

Medical Advice in Seventeenth-Century Journalism

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Making a living from writing is common enough in our day, but three centuries ago such a feat was rare. We are so accustomed to successful specialized journalism—medical, scientific, political, literary—that we can imagine only with difficulty a time when journalists struggled for bare sustenance, trying to create a buying audience where none had existed before. In seventeenth-century England, authors who needed support wrote for the patronage of the aristocracy; others wrote for fame. With growing literacy among the population, however, the possibilities of a new audience with its own demands began to be realized. Booksellers, themselves among the increasing middle class, found it profitable to hire educated but impecunious writers to produce hastily scribbled pamphlets and books, to be sold cheap to an audience far less wealthy than the aristocracy. These hack writers and their booksellers were derisively termed "Grub Street" by more serious and respectable literary men, who, secure from the pinch of necessity, wrote for glory and for the ages.

Most men who grubbed for a living with a pen were not very successful at it, although their personal habits

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might have been just as responsible for failure as problems of the market—the hack writer's drunkenness, gambling, and debt are almost legendary. However, there were no copyright laws, government censorship was strict, and any writer who offended the government or a nobleman could be severely punished by fine, the stocks, or imprisonment. Under these circumstances we need not be surprised that regularly published periodicals were less successful than individual pamphlets and books. A few short-lived penny papers reported political news, especially in times of war, but periodicals devoted to other specialized subjects, like our own magazines, were almost unknown. Aside from Peter Motteux's *Gentleman's Journal*, 1692-1694, even literary or essay periodicals, like those of Addison and Steele, were several years in the future.

In the last decade of the century, one of the most successful "Grubaeon Sages," as Jonathan Swift later termed these scribblers, was John Dunton (1659-1733), a bookseller who found a way to sell upper-class knowledge to middle-class buyers and in so doing established the most popular journal of his day. Dunton conceived the idea for a periodical devoted exclusively to answering questions sent in by actual readers. Accordingly, the *Athenian Mercury* began to resolve

"all the most Nice and Curious Questions Proposed by the Ingenious" on March 17, 1691, usually appearing twice a week until June 14, 1697. Questions could deal with any "decent subject," Dunton declared, although the *Mercury* shied away from politics. Readers who paid their own postage to Mr. Smith's Coffee House, next to Dunton's shop in London, had their questions on theology, history, philosophy, science, medicine, and ethics printed and answered anonymously by the authorities of the Athenian Society—Dunton's fictionalized board of experts on all possible subjects.

The History of the Athenian Society, which Dunton commissioned Charles Gildon to write in 1692, reported twelve members of the Society, competent in all languages and professions, including theology, mathematics, and medicine. However, as Dunton's Grub-Street rivals later discovered, the actual Athenians were both fewer in number and lesser in qualifications than the *History* claimed. Gildon compared the Athenian experts to the Royal Philosophical Society, officially founded by King Charles II for the advancement of scientific knowledge, and bemoaned the fact that he was not Thomas Sprat, author of *The History of the Royal-Society*. Were he such a historian as Sprat, he might write "the *Second-Best History* of the Sec-

ond-Best Institution, for the promotion of Learning, and removing that Epidemick Ignorance, which exercises so incredible a Tyranny over the more numerous part of Mankind." Actually, however, this poor man's version of the Royal Society consisted of Dunton himself and two of his relatives by marriage: Richard Sault, an adequate mathematician with a foul temper, and Samuel Wesley, eccentric father of Charles and John of later Methodist fame. The most intellectually respectable Athenian was the fourth, John Norris, an idealist philosopher who contributed for only a short time before differing with the policies necessary for turning a penny in Grub Street.

Many questions and answers published in the *Athenian Mercury* were serious and reasonably well informed. Since Wesley was an Anglican minister, theology was particularly prominent, and since Sault was a mathematician, rather intricate questions on algebra received treatment. Yet even on other scientific and medical topics, the Athenians usually proved equal to their task, frequently citing the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* and other scientific authorities. Although Gildon's *History* boasted that the Athenian Society included a physician, his identity, if he existed at all, is unknown. Still, when the Athenians provided their precursor to modern medical advice columns, they managed to sound knowledgeable. They even exhibited a certain caution in giving advice to specific patients, as such columns do today. To a querist who wanted to know the cure for "Melancholy," for example, the Athenians replied that "this Question were fitter for a *Profess'd Physician* than for such as pretend no more than in a short Essay to satisfy the *Curious*." They relented enough to recommend "diversion" as a cure, but added, "For the *Therapeutick* part, the College [of Physicians] will prescribe better, though scarce cheaper Remedies."

The Athenians were not always this reluctant to suggest particular cures. When a reader from the country complained that he lived far from a physician and needed to know the causes and cures of headache, melan-

choly, vertigo, apoplexy, palsy, convulsions, rheums, catarrhs, coughs, pleurisy, colic, and scurvy, they responded at length and specifically with suggestions, citing Van Helmont as their authority. On occasion they gave their advice on sneezing, baldness, "the stone," and seasickness. Asked for a cure for the bite of a mad dog, they reported, "The common Method (and which is often effectual) is a Piece of a Mad Dogs Liver, and Dunking in the Sea." Whenever possible, they recommended medicines available from their own bookseller. Dunton, like other such tradesmen of the time, sold ague cures and stomach elixirs in his own shop, frequently advertising them in the *Mercury*.

Melancholy and lunacy seemed to be the most pressing medical topics for the *Mercury's* readers. Among several questioners on the subject, a reader who wanted an explanation for lunatics' strength in "fits" received the most learned answer. The Athenians disagreed that such strength could derive from the fermentation of a lunatic's thicker blood:

(1.) If the Blood of raging Mad-Men be so very thick to make 'em strong, then they wou'd soon die, for thick Blood [leads to] acute Feavours, produces Pleurises and speedy Death, which they are farther from than other Men. (2.) 'Tis from the Nerves that this force is, not from the Blood immediately, and therefore raging Mad-Men are Meager and Lean, from the expence of the Spirits of Nervous Juice in their Fits, (3.) The Blood is so far from being Viscous, or thick, that its quite the contrary; for the Distemper is in the Mind, which affects the Animal Spirits too violently, just like a Man heated with Wine, the Spiritous Vapours of the fine Sulphureous particles of the Wine ferment the Blood, and rarifies it, for what is most active is most subtle, and consequently fit for impetuous Contractions, and extraordinary Emotions; Expansion and fermentation of thick Blood is so far from strengthening any Muscles, suppose in the hand, that it wou'd swell it, and hinder the very clinching of it together. We shall bring one other Argument . . . and that is the effect that a fright has upon People, who are stronger at such a time than any other; that the Heart, and every Pulse, beats very fast in a fright, every Body knows, and every little Naturalist knows that the Cause of it is a vehement impetuous Circulation of Blood, which can't be where Blood is thick.

Such theoretical considerations occupy more of the space devoted to medicine than does practical advice. With an eclectic willingness to consider all possibilities, or perhaps simply a reluctance to offend their questioners, the Athenians treated Sir Kenelm Digby's "sympathetick powder" with the same seriousness they afforded Harvey's theory of the circulation of the blood. The sympathetic powder was supposed to cure wounds through the manipulation of some item that had touched the wound, and was said to be effective even at a great distance from the sufferer. In discussing the cure of respiratory disease by sympathy, the Athenians did refuse to lend their own authority to the method and simply reported that they had

an Account of some who have been cur'd through Sympathy, by spitting in a Napkin, and tying it up to dry in the Smoak of the Chimney; the Relaters do not impose this upon any one's Faith, but leave every one who pleases to be convinc'd by Experience, as they say they have been.

Old wives' tales, too, prompted credulous explanation. To the question, "Whence proceeds the Shuterkin?" the Athenians replied,

Physicians have imputed this Shuterkin (which resembles a Weezle) to the Steam and Warmth of the Stove-Pots, which vivifies the natural Irrigation of the *Uterus*, which has a Tendency to form something, as the Guts and Intestines by an undue Disposition of Heat, &c. from Worms; it usually comes forth with the Birth of the first Child, which it sometimes Corrodes; as soon as it comes into the open Air, it will run up the Walls, and strive to hide it self, but they do all they can to kill it immediately.

Yet much Athenian explanation of anatomical and physiological questions was in line with the best authorities of their day. They consistently praised the Royal Society and held Robert Boyle in much esteem (one of their members, probably Wesley, published an ode on Boyle's death in the *Mercury*). In accord with this admiration for modern science and scientists, some of their answers to physiological questions read like pages copied straight from a medical text. A reader who wanted an explanation of "nutrition" prompted a learned es-

say which began, "Mastication, Deglutition [deglutition], Extension, and Corrugation of the Ventricle, are Successive Motions, partly by the *pondus* of the *aliment*, partly by the *Tone* of the *Tunicles*, in order to *Concoction*." Even if the puzzled reader failed to understand all of this, he must have been flattered to think the Athenians assumed he could, and impressed by the extent of Athenian learning.

In answering one of their most remarkable questions the Athenians revealed their enthusiasm for new discoveries, their recognition of the importance of experiment, and a skepticism which often blends oddly with their credulity on other matters. A troubled reader reported a new medicine in the *Mercury*:

We are confident the Learned Athenians have met with the Report of the wonderful Cures which have been wrought by the *Vulnerary Powder*, and the Drops called *Tinctura Sulpheris Veneris*, lately found out by the ingenious Chymist, Mr. John Colbatch, in St. Ann's-Court near Soho-Square; who hath made above twenty Experiments in the Presence of many of the most able Chirurgeons; and as Learned Physicians as any in the Town. And particularly the Famous Mr. Cooper ripped up a Dog's Belly, and took out a Gut, and cut it through with his Incision Knife, making a greater Wound than any Sword can make with a thrust: And in a few days after cut off the same Dog's Thigh, near the trunk of his Body; and this Medicine [ie, the *Vulnerary Powder*] alone stopped the bleeding, and shut up the Mouths of the Arteries in a very little time, without any Bandage or Cauterizing, and the Dog continues in perfect health. There have since been several Amputations made on Cripples in St. Bartholomew's Hospital; one hath had a Leg, another an Arm cut off, and the great Fluxes of Blood from the Arteries were stopt by the Medicine only, without any Cauterizing or Ligature, as afore is said. The expert Mr. Cooper hath sent a Memorial of the several Operations by him made to the Royal Society of *Greesham College*, to testify those wonderful Cures, which we doubt not but some of you have seen.

The querist then demanded of the Athenians whether such a discovery would not encourage duelling, since wounds would be easily cured; whether the medicine should be kept from enemy nations; whether resulting crippled soldiers would not be a financial burden to the nation; and

whether the medical profession would not either suppress the medicine or else charge excessively for it.

The Athenians dealt masterfully with the ethical questions, saying that all medicines are "essentially good" and only "accidentally evil" according to their use, and that the enemy should be deprived of the medicine, "for Self-Preservation never read such a good-natur'd Lecture, as to provide an Enemy with Weapons to fight against ones self." As for crippled soldiers, the nation owes them their lives and they could do some work. Surgeons, the Athenians were convinced, would not charge high rates if they could get the medicine reasonably themselves, but in any case, a desperate patient would willingly pay dearly for his life. The fact of the medicine itself, however, was another matter:

. . . We answer, that 'tis our Opinion that the happy Inventor of this surprizing Medicine gives undoubted Assurance to the Age, not only of its certain Operation upon *canine Bodies*, but also upon *humane*; for upon our own knowledge, Nature provides much better for the Bodies of Dogs than Men. 'Tis not long since the aforementioned ingenious Mr. Cooper ript open a Dog, and made an Incision upon one of his Guts, which without any application became well again, only by the friendly assistance of Nature: If this *Vulnerary Powder* has the same effect upon *humane Bodies*, as not only this, but several other Powders, nay, even bare Nature it self has upon *Canine* (which might very easily be try'd upon Criminals at any Sessions, or at the Hospitals, or in accidental Misfortunes) no doubt but the Nation will be extremely engag'd to the Author of it, and the Gentleman will not want Encouragement from his Majesty at this time of the Day.

Both the ethical problems and the idea of using criminals as subjects in medical experiments have a strangely modern ring.

Not the least of Athenian attractions for middle class and feminine readers was a willingness to translate into English while summarizing learning originally published in Latin. Most Athenian book summaries appeared in the Supplements to the bound volumes of the *Mercury* (called the *Athenian Gazette*) and in *The Young Students Library*, a sin-

gle volume published early in the Athenian venture. Since women and tradesmen, without a university education, were deficient in their knowledge of classical languages, the Athenians performed a real service in trying to keep them current on books in Latin and other foreign languages. Gildon's *History* proudly stated this intention and sarcastically parodied learned critics who ask, "What Honour will be due to Learned men, that have spent so many years in the study of Languages, and the Criticisms of them, if the Kernal of that Nut, they are so long a cracking, be given to every *illiterate* Fellow, that understands not what's Latin for the Book he reads." As long as "illiterate" readers paid their pennies to be thus informed without the pains of a classical education, the Athenians were willing to laugh at the snobbery of scholars.

Many of the articles on books were taken from *Journal des Scavans* and other foreign reviews, but articles from the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* were also summarized. While theology received the most coverage in these early "book reviews," science and medicine also commanded attention. Athenian admiration for Robert Boyle is evident. *The Young Students Library* summarized several of his works, including *Of the Agreement of Specifick Remedies with the Corpuscular Philosophy: To which is added, A Dissertation about the various Usefulness of Simple Medicaments*. This theoretical work on the action of "minute particles" of medicines on specific parts of the body concludes with a plea to physicians to cease using complicated mixtures of medicines:

In the first place it is easier to guess what Effect a simple Remedy will produce, than a compounded one; for Compositions change so much the Nature of Medicines, that it is not easie to foresee the Effect. A Glass of *Antimony* dissolved in the Spirit of Vinegar, does not Purge or cause Vomiting; but very seldom unprepared *Antimony*, which some take without either being Purged or Vomited by it, if it be mix'd either with *Salt-Petre* or *Tartar*, it becomes a violent Purgative and causes great Vomiting; and mixed with *Tartar* becomes Diaphoretick and sometimes Diuretick. . . . In fine, one may draw more from the use of simple Remedies, a more

perfect Knowledge of the true Effects, than of such Remedies as are used now. It is very hard to know the Vertue of each Drug, when there are many mix'd together; since it is not easie to know it, when such Ingredient is examined by it self.

As in the *Mercury*, however, the Athenians did not always content themselves with the cool experimental approach of Boyle. In *The Young Students Library* they devoted several pages to summarizing *Curious Miscellanies: or the Journal of Physicks; by the Curious in Nature of Germany*, for the most part concerned with marvels and monstrous births, like a calf with three tongues. The most interesting part of this summary is the long section on Chinese medicine, praising Chinese expertise at diagnosing all diseases only by feeling the patient's pulse. Unwilling to subtract glory from England by elevating China, the Athenians added that an English expert on the pulse was Mr. David Abercromby, "Physitian, that made himself known before by his Method of curing venereal Distempers without the help of Mercury, and without any mercurial Salivation."

After six years of such altruistic and profitable effort, the *Athenian Mercury* ceased publication in 1697. John Dunton's wife had died, and his debts for other ventures had mounted, forcing him to hide from creditors. While it lasted, the *Mercury* must have been a great success, for Dunton collected the individual papers into the *Athenian Gazette*, added supplements for a time, and published several other works under the Athenian name. Even into the eighteenth century the *Mercury* received much attention, anthologized as *The Athenian Oracle*, which went to three editions. "Athens has a kind of Immortality, and like a King or Queen of England, never dyes," crowed Dunton in his autobiography, and for a while it seemed to be so. Some of this popularity was undoubtedly due to the varied content of the paper, wherein for a penny a reader might find advice to the lovelorn, a biblical interpretation resting on obscure points of Hebrew, and a discussion of the gout. And the *Mercury* was not always solemn, frequently taking a joking approach to its readers, devoting entire numbers to doggerel verse, and sometimes laughing at its own intellectual pretensions.

To be sure, the Athenians were blatantly self-advertising, they wrote in a great hurry, their information was not always accurate, nor was their judgment profound. They often lacked discrimination for all but the best way to sell penny papers. Yet the combination of Dunton's exuberance and shrewdness with the curiosity of his middle class readers probably accomplished a more important end than mere scholarly accuracy. Within its motley pages, the *Athenian Mercury* provoked interest in expanding knowledge and often presented its possibilities to a growing middle-class audience whose future support for science would prove so important.

Bibliographic Note

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Dunton on Dunton

My first Project was the *ATHENIAN GAZET*.

The Humane Mind, tho it has lost its Innocence, and made Shipwrack of the Image of GOD, yet the Desire of *Knowledge* is undestroy'd. Mankind are sunk, as it were, into *Shadows and Darkness*, and now and then they see some glimmering Apparition of Truth, but yet, tho' it be as Glorious, 'tis fleeting as a Vision. The Soul is also as much jilted and juggled with a *walking kind of Happiness*, which is promising enough, but always unperforming. Thus the *Humane Understanding* and the *Will* being under *penal* Banishment from Truth and Goodness, and yet tantaliz'd with the Appearance of Both; the Soul must suffer under a World of uneasiness and pain, for what misery more exquisite, than when the *Faculties* and their *Objects* are divorc'd?

Now under this Condition, what *Project* cou'd be more agreeable, than that which promises, at least, to open the *Avenues*, raise the Soul, as 'twere, into *DAYLIGHT*, and restore the Knowledge of *Truth* and *Happiness*, that had wandered so long unknown, and found out by few?

This was the great Design of our *English Athens*, which was a Thought intirely (if you'll forgive me the Vanity) of *my own Creation*.

John Dunton, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* (1705)