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 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

I enquire You my Curiosity never led me to visit the Woman by Llangollen; but on my Journey paying by the door I made bold to call; and twas my Fortune to come in as I saw her not alive; but I discoursed with her Parents both then, and in my return; and with divers others in the Neighborhood. I believe 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 I own I know a Disorder of Nature in her, and others, on the Defective side, as we sometimes find it in Eces of Appetite; and both very Unaccountable. Where the Flame of Life is weak, little will Jerve 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 Occasions) there is little want 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 &..."

References

2 NHS. Overview: Anorexia Nervosa. NHS, 2018 (nhs.uk/conditions/anorexia).