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psychiatry in history

The Royal Society: fasting in the early 18th century

Greg Wilkinson

The Woman by Llangollen died: the Derby-Shire Woman recovered

The Royal Society originates from the first 'learned society' meeting on 28 November 1660 following a lecture at Gresham College by Christopher Wren. This group of natural philosophers and physicians received royal approval and from 1663 became known as 'The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge'. Their motto *Nullius in verba*, from Horace, means 'take nobody's word for it': a determination to withstand authority and to verify all statements by facts determined by experiment. The Society's unique classified papers (1660–1741) include two volumes concerning 'Physick': these comprise 117 national and international communications. Only eight of these are of potential psychiatric interest: two describe lengthy fasting – one in Latin (1666), and the other is cited below; two concern long sleep; and, one each are on catalepsy, swoon, *boulimia centenaria*¹ and nostalgia. This minority might be taken to indicate the comparative poverty of contemporaneous interest, theory and method in mental physick among such curious men of science. Even so, over 300 years later: 'We don't know exactly what causes anorexia and other eating disorders'.²

Ile' a//ure You my Curiosity never led me to vi//t the Woman by Llangollen; but on my Journey pa//sing by the door I made bold to call; and twas my Fortune to come in as /he was just expiring, /o that I saw her not alive; but I discoursd with her Parents both then, and in my return; and with divers others in the Neighborhood. I beleive the Main Matter of Fact is true, that she livd ten Weeks and some odd days without Sustenance, she had livd so before for a fortnight, and always in a trance. But as for the Miracle of it, and her pretended Illuminations, I have no faith for them. It may be (for ought I know) a Disorder of Nature in her, and others, on the Defective side, as we sometimes find it in Exces of Appetite; and both very Unaccountable. Where the Flame of Life is weak, little will /erve to maintain it; it may feed upon the Stock already laid up, as in many other Animals that sleep all the Winter. I suppose when Nature ceaseth to crave (as it probably may on divers Occa//ions) there is little wast made, and a Man may live long without outward Sustenance. Such seems the Case of the Derby-Shire Woman, who is said to have liv'd sixteen Moneths without Meat or Drink; onely her Mouth was now and anointed with a feather [*Sic*]. But /he did not sleep or doze altogether, like her of Llangollen; but had her Intervals of sleep, and Waking, and conversd with Vi//tants, & afterward recoverd her Health.

M^f – of – at M^f – of –'s Funerall mentioned one or two in his Neighborhood that has livd so; one (as I remember) 6 Weeks, the other about half a Year; but this latter took some drink now and then, as I was told since; when I see Mr –, perhaps I may be better informed.

For the Woman of Llangollen's Character, I find it agreed upon in Generall, that she was grave, sober, and Religious, but not without a deep tincture of melancholy, being from her Childhood (by the Confe//sion of her Parents) Subject to disquieting thoughts, and frightfull Dreams. She was Con//stantly at the Service of the Church but frequented other Meetings; and by some Phra//ses and Notions of her Mother's (a Woman of a very fluent Tongue, tho illiterate) I gue//e She read much in Di//enter's Books. From much attention to dark thoughts she came at last to beleive that Something spoke to her, & gave her advice, & Comfort against Severe Temptation and Tryalls from her spiritual Enemy. Once /he thought /he saw a young Boy in yellow apparell pa//fiercely by her in the Air, so that she had onely a glance of him; and being at a lo//s to know what he was, the voice told her – It was Original Sin. ... What ever Opinion others may have of that young Woman (near 30 years of age) I fear She had a high One of her self, & so had all about her; and lookd upon those raptures /he had as Divine favours: w^{ch} made her tell her Mother somewhat before /he fell into her last fit – That /he had reveald unto her things beyond Humane Comprehen//ion; that /he would /ay Little to her any more; that /he was going to Christ her Husband, that the Comforter would come to them, if they /ervd God; and read to her Our Saviour's Valedictory Discours to his Disciples out of S^t John. She took upon her also to foretell somethings in Ch: and State; w^{ch} I had no Mind to hear, ... I told her Parents, That her Piety & Good Meaning, I hop'd, was acceptable to God; the rest might be her Infirmary, ... They were civill and thankfull. I thought they were poor, & offerd them /omewhat, but they utterly refused, & said they did not want, and were farr from intending to make profit by their Daughter; and /o, I was told, they answerd divers others. Mar. 9th 1705–6. (Anonymous: Royal Society Archives: Cl.P/141/59.)

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