech mask in fiction is a dialogized hybrid of two discourses of one and the same personage, deliberately designed by the author: the one is constant and inherent to the personage, the other is temporary and typical of another personage or a socio-professional archetype, i.e., adherent to the speaker.*

Discussion

The Mock Doctor in mass literature

Humor magazines experienced a publishing boom in Russia in the 1880–1900s. They targeted an undemanding mass reader, and their main purpose was to entertain and amuse. Their authors often exploited the Mock Doctor in different plot collisions.

Nikolai A. Leikin edited and published a popular humor magazine called “The Oskolki” (“Fragments”), and he knew perfectly well what the mass reader expects. “The Two Doctors” was a short story he published in his book “Cunning Fellows”. The story introduces a moralistic sketch. In line with the genre cliché, Nikolai Leikin starts by determining the chronotope of the action. *We see a terrace a luxurious summer cottage in Pavlovsk. There sits an elderly and obese, but very amiable husband. Nearby sits his skinny, middle-aged, and very angry-*

looking wife with a heavy make-up on her face. They must just have had lunch. The capricious lady wants her husband to get her to Imatra, an expensive resort on the Finnish border, because this is what all the decent people in their summer community do. The husband resists because Imatra is too expensive, upon which the wife throws a tantrum: *Ah, ah, I'm dying! Call the doctor! Call the doctor! To make herself more comprehensible, she is ostentatiously clutching her chest, moaning, and tossing about in her chair* (Leikin, 1881, p. 195). The husband has to call the doctor. However, the doctor sees through the bluff and refuses the fee. The wife insists on calling another doctor, who turns to be an experienced psychologist. Money-minded, he plays along with the lady:

– *Well, yes ... I was right. Can you feel your temples pounding, madame?*

– *Oh, yes, Doctor, I'm suffering great pains. <...>*

– *I can detect a strong decrease in red blood cells and an abundance of white ones... Show your tongue, please. Your tongue is all right... It's the nerves... Severe nerve attacks... You are too sensitive. It's because some of your organs do not function properly. Sir, you need to be kind to your wife, be more indulgent...* (Leikin, 1881, p. 198).

The Doctor accepts a generous fee for his visit. The Mock Patient and the Mock Doctor enter a conspiracy in pursuit of their own goals. In this story, the Doctor does not shift from one professional status to another: he is a real doctor. However, no two doctors are created equal. The personage puts on the speech mask of an *Aesculapius* who is a great specialist in female nervous diseases. He mirrors his patient's bluff. In his biographical essay on Nikolai Leikin's 30th anniversary as a writer, A.I. Vvedensky noted that Leikin had *the talent of a cartoonist, not that of a psychologist or an artist. His superficial talent cannot yield anything serious and long-lasting. His is but a fleeting fame* (Vvedensky, 1890, p. 636). The critic was right: the only reason scholars still address Leikin's oeuvre is to recreate the literary context of the late XIX century.

Alexander V. Amfiteatrov introduced another variation of the Mock Doctor in his short story “The Way They Treat Us”, which was published in “*The Budilnik*” (“Alarm Clock”). The plot is simple and clear from the very opening line: *Semyon Luchkov, the landlord, ate too much of jellied pork on his birthday and fell sick*. The Mock Patient calls doctors, every time a more expensive and better-qualified one, but none of them can ease his suffering. He starts by consulting a student, his son's tutor, then moves on to a cheap *three-ruble doctor*, followed by Professor Kolpakov and his Assistant. However, even those two are unable to help Luchkov, whose condition only gets worse with each medication they prescribe. Eventually, Professor Kolpakov's visits bring the glutton on the verge of death: *Kolpakov and his assistant kept coming three days in a row, but Semyon Luchkov felt no better. The Assistant gradually abandons his initially playful mode and breaks up, Tell me, you cursed thing, why are you not recovering although we are giving you the best medical treatment possible? Professor Kolpakov turns completely sour, and each time, saying goodbye to the patient, he looks at*

him intently and intricately, as if he wants to say: *I haven't doctored you out of your life, have I?* (Amfiteatrov, 1886, p. 378). Doctor Khrabrov is the last in this chain of physicians. Taking the largest fee of all, he diagnoses *imminent death by a jellied pig*, thus allowing Luchkov to eat everything he likes. At the end, the author simply interrupts the chain of homogeneous episodes with Luchkov's death.

The Mock Doctor was a popular visitor on stage as well. "The Doctor's Appointment" is a one-act comedy by I.L. Shcheglov. The action unfolds in Doctor Schwarzkopf's house. His servant Feoktist characterizes Schwarzkopf as a *resilient German*. On a working day, his eccentric wife forces the doctor to go to the countryside. Feoktist is in love with Polina, a lady's maid, but he is one hundred rubles short from a descent wedding party. He remembers that when he was once out of work in Taganrog, he *joined an acting troupe and portrayed noble gentlemen*. Taking advantage of the absence of his master, Feoktist decides to fake a doctor in order to get money for his wedding. The Mock Doctor believes that the patients are naive enough to be deceived: *Fortunately, I've lived long enough at the Doctor's to pick up some scraps here and there... All these pathologies, physiologies, and other bullshitologies... I often leafed through his mind-bending books, and all the smart words, they are running through my head right now!* (Shcheglov, 1901, p. 199).

The Mock Doctor receives several Mock Patients, starting with a school teacher named Erofeev, who suffers from what he defines as *diplopsia*, i.e., a double vision. For instance, he sees Feoktist both as a doctor and as an animal: *You might think it strange, Doctor, but it seems to me that you are... (embarrassed and stammering) a... a chameleon!* The Mock Doctor makes an educated guess that Erofeev is a delirious alcoholic. In fact, *Erofeev* is a token one: The Dictionary of V. Dahl defines *ерофеич* or *ероука* as *herbal vodka* (Dal, 1989, p. 591). The Mock Doctor and the Patient together drink three glasses of vodka, and Erofeev feels much better. Feoktist advises his first patient to give up vodka for cognac. The next patient of the Mock Doctor is a Miss Prim and Proper. She has such an acute sense of smell that immediately feels sick as soon as she enters the office and catches the smell of onions: *Ah, I can't bear the smell onions... I just can't... I feel sick! (She staggers ostentatiously. Feoktist picks her up and lays her down on the couch). Recovering, the young lady says: Ah, I'm so sensitive: a whiff of something indelicate in the air makes me sick! A strong word heard in the street makes me faint! (Gives the glass back). We women are really so weak, so helpless; I don't know what would have happened to us without support! (Flutters her eyelashes)* (Shcheglov, 1901, p. 209). Miss Prim and Proper cannot explain what exactly is wrong with her. However, the Mock Doctor finds the right treatment, deciding to *excite the slender nature* of the patient with regimental music. Feoktist and the girl dance a polka, and she feels completely healthy and rewards her rescuer with money. The play consists of a number of similar comic episodes. It ends with the arrival of the real doctor, who exposes the mock one.

Thus, the authors of mass humor journals used some very old tricks to achieve their main goal, i.e., to make the readers laugh, or at least bring a smile to their faces. They created very simple plots, and their humor was almost entirely linguistic.

The Mock Doctor in Anton Chekhov's stories

Anton Chekhov's innovative approach becomes obvious against the background of the clichéd images depicted by Leikin, Amfiteatrov, and Shcheglov. His story "The Two Rural Aesculapiuses" (1882) was published in "Svet and Teni" ("Light and Shadows"). Eventually, it entered the treasure trove of Russian literature and became one of the most famous works by this author. The story seems to follow the pattern of *fragmented* literature. For instance, Chekhov defines the chronotope in just a few words: *One morning at a small provincial hospital*. The next sentence outlines the collision: *The Doctor has gone hunting, and two paramedics, Kuzma Egorov and Gleb Glebych, have to treat patients in his absence* (Chekhov, 1974, vol. 1, p. 126). The story opens immediately with an impersonation: two paramedics act as doctors.

For a modern reader, these two occupations might seem very similar. However, in the 19th century the gap between a doctor and a paramedic was enormous. Only a university graduate who received a fundamental medical education could become a doctor (Mangold, 2020). In contrast, a paramedic was often a former barber whose duties included bloodletting and treating minor injuries. Brockhaus and Efron's Dictionary has an article on "Paramedic and Paramedicine" that starts as follows: *In the early 19th century, paramedics were trained by urban and provincial doctors, and the first paramedical schools appeared as late as in the middle of the 19th century. <...> Graduates were obliged to work at state hospitals. Article 561 of the Medical Regulations said that a paramedic could not prescribe medicine* (Bortkevich, 1902, p. 443). Thus, paramedics were directly subordinate to their doctors and had a very limited profile.

The whole point of "The Two Rural Aesculapiuses" lies in the fact that the personages, along with a change in professional status, lose their inherent behavior pattern of *medical assistants*. However, their attempts to act as doctors are a pure mockery, but only the author can see it. The Paramedics believe they manage the role of doctors quite well, while the author shows them in a comic light. The shift from their natural behavior to the acquired one also affects their speech:

The muffled-face man and the deep-voiced Mikhailo come in.

– *Who goes?*

– *Ivan Mikulov.*

– *Huh? What did you say? Speak plain Russian!*

– *I am Ivan Mikulov.*

– *I'm not asking you, Ivan Mikulov! Get lost! You! What's your name?*

Mikhailo smiles.

– *As if you don't know.*

– *Like hell I know! And stop laughing! Can't waste my precious time on your stupid jokes! What's your name?*

– *But you do know my name. Have you gone mad?*

– *Of course, I know your name, but I have to ask, it's the procedure! And no way have I gone mad, I'm not a drunkard like you, mister. At least, I don't do spree drinking. Your name and surname?*

– *Why should I tell you if you know yourself? We've known each other for five years, and on year six you suddenly forget it?*

– *Of course, I remember your name, but I have to follow the procedure! Understand? Or do you not understand Russian? The procedure!* (Chekhov, 1974, vol. 1, pp. 196–197).

The speech portrait of the Mock Doctor is built on the fact that the Paramedic in him keeps interrupting the Doctor. It is clear that Gleb Glebych the Paramedic and the low-voiced Mikhailo belong to the same social stratum and have known each other for several years. The patient addresses the Paramedic he sees, while the Paramedic identifies himself with the absent Doctor, who has never met Mikhailo. As a result, Gleb Glebych pretends he does not recognize his old drinking buddy: he sees him as a patient. It seems that the Doctor Gleb Glebych works for treats *the procedure* as something sacred that stands above him and guides his professional behavior. The Paramedic knows it and tries to copycat the Doctor in his utter respect for *the procedure*. The artistic ingenuity of this dialogue lies in the fact that somewhere between the lines, on the subtext level, we hear another voice – that of the absent Doctor, who is away hunting. The Paramedic copies his behavior patterns and speech in his vocabulary and irritable intonation: *Huh? What did you say? Speak plain Russian!*

The image of the Mock Doctor manifests itself in the practice. The anamnesis and diagnosis are quick and simple:

In comes a small, wrinkled old woman, as if flattened by her evil fate. She crosses herself and bows respectfully to the doctor. <...>

– *Do you have stomach issues?*

– *I do, good sir, I do...*

– *Well, pull your lower eyelid! Okay, that's fine. You have anemia... I'll give you some drops... Take ten drops in the morning, afternoon, and evening.*

Kuzma Yegorov sits down and writes down the prescription:

Rp. Liquor ferri, three grams, the one on the windowsill, not the one on the shelf, Doctor does not allow to open it, ten drops three times a day for Marya Zaplaksina (Chekhov, 1974, vol. 1, p. 198).

Although the law prohibited paramedics to issue prescriptions, Kuzma Egorov does it by imitating the behavior he learnt from the Doctor. His prescription is indicative in many ways. The way he switches from Latin to Russian indicates that the patient is illiterate and will not be able to read the prescription anyway. The comic effect comes from the macaronic style and the contrast between the pseudoscientific and the colloquial. The panacea is right there, in the provin-

cial hospital. At least some part of what he wrote in the prescription, Kuzma Yegorov could have addressed directly to his partner Gleb Glebych, but this would have betrayed him as a Mock Doctor. Therefore, the prescription changes its genre: it turns into a note addressed to the companion in misfortune, not the patient. In fact, the literary predecessor of this device is a note from the Mayor to his wife he scribbles on a tavern bill in Nikolay Gogol's "The Inspector General".

Again, we see the absent Doctor between the lines of the prescription. Before going hunting, he must have instructed the Paramedics on what to do and what not to do. We do not know if the drops on the windowsill really are *Liquor ferri*. In fact, Kuzma Egorov tells his partner to give the patient something that is standing on the windowsill. Most likely, it is some weak stuff that can do no harm. An additional insurance against medical error is that the medicine is prescribed in minimal doses, i.e., *ten drops three times a day*. The patient is offered nothing but a placebo, which can do her some psychological support at best. Thus, the story unites all three personages – the Paramedics and the Doctor – under the author's ironic assessment as *rural Aesculapiuses*. Anton Chekhov does not just make the reader laugh: he creates a sketch of provincial life with a slight latent criticism of the provincial intelligentsia. It is also important that these two Mock Doctors emerged from the pen of a medical student: Chekhov wrote it when he was studying medicine at Moscow University.

In 1884, Chekhov published a similar story called "The Surgery" in "Oskolki". The plot again revolves around an absent doctor: *A provincial state hospital. The doctor is away getting married, and the paramedic Kuryatin, a fat man in his forties, has to see his patients...* (Chekhov, 1975, vol. 3, p. 40). While in the first story the comedy was generated in the speech of the characters, "The Surgery" is a comedy of action. Paramedic Kuryatin has to remove a tooth from Vonmiglasov, a local deacon. Both characters have token names that reveal their semantic potential in their actions. There is a Russian proverb that starts like this: *as much as a chicken is not a real bird*, <...> and gets a proper continuation according to the context. The reader is bound to come up with a simple conclusion: *As much as a chicken is not a bird, a paramedic is not a doctor*.

Another Mock Doctor appears in Chekhov's unfinished vaudeville "The Night Before Judgment". The Gusevs, a husband and a wife, meet a certain Zaitsev during their stay at a rural inn. Zaitsev fancies himself an experienced seducer and wants to have a no-strings affair with Mrs. Gusev. He pretends to be a doctor: *Let me feel your pulse! (He is feeling for her pulse.) Hm... Hmm... (Pause). What are you laughing at?* Mrs. Gusev's laughter testifies that she immediately saw through Zaitsev. He is holding her hand not like a doctor, but the way a flirting man would do. Besides, he can't say anything in particular about the pulse of his patient: *Are you sure you are a doctor?* Mrs. Gusev asks him (Chekhov, 1978, vol. 12, p. 229). In the end, the Mock Doctor, who believes himself to be a Seducer, finds himself caught in the net that Mrs. Gusev, a woman of the world, has trapped him in. "The Night Before Judgment" creates a strong vaudeville confusion

by flickering various speech masks: a failed Seducer peeps out from under the mask of the Mock Doctor while a Femme Fatal keeps watching him from under the mask of a Seduced Victim (Kubasov, 2018).

In Chekhov's later oeuvre, the Mock Doctor becomes a more complicated and reduced figure. In “Tonych”, the main character evolves from a provincial doctor into a *pagan god*. In the finale, his medical practice gives way to money-making. Chekhov's other doctor characters – Astrov, Dorn, and Chebutykin – are also far from ideal and retain some traces of the Mock Doctor.

Conclusion

The Mock Doctor was a popular image in Russian comedy literature in the late 19th century. He always came hand in hand with the image of the Mock Patient. The Mock Doctor had a speech mask that coupled the personage's inherent linguistic personality with an adherent one, which the personage appropriated in certain situations. In the late 19th century, comedy authors of mass fiction based their images on the old tradition, which had degenerated into a set of patterns. As a rule, they underestimated the creative mind of the readers and offered them ready-made solutions. Anton Chekhov took an ambivalent position in relation to his peer authors: to be published in humor magazines, he had to comply with their guidelines. However, the author of “The Two Rural Aesculapiuses” brought the canon of the Mock Doctor and the Mock Patient to a logical extreme. By exhausting these two old images, Chekhov did not abandon them completely. In his mature oeuvre, the Mock Doctor became a much more complex and ambivalent figure. Chekhov's irony and comedy derivatives revived the implicit genetic connection with the Mock Doctor archetype in the mature oeuvre of this great Russian writer.

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