

## Sensibility and the Innocent Eye of Medical Science

Medicine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a growth industry and this was despite the lack of any real change or improvement in knowledge or practice. Augustan satirists viewed with some chagrin an industry built by those who, in Swift's words "tend the Sick for Pay." Still the commercialization of the English economy fuelled a growing demand for medical services and this in turn sparked an explosion in the Medical professions which contributed to the real progress of treatments if only by a massive infusion of capital into this particular service. As George Holmes points out, the steady expansion in the English economy from the early 1690s prompted growth which was immediately met by various attempts in the different professions to institutionalize and restrict their industries. As Roy Porter approvingly adds, the vigour of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English economy in general and medicine in particular rested on the utter failure of these efforts to restrict the entrepreneurial drive which characterizes the period. People were prepared to lay out sizeable sums of money to minimize pain and extend life, and accordingly there were many eager to capitalize on the inexhaustible market provided by the fear of death.

This situation led to many phenomenal success stories particularly among those who had recourse to the affluence classes. John Radcliffe and William Hunter are only two cases. Exploitation and corruption were, of course, as common in the Medical Profession as in any other, but this should not lead us to an unduly pessimistic vision of 18<sup>th</sup> century medicine. Many modern scholar have busily exposed the "dark side" of medicine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with its clear political and social functions, and concluded absurdly that Medicine and its progress is evil. But even the Augustan wits, often selected by the above revisionists as proof of corruption in the sacred sphere of medicine, knew all too well that medicine, though susceptible to perversion, could offer real benefits. Here is Swift in his sickness lamenting his being:

"Remov'd from kind Arbuthnot's Aid,  
Who knows his Art but not his Trade;  
Preferring his Regards for me  
Before his Credit or his Fee."

A good physician was a boon to humanity, not its bane. Likewise Pope, who with Swift suffered interminably, reputedly ended his life with a tribute to the "Facultie" of Chelsea

College, who tended his illnesses, as “the most Amiable Companions, and the best friends as well as the most learned men I know.” On the other side of the coin, Pope could happily execrate a physician who for professional or personal reasons seemed to merit reproach. Dr. John Woodward was just such an example. Woodward was a physician who championed *vomition* with such truculence that he raised the bulk of the medical profession against him and was eventually driven to the ground by Dr. Richard Mead in a Duel fought in the courtyard to Gresham College. Pope sided with the majority and lampooned Woodward, who was also a dedicated collector, as “Mummies” in the New Dunciad.

What is significant about the attitudes of Pope and Swift toward medicine is that they measure it by the same ethical standards as they use for all human conduct. They require of a physician a mixture of integrity, humanity and civility as well as technical proficiency. It is of extreme importance to remember that both Swift and Pope find physicians in their day worthy of respect, gratitude and praise. This kind of balanced approach to Medicine is a timeless corrective to the attitudes toward medicine is a timeless corrective to the attitudes toward medicine that seem to gravitate to one or the other extremes of blanket optimism or utter pessimism.

It is to the former extreme, that is uncritical optimism, that Richard Schwartz inclines in his book on Samuel Johnson and the New Science. Here Schwartz marshals together fragments, which point to Johnson’s empirical turn of mind and sympathetic turn of heart, to prove that Johnson, unlike his satiric predecessors, understood, appreciated and applauded science within a larger frame of Christian beliefs. Unfortunately what Schwartz says of Johnson holds true for Dryden, Swift and Pope as well as, going further back Sir Thomas Browne and Milton. This work would be stronger if it cast its net more widely and not tried to distinguish Johnson unduly in this matter. This is doubly true when we remember that the bulk of Johnson’s writings on science consisted of warnings against the overwhelming attractions of curiosity to the detriment of life. Johnson’s one prolonged piece on science, and in particular on medicine, is his astoundingly poignant biography of Herman Boerhaave, the premiere physician, and teacher in European Medicine in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Here like Pope and Swift, Johnson praises the man and the physician.

Boerhaave was trained for the ministry but his interests in science sparked vindictive charges of atheism so he found his path to ordination, and the “Cure of Souls” blocked. Fortunately “he was equally qualified for a Profession, not indeed of equal Dignity or Importance, but which must undoubtedly claim the second Place among those which are of the greatest Benefit to Mankind.” His activity as a physician clearly shines out as a paradigm of human goodness for Johnson; the whole biography exudes a desire to emulate Boerhaave’s example. Boerhaave, equipped with the classical tongues, undertook to restore “the greatest authors” such as Hippocrates, to their “just and ancient Reputation” as healers. The effectiveness of the cure was the final criteria by which he judged all learning, ancient and modern.

“He neither thought so highly of himself, as to imagine he could receive no Light from Books; nor so meanly, as to believe he could discover nothing but what was to be learned from them. He examined the Observations of other Men, but trusted only to his Own.”

The attitude toward learning expressed and endorsed here by Johnson is entirely reconcilable to Swift’s position in the The Battle of the Books. Over the entirety of Boerhaave’s work reigns an unshakable piety and Christian resignation to the limitations of this life, that fits perfectly with Johnson’s. Johnson’s ideal physician is also Swift’s and Pope’s and indeed it is a scientific model worth emulating.

Having so far cited two physicians in the world of early 18<sup>th</sup> century Medicine, a saint in Herman Boerhaave and a sinner in John Woodward, we should further illuminate the crucial difference between them. Laying aside his clear technical superiority, we see that Boerhaave was particularly praiseworthy for succeeding generations because of his attitude to controversy. Whereas John Woodward flew into insult and condemnation over points of medical practice or personal conduct (in 1710 he was expelled from a meeting of the Royal Society for refusing to retract a derogatory statement about Sir Hans Sloane), Boerhaave refused to answer detractors preferring the steady growth of his just reputation to vindicate him. If we recall Thomas Sprat’s rhetorical strategy in the face of an inherently contentious time, we see the value of Boerhaave for 18<sup>th</sup> century science.

Boerhaave’s Preface to his Aphorisms (Latin 1728; trans. J. Delacoste, 1742) describes his work as a compilation of the best insights and cures offered by “the Industry

of the ancient Greeks, the Diligence of the succeeding Arabians” and the modern “improvements” in the “the theory of Physic” and “Anatomy.” He views “the Noble and Generous Art of Physick” as a cumulative and co-operative effort at once above the clamour of “ignorant and invidious Men” and the pleasing “Elegance of the Augustan Age.” Truth, in short, needs no justification and in its pursuit the innocent eye of science cannot be reproached.

As Boerhaave mentions, the key to the changes in 18<sup>th</sup> century Medicine lie in the study of anatomy. Anatomy simultaneously played two important roles: it was the center of research at this time and the essential component in the training of physicians and surgeons. Anatomy was not by any means unexplored but earlier efforts had been severely hampered by a shortage of bodies for dissection. Groundbreaking anatomists like Vesalius and Harvey had long before championed anatomy as the crucial step forward in the science and training of Medicine. But both men had to deal directly with monarchs to win corpses for their dissection tables. Traditional Christianity, despite its rhetoric of denigrating the body, retained the fundamental ritualistic need to use a corpse as a focus of the funeral rites. This is perhaps the singly most universal component in primitive cultures. Dealing with the dead, and therefore Death, was of unrivalled importance.

This is significant for 18<sup>th</sup> century Medicine because as the Medical industry mushroomed so did the demand for trained physicians. The call for more physicians and surgeons, and for a better standard of service made for a rapidly rising demand for corpses for research and lecturing. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries demand for bodies outstripped supply. People at that time would not surrender their bodies to science as we so happily do. It was still the custom, especially strong in the lower classes, to sit long vigils and hold wakes around an open coffin. To the traditional mind, the public mutilation of the body was sacrilege. Hogarth’s final stage in the Four Stages of Cruelty is an anatomy lecture.

To supply the need for bodies an ingenious solution was struck whereby the government would allocate the bodies of all convicted murders to the anatomists. This satisfied, for a time, the requirements of the medical profession and it added the final and ultimate deterrent to the law. There were riots at Tyburn as families rushed forward to

seize the bodies of executed relatives (they did not intervene in the execution itself) to prevent the physicians and surgeons committing the final desecration.

Still demand exceeded supply, so in 1752 an act was passed which gave the medical profession the rights to the bodies of all executed felons. Given the expanding rate of executions, the physicians were well supplied. It was at this fortunate moment that a Scottish Medical entrepreneur named William Hunter set up his private Anatomy Lecture hall, where he offered training after the “French Manner”, meaning that each student performed his own dissection. This was a novelty and his lectures were extremely popular, not only among those pursuing medicine, but also interested gentlemen like Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. The end result of this process was that anatomical knowledge became rapidly diffused in English society where it was, as we shall see, rapidly seized upon in the formation of a new concept of the body as a moral entity and as a microcosm of the family and society. Yet beneath this scientific research and training, with its real advances in knowledge and surgical practice, lay a sense of transgression. William Hunter warned his students not to discuss what they do in his hall:

“In a country where liberty disposes the people to licentiousness and outrage, and where Anatomists are not legally supplied with dead bodies, particular care should be taken to avoid giv[ing] offence to the populace, or to the prejudices of our neighbours.”

What William Hunter was afraid of was what would in a further fifty years befall a number of anatomy lecture halls in Scotland when the mob realized where bodies stolen from graves had disappeared to. The fact that Hunter refers to anatomists not being “legally supplied with dead bodies” means that they are not being legally supplied with enough bodies. The Graverobbing had already begun.

William Hunter was the foremost Anatomist in London and his solution to the problem of science transgressing traditional, or as he calls then vulgar, morals and “prejudices”, is never to offer a justification. As L.J. Jordanova argues, Hunter’s masterpiece on the Anatomy of the female reproductive organs and the generation of the fetus is largely pursued via graphic diagrams and etchings with a minimum of commentary. The innocent eye of science was simply looking, and where truth is the only criteria for justification, the greater the realism and detail the more praiseworthy the

effort. This may be true but it was an abomination to traditional values and even the modern reader, or more correctly viewer, cannot be shaken by the particular rendition Hunter offers of human flesh. As Jordanova begins to show, this apparent realism does in fact retain many aspects of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century social ideology. The point is, as John Mullan also argues, the physicians continue to pursue an invisible medium, one that cannot be reproached on specific attitudes, and which offers only truth. But this truth is in fact strongly ideological in fact, almost invincibly so. For example, Hunter's rendition of the fetus in the womb goes to great length to emphasize the physical bond between mother and child; this was a departure from early techniques. This Jordanova explains meshes with the larger drive to support the family unit as a natural, biological structure, and not a social construct. Familial bonds becomes, thereby, ever more sacred and become animated by lines of natural connectedness, of feeling, of sympathy. If we look at Jean-Baptiste Greuze's "Le Paralytique" (1763) we can see how a family converges automatically and spontaneously upon a stricken member; each figure exudes the sympathy that makes this family unit a cohesive, inviolable whole. Denis Diderot went into inexplicable raptures over the "moral tone" of this painting and championed this "sentimental" style.

This brings us to the crux of this paper, where medical science meets the general quality of "sensibility" which is widely taken to characterize the literature of the mid-and late-18<sup>th</sup> century. G.S. Rousseau is quite right, I think, to lay stress upon the detailed physicality of "sensibility" and upon the role of the "Nervous" system in the explanation of the body. During the Restoration an Oxford Professor Thomas Willis was making, according to Rousseau, a paradigmatic discovery with respect to the human nervous system. This essentially united sensation, the nervous system, the brain and the soul. It immediately became the focus of anatomic research and efforts to explain experience. It is not mere coincidence that one of Willis students was John Locke, who, in a second paradigmatic step, set about explaining knowledge through a physiological model which relayed reality and stimuli to the brain where ideas were formed corresponding to the original stimuli and then recombined to produce further ideas. Like Locke's political ideas, this emphasis on experience and the nervous system could not have come at a more receptive time. Thus for these intellectual reasons, and for those related to the rapid

dissemination of anatomical knowledge within a growing medical industry, the nervous system coupled with Harvey's circulation of the blood to provide the materials from which a new social ideology could be constructed, along with a new body as Terry Eagleton would argue. The project of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in terms of culture is to produce a new morality which could better survive and control a growing entrepreneurial economy. Sensibility, broadly speaking is one facet of this modernization project.

Very briefly, if we look at Richardson's Pamela we see a servant girl tormented by a master who threatens her physically and morally, and is acting in a socially reprehensible manner by debasing himself from his proper privileged place. She is painted as an innocent whose internal goodness, her soul, expresses itself spontaneously through her physical reactions. She blushes, as her circulatory system expresses mild affronts; she cries on more severe occasions; in the crisis she trembles and faints, which demonstrates disturbances to both her nerves and heart (fainting seems to have been seen as related to the heart). What is important with Pamela is the spontaneity of her response. Her morals regarding sexual purity, family ties, and the social order are less rationalized than internalized as made manifest in her physical actions and condition. Mr. B – charges her with exaggeration and audacity but she is merely a tool of goodness and truth. She can neither ignore nor repress the truth. The internal is the good and whatever thwarts its expression is bad. There is an interesting affinity between the ethics of sensibility and those of Neo-Platonism.

If we expand the picture to consider benevolence, we see it is the internal action of natural goodness expressing itself not only in physical states but in action and sympathy. Giving aid or more frequently small alms expresses a goodness which is internal but which reaches out to others. As we see in Greuze's painting, the family is the first sphere of this extended goodness. Pamela must not be penetrated by Mr. B – because that would violate here internals as well as eligibility to create a pure family organization. Society, itself, becomes a larger version of a family, where emotional links fortify and naturalize the social order. Sensibility is an emotional acceptance of the social order in what Eagleton calls the formation of the modern conscience. For this reason, Pamela's sensibility is tested by a misbehaving master. Elsewhere the prospect of fallen fortunes, as in the Vicar of Wakefield, is the true source of pathos. Loyalty is another favorite.

Greuze's "La Paralytique" displays a patriarch whose own internal nervous system has collapsed but whose family ties only respond with redoubled strength.

It is no coincidence that another way in which Pamela expresses her besieged goodness is writing where the excuse of realism is endlessly evoked to excuse "hard" words. Writing becomes linked in this way to the pious, the moral, the emotional and the social.

To conclude, we notice that sensibility has pursued the same goal as the language of science - a kind of invisibility that can use truth as its tacit justification. Sensibility is, as a literary quality, very often a negative reaction to disturbances in the social order and it thereby maintains that careful compromise between the propertied classes which gives the English establishment such staying power.

As a point of interest, sensibility and science diverge paradoxically where they also meet, the body. The new delicate, spontaneous, innocent body created using the anatomical knowledge of neurology was not something to be surrendered to the physicians for further research. The body has been made even more important and even less likely to be sacrificed to knowledge. Still no one, save Johnson, gave their bodies to science. Sterne, the most precise user of anatomical descriptions to describe the emotions, himself was dissected, but not by choice. His grave was robbed and he was dissected at Cambridge by one who apparently knew who Sterne was; or at least who was informed by a member of the audience. The dissection continued. A Baillie, who dissected Johnson, reports with gravity and respect that he did not open Johnson's skull, to view the brain the seat of his great learning, morality and soul. Sterne received no such courtesy.

The demand for bodies continued to grow, especially in Scotland which became the center for anatomical research in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yet those who subscribed to the cult of sensibility began to guard the bodies of their loved ones with locks and massive funeral monuments. The Graverobbers ravaged the unguarded graves of the poor. Mary Shelly records how she had to sit vigil over her mother's grave for a period of weeks to allow the body to decay to a point where the graverobbers were no longer interested. The Anatomy Act of 1832, the same year as the Reform Act interestingly, decreed that the Anatomists could lay claim on the bodies of all who died in the poor homes or Work Shops.

Turning back to William Hunter, we find him preaching exact realism to the Royal Academy as the first Professor of Poetry. Nature, he charges, always surpasses art. Some like Joshua Reynolds did not agree, replying that particular detail however precise must be informed with a higher meaning. Some think that Hunter had the fusion of realism and meaning in mind when he arranged to have a statue cast from an executed Smuggler who had been set into the pose of the fallen gladiator and then carefully flayed. It is perhaps more meaningful than he intended for it reminds us that knowledge has a price and that somebody's got to pay.



**Smugglerius (1775)**