

INTERPRETING QUACKERY IN GEORGIAN ENGLANDRoy Porter

The history of medicine has typically been written as the history of orthodox medicine. The story of irregular medicine in Britain still largely awaits research in depth and detail. But how it should be addressed poses daunting problems of interpretation.

One plausible line of approach would be to construct a history of 'marginalised' or 'heretical' therapies, perhaps by analogy to radical or populist histories of working people or to feminist histories of women.¹ Taking its bearings from today's 'fringe' movements, such a history would obviously give due prominence to those alternative medical systems that flourished in the Victorian age (homoeopathy, natureopathy, medical botany, Coffinism, Thomsonianism and so forth), and it would clearly look back to the Puritan medical reformers of the Civil War era, and thence to the Paracelsists.² But it is less easy to fit eighteenth century irregular medicine into this framework.

A different approach has been altogether more common; that is to write off irregular medicine as rank quackery.³ Viewing all irregular medicine as 'quackery' became an article of faith amongst champions of the cause of ethical medicine in the Victorian age. And the cumulative effect of this reformist tide was that series of legislative changes from the Apothecaries Act (1815) through to the Medical Registration Act (1858) which set medicine on a more professional, more ethical plane, in part through erecting a cordon sanitaire between it and what it labelled money-mongering quackery.⁴

But the result has been that establishment accounts of irregular medicine have automatically dismissed it through the put-down, 'quackery'. Usually this has meant that so-called 'quacks' have been set up as the target of legitimate wrath. As L. R. C. Agnew thunders:⁵

Having spent several years in such quack-infested fields as cancer research and nutrition, I find it difficult to be objective about quackery, even quackery in seventeenth-century England. I do not like quacks; indeed, I despise them, and while I recognise that an occasional quack remedy or belief has been imported into orthodox medicine, I cannot evince the least sympathy for the breed, those crab lice that have feasted parasitically on the body medical since the very beginning of recorded medical history.

Alternatively, quacks are treated and studied just for their entertainment value. All too readily the history of heterodox medicine thus becomes a string of tired anecdotes.⁶ Non-standard practice is thus reduced to a chapter in The history of popular delusions.⁷

Indeed in this reading, medicine's war against quackery is portrayed as more than an endless campaign against frauds, but as a critique of human nature. As Robert Southey put it:

Man is a dupeable animal. Quacks in medicine, quacks in religion and quacks in politics know this and act upon that knowledge. The credulity of man is unfortunately too strong to resist the impudent assertions of the quack.⁸

Astutely, Southey saw that this was all a consequence of the desperation born of disease:

Sickness humbles the pride of man; it forces upon him a sense of his own weakness, and teaches him to feel his dependence upon unseen Powers: that therefore which makes wise men devout, makes the ignorant superstitious. Among savages the physician and the conjurer are always the same.⁹

Most accounts of irregular medicine in 'the long eighteenth century' have conformed to this model. Superficially, at least, it seems to fit. For many of the irregulars in the public limelight such as the "Chevalier" Taylor, Gustavus Katterfelto, and James Graham were indeed showmen. And the century itself waged a concerted attack on its quacks in precisely these terms. Thus The Cheats of London Exposed: or, the TRICKS of the TOWN Laid Open to Both sexes. Being a clear Discovery of all the various Frauds and Villainies that are daily practised in that great City (1766) indicated quack doctors alongside partners-in-crime such as whores and sharpers. Indeed, quack doctors were amongst the most culpable of all, for quacks cheated people not only of their money but their health. Two features loom large in all broadsides against mountehanks, empirics, and charlatans. First, their knavishness. Quacks had always drawn the accusation of being (in Ben Johnson's definitive phrase) "turdy-facy-nasty-paty-lousy-fartical rogues". In his Dictionary Dr. Johnson was to build a fraud charge into the very definition of medical quackery, regarding the creature as

1. A boastful pretender to arts which he does not understand.
2. A vain boastful pretender to physic, one who proclaims his own Medical abilities in public places.
3. An artful, tricking practitioner in Physic.¹⁰

Second, their gift of the gab. Whether in the fulminations of pukka physicians, the back-stabbings of fellow charlatans, or the cynical picaresque of Tobias Smollett, the quack is presented as all mouth, a peddler of velvet sales patter (what Ward called "senseless cant"), emperor of bunkum.¹¹

Throughout early modern England the frauds of quacks were attacked.¹² The question, however, is whether this line of exposure of quacks as vulgar, hum-bugging, mercenary crooks is historically helpful. All the evidence, for example, suggests that many quacks sincerely believed in their remedies and powers; so honesty fails as a criterion for distinguishing quacks from true doctors.

Likewise we cannot simply say that quacks were those practitioners without qualifications. For some commonly labelled as quacks had excellent medical training and title, John Pechey, for example, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, having received an apprenticeship from his father and being a graduate of Oxford and a licentiate of the College of Physicians - he noted how 'Many Men make it their business to ridicule the Public Way of Practice, because it thwarts their Private Interest'. James Graham studied at Edinburgh under Cullen and Black. Indeed, like scores of regular practitioners, many quacks such as William Brodum, William Solomon, and Ebenezer Sibly, bought their M.D.'s from St Andrews or Aberdeen.

Neither can we simply identify quacks by saying they were those practitioners whose medicaments were bogus. Indeed regular and quack preparations were often identical and it was a common grouse against quack nostrums that so many were "pilfered ... from regular practice", plagiarized from the College pharmacopoeias.

Hence, if we take many of the features supposedly defining the pretensions and impositions of the quacks, we find that they are also applicable to reputable members of the faculty. Not surprisingly a literature arose condemning no less fiercely the 'quackery' of the medical profession itself, putting orthodox doctors under the lash for identical vices and vanities.¹³ Quacks were whipped for mystifying dealing in obscure trade cant. But so were what Dr. Garth dubbed "the homicides of Warwick Lane", the physicians. Quacks puffed nostrums. But scores of orthodox practitioners did nicely out of patent medicines and proprietary pills made to secret formulae, Dr Robert James profiting from his best-selling febrifuge "powders",¹⁴ for which Horace Walpole had such a "superstitious veneration".¹⁵ Indeed, regular doctors had no ethical qualms about nostrum mongering.¹⁶ As John Hunter wrote to Edward Jenner:

Dear Jenner, I am puffing of your tartar as the tartar of all tartars, and have given it to several physicians to make trial, but have had no account yet of the success. Had you not better let a book-seller have

it to sell, as Glass of Oxford did his magnesia? Let it be called Jenner's Tartar Emetic, or anybody's else that you please.

Again, quacks were excoriated for their patter, showmanship and self-advertisement. But who could match the faculty in ritual and ostentation? Augustan satire teems with caricatures of the pomp of physicians with their Latin mumbo-jumbo, their carriages and running-footmen ("a travelling sign post", said Smollett, "to draw in customers"), and so forth. Thus quacks were denounced as frauds; yet early modern commentators took a Shavian view of all the professions; from Ben Jonson, through Butler, Gay, Swift, and Pope to Henry Fielding, it was "a world of quacks",¹⁷ in which all professions were conspiracies against the laity.¹⁸

It would be a forlorn and historically misguided enterprise, I wish to argue, to draw hard and fast lines between proper practitioners and quacks, using criteria such as integrity, scientific method, or therapeutic efficacy. I am not proposing a historical "quack's charter", not arguing for relativism or nihilism. Rather I want to suggest that the label "quack" as commonly used is anachronistic, prejudicial, question-begging, and a historical dead-end. There is a historical reality of eighteenth century 'quackery' or at least a way the term can be usefully applicable to the period, but it must be used with care.

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NOTES

- 1 See for instance S. Rowbotham, Hidden from history (London, Pluto Press, 1973).
- 2 For a sample see R. Cooter, 'Deploying "Pseudo-Science". Then and Now', in M. P. Hanen, M.J. Osler and R.C. Weyant (eds), Science, Pseudo-Science and Society (Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980), 237-72; J. V. Pickstone, "Establishment and Dissent in Nineteenth Century Medicine", in W. J. Sheils (ed.), The Church and Healing (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), 165-190, and f.

Barrow, "Anti-Establishment Treating: Spiritualism in Britain", in ibid., 225-248.

- 3 To a greater or lesser degree this is the line adopted in standard accounts of 'quackery' such as E. Jameson, The Natural History of Quackery (London, M. Joseph, 1961) and A. D. Wright, "The Quacks of John Hunter's Time", Transactions of the Hunterian Society, xi (1952-53), 68-84.
- 4 See J. Peterson, The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978).
- 5 L. R. C. Agnew, "Quackery", in C. D. O'Malley (ed.), Medicine in seventeenth century England (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974), 313-26, p. 313.
- 6 For Graham, see Roy Porter, 'The Sexual Politics of James Graham', British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies, v (1982), 199-206.
- 7 C. Mackay, Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions 2 vols (London, National Illustrated Library, 1852).
- 8 Quoted in C. J. S. Thompson, The Quacks of Old London (London, Bretatonos, 1928), 276.
- 9 [R. Southey], Letters from England 3 vols (London, Longmans, 1807), III, 284.
- 10 Other definitions include: "A mountebank, a bold and ignorant pretender to the art of Physic." Bailey. "A person who pretends to arts which he does not understand, generally applied to pretenders in Physic." Barclay. "A pretender to knowledge of which he is not possessed, a vilifier of all that is honourable and respectable in the Medical profession ... and a puffer of some remedy the powers of which he does not understand." Dr Hastings. Quoted in Quacks and Quackery by a Medical Practitioner (London, Simkin, Marshall, 1844), 1.
- 11 For Smollett see G. S. Rousseau, Tobias Smollett, Essays of Two Decades (Edinburgh, Clark, 1982); R. Hambridge, "Empiricomany, or an Infatuation in Favour of Empiricism or Quackery. The Socio-Economics of Eighteenth Century Quackery", in S. Soupel and R. Hambridge, Literature and Science and Medicine (Los Angeles, Clark Library, 1982), 47-102.

- 12 Thompson, The Quacks of Old London, 33-44.
- 13 H. Rowe, The Sham Doctor. A Musical Farce in John Croft (ed.), Memoirs of Harry Rowe (York, the Subscribers, 1801).
- 14 J. Crellin, "Dr James's Fever Powder", Transactions of the British Society for the History of Pharmacy, i (1974), 136-43.
- 15 M. H. Nicolson, "Ward's Pill and Drop and Men of Letters", Journal of the History of Ideas, xxix (1968), 173-96, p. 196. Walpole recommended James' powders, "for cough, for gout, for smallpox, for everything".
- 16 See S. Paget, John Hunter (London, Fischer & Unwin, 1887), 165.
- 17 Gentleman's Magazine, 1731, quoted in Hambridge, op.cit. (ref. 11), 76.
- 18 For the quackery and imposture of all the professions see C. Probyn, "Swift and the Physicians", Medical History, xviii (1974), 249-61.

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