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Worms in Teeth, Swallowed Bodkins, and Stained Agates: The Royal Society and the Curious Papers of Theodore de Mayerne



Theo: de Mayerne Eques Auratus,
Baro Abonae in Aula Magna Regis Britanniae
Archiatrorum Comes. Anno Aetatis 82.

W. Elder sculp.

In May 1665, Sir Theodore de Vaux was proposed (by John Wilkins), elected, and finally admitted to the Royal Society.[1] Physician to Charles II and recently elected honorary fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, De Vaux was doubtless a prestigious catch and also proved an active member. But he was also the godson of Theodore de Mayerne (1573-1655), the celebrated paracelsian and physician to the Stuart kings,[2] and in possession of a substantial amount of documents written by, or sent to, his deceased godfather. Keen to contribute, in the week following his admission De Vaux brought in a paper “concerning worms bred in the teeth of men.”[3] Participants chipped in with anecdotal corroboration: Croone assured he had “likewise heard of worms taken out of the teeth”; Moray had also heard of “the like of worms taken out of the gums of a man in Scotland.” Later, De Vaux returned with yet another account “of an aged woman, named Sarah Hastings, who had taken worms out of the teeth, gums, tongue, throat and face of several persons.”[4]

For the coming years, the worms-in-teeth case stories were supplemented by an assortment of miscellaneous documents from the same source, including “a Latin paper [...] relating to the preserving of timber”[5]; “a relation of a furred robe, made of the skin of the Tartarian boramez, supposed to be a plant animal,”[6] “a paper [...] concerning the nature of craw-fish,”[7] and a document relating what “happened to one Mr. JOHN STEVENSON, who swallowed a bodkin.”[8] “Several papers about sugar” offered an occasion to remind those “engaged in the bringing in of the histories of trade, be mindful of their engagements,”[9] and a paper about “soap-making” was “delivered to Mr. HOOKE who undertook to give an account of that trade,”[10] and so on. Eleven years later, in 1679, De Vaux still brought in “receipts, which had been experimented by Sir THEODORE MAYERNE for making of ales of several sorts.”[11]

De Vaux was actively encouraged to communicate these various documents from De Mayerne[12]; contributions to the history of trades and crafts such as the communications on sugar, soap or ale, were clearly appreciated; when De Vaux in July 1668 brought in “certain papers about chemistry,” they were referred to further scrutiny by the relevant committee.[13] Moreover, there are modest indications that papers circulated internally. For example, in 1666, writing to Boyle about methods for the “preservation of timber,” Oldenburg referred to “a prescription of Sr Th. Mayerne, consisting of sulphur and aqua fortis; wch, upon this occasion, I shall looke after; and if I find it, present it to yr view, if you have not seen it already.”[14] These appreciations, however, mostly reflect an eclectic interest in simply gathering all kinds of reports for verification and testing. By contrast, when it came to evaluating the analyses and interpretations contained in the papers, reactions were mostly dismissive. John Wilkins offered a unimpressed analysis of the worms-in-teeth accounts by “surmis[ing], that these supposed worms were nothing but the condensed sweat, squeezed out of the pores.”[15] Third-party reports were met with suspicion, even when corroborated by Mayerne himself.[16] And when, in May 1681, “Mr HOOKE read a translation, which he had made of a paper which he had made of a paper of Sir THEODORE MAYERNE, brought in by Sir THEODORE DE VAUX, about a method of staining agates,”[17] at the following meeting “it was generally concluded, that the ways mentioned in that paper were only conjectures, and not the result of experiments.”[18]

This last dismissive reaction reflects predictable antipathies integral to the general scientific self-understanding of the experimental philosophers. Putting to one side the sensibilities of individual fellows such as Kenelm Digby, Daniel Coxe, or Oliver Hill,[19] this had to be the fate of the papers of a Paracelsian physician close to Margaret Cavendish would meet in the Royal Society taken as a global epistemological environment! Already in 1661, Boyle had published his *Sceptical Chymist* against the “spagyrist’s principles.”[20] In *Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy* of 1663, he railed against the “vain-glorious Boasts

of *Paracelsus* himself, and some of his Followers.”[21] And even if Boyle did not explicitly name him in this context, this included practitioners of the Paracelsian pharmacology of which Mayerne was a pioneer.[22] Sceptical about “the Universal Medicine, which many *Paracelsians*, *Helmontians*, and other Chymists talk of so confidently,” Boyle set out to show how “the Naturalists skill may improve the *Pharmaceutical Preparations of Simples*” and help replace the “Vulgar Chymistry” of “*Spagyric Remedies*” which is “very incompleat, affording us rather a Collection, of loose and scatter’d [...] Experiments, then an Art duely superstructed upon Principles and Notions, emergent from severe and competent Inductions.”[23]

Society minutes reflect how members, following Boyle’s critique of the Paracelsians’ “boasting,”[24] rejected their thinking as “a pompous way of philosophizing.”[25] At the same time, empirical reports such as those obtained through De Vaux and Mayerne offered no reliable corroborating evidence to support any firm principles and notions, Paracelsian or other, but represented only “loose and scatter’d experiments” that could be put in the service of *any* kind of conjecture. Between a Paracelsian medicine too esoteric and a practical physicks too empirical a tenuous connection existed that had to be broken and replaced by what Thomas Willis, in his eponymous work of 1675, called a “rational pharmaceutics.”[26] Against the Helmontien “Pseudochymists and Fanaticks,” such a new medical practice would explain the operation of remedies not by “specifick virtues” but by “the Reasons of them, that is, the Variations of Changes and Accidents which happen in their preparations, as also we will add the reasons of their Virtues and Effects, which appear in them when they are prepared.”[27]

Unsurprisingly, very little of the discussions of Mayerne’s various papers on teintures, remedies, and medical case stories filtered through to the society’s more public interface. True, at a meeting in 1687, a paper by Mayerne’s himself “concerning the cure of the bite of a mad dog” was ordered to be published in the *Philosophical Transactions*,” but it never was.[28] The only paper that ever made it to the pages of the Royal Society organ was “A Discourse of the viper and some other poysons” which appeared in 1694.[29] The vast majority of papers brought in by De Vaux were politely received and “filed up,” never to be heard of again. Judging from the *Philosophical Transactions*, they appeared to not engage with Mayerne at all. From this public perspective, the Royal Society treated Mayerne as an intellectual cut of an entirely different cloth than themselves and ignored him as much as Bacon already did.[30] Looking inward to the more private minutes of the society meetings, however, this apparent indifference concealed an active and continuous effort to sort the grain from the chafe in their continuous engagement with Mayerne’s curious *Nachlass* over several decades.

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[1] Meetings of May 1665, Birch, II, 42, 45, 49. De Vaux had already be proposed as candidate very early on, in 1661 (Birch I, 18). But nothing came of it at the time.

[2] See H. Trevor-Rober, *Europe’s Physician. The Various Life of Sir Theodore de Mayerne* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); B. Nance, *Turquet de Mayerne as Baroque Physician: The Art of Medical Portraiture*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

[3] Meeting of May 31 1665, Birch, II, 52; cf. Meeting of 7 June, 1665, Birch, II, 55.

[4] Meeting of June 20 1666, Birch II, 99. In 1683, the worms-in-teeth story came up yet again in the context of a general discussion on pores and worms: “The discourse falling from microscopical worms to other large worms in the teeth, Sir ROBERT REDDING mentioned a worm found in a hollow tooth : and Sir THEODORE DE VAUX mentioned a paper of Sir THEODORE MAYERNE’s, which the Society had seen, concerning a woman, who killed Worms in the teeth” (

Meeting of October 24, 1683, Birch, IV, 219). Eventually, in April 1685, almost exactly 20 years after the reports about Sarah Hastings first appeared, the whole business was finally dismissed as a deception: “On the occasion of cheats, Dr. LISTER said, that Mr. WILLUGHBY had detected that of the woman, who pretended to take worms out of the teeth with a quill, having forced the quill from her just as she was putting it into his mouth, and found small worms in it” (Meeting of 1 April 1685, Birch IV, 386-387).

[5] Meeting of 28 June 1665, Birch II, 60.

[6] Meeting of 22 August 1666, Birch II, 110-1.

[7] Meeting of 29 August 1666, Birch II, 113; cf. Royal Society Archives, ref. nr. EL/W3/1.

[8] Meeting of 20 May 1669, Birch II, 372.

[9] Meeting of 10 October 1667, Birch II, 199; cf. Royal Society Archives, ref. nr. CLP/19/29.

[10] Meeting of 17 October 1667, Birch II, 201.

[11] Meeting of 17 July 1679, Birch III, 496. Other Mayerne-related documents today kept in the Royal Society Archives, some of them originally brought in by De Vaux, others derived from other sources, include papers on hydrophobia, hydropholica, dropsy, colors and dye, snakes and crocodiles, vipers and viper wine, tar, resin, and turpentine.

[12] Meeting of 18 May 1681, Birch IV, 87.

[13] Meeting of 30 July, 1668 Birch II, 311.

[14] Oldenburg to Boyle, 15 March 1666, in H. Oldenburg, *Correspondence*, III, 59; cf. Royal Society Archives, ref. CLP.3i/24.

[15] Meeting of 31 May 1665, Birch, II, 53.

[16] Cf. Meeting of 20 June, Birch, II, 99 : “Sir THEODORE MAYERNE affirming with his own hand on the back of the letter, that himself had seen the like operations of this woman performed before King CHARLES I. at Whitehall, in 1642.”

[17] Meeting of 18 May 1681, Birch IV, 87.

[18] Meeting of 25 May 1681, Birch IV, 88.

[19] See J. Begley and B. Goldberg (eds.), *The Medical World of Margaret Cavendish*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, chap. 6; on Coxe, see M. Hunter, *Boyle. Between God and Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 149-150; on Hill, see M. Boas Hall, *Promoting experimental learning: experiment and the Royal Society, 1660–1727*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 155-156; M. Hunter, ed. *Robert Boyle by himself and his friends: with a fragment of William Wotton's lost Life of Boyle*, London: W. Pickering, 1994, lxxi–lxxii.

[20] See R. Boyle, *The Sceptical Chymist*, London, 1661; cf. Oldenburg to Spinoza, 31 July 1663, Oldenburg, *Correspondence*, II, 97, trans. 99.

[21] See R. Boyle, *Some considerations touching the usefulnesses of experimental naturall philosophy* (Oxford, 1663), p. 71; P. Pinet, “Robert Boyle (1627-1691) et la pharmacologie,” *Revue d'Histoire de la Pharmacie*, 328 (2000), 471-84.

[22] Boyle only mentions Mayence once when exemplifying a “methodist” who prescribes the same “lucky” remedy for multiple ailments, in the event, the multiple therapeutic uses that Mayerne

made of his “salt of steel” to cure “all Obstructions, Cachexies, and Hydropicall Distempers” (Boyle, *Considerations*, 401-2).

[23] Boyle, *Considerations*, 119, 186-87.

[24] Boyle, *Considerations*, 71, 90, 201-2, 205, 394.

[25] Meeting of 7 December 1664, Birch I, 501 (from Henshaw’s account of frog spawn).

[26] See T. Willis, *Pharmaceutice rationalis, sive diatriba de medicamentorum operationibus in humano corpore; pars secunda* (Oxford 1675); English trans. in *Pharmaceutice rationalis: or, An exercitation of the operations of medicines in humane bodies* (London 1679).

[27] Willis, *Pharmaceutice rationalis*, english ed., 140, and 2-3.

[28] Meeting of 2 November 1687, Birch IV, 557; cf. Royal Society Archives, ref. nr. RBO/9/10.

[29] See *Philosophical Transactions*, no. 18:211 (1694), 162-6. Some papers were published by De Vaux himself in 1690 under the title *Praxis Medica* (London 1690), with a preface by Walter Charleton. See T. Gibson. “An Account of Theodore Turquet De Mayerne’s “Praxis Medica,” *Annals of Medical History* 5:5 (1933), 438-43.

[30] Trevor-Roper, *Europe’s Physician*, 1-5.

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