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# RETHINKING EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ASYLUM REFORM*

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ABSTRACT. *This article seeks, through the medium of a case study of the York Lunatic Asylum scandal of 1813 to 1815, to rethink aspects of the existing historiography of early nineteenth-century asylum reform. By moving away from the normative medical historical focus on 'madness' and 'custody', it relates the reform of lunatic asylums to the wider social, cultural, and political currents of the early nineteenth century. In particular, it demonstrates how the conflict over the administration of the York Asylum represented a clash between different conceptions of social power and public accountability which were rooted in mutually opposed cultural ideologies. In addition, by bringing more recent work on identity and performance to bear on a classic set of historical issues, it also seeks to investigate how the reform of lunatic asylums, and the cultural shifts which they embodied, impacted upon the social identities of medical practitioners engaged in the charitable care of the sick and mad.*

What man of civilised feelings or gentlemanly habits – what man of property or of respectable rank in society – what man of learning or of character, will engage in the care or treatment of this unfortunate class of mortals? They must be left in the care of the vulgar, illiterate, and robust keeper, and the 'Mind' that might have been solaced and restored by the influence of manner and education, must be overthrown, debased, lost.

(A. Mather, *A plain narrative of facts relative to the reception and treatment of Jane Horsman at the establishment in Clifton of which Br Belcombe and Mr Mather are proprietors* (1819), p. 80)

## I

In 1819 the York surgeon, Alexander Mather, was an anxious man. What had begun with the committal of a 'certified' lunatic to the private madhouse in Clifton (a village to the north of York), which he ran in partnership with his colleague, Dr William Belcombe, had become a public political scandal. The 'lunatic' was a woman by the name of Jane Horsman, and after her committal, her friends had approached the York solicitor and evangelical Anglican, Jonathan Gray, to inquire after her. They claimed that Jane's incarceration had little or

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nothing to do with the state of her mind, but was part of a plot hatched by her uncle, Francis Bulmer, to secure the substantial pension which she received from her brother, a wealthy East India Company official.[1] In response to their request, Gray enlisted the help of the acting magistrate, Mr Dickens. In the company of a local physician, Baldwin Wake, Dickens gained admittance to the asylum, where Dr Wake declared Miss Horsman to be sane. Shortly afterwards, Dickens returned to Clifton with a number of Jane's friends and two constables, and demanded entry. On being refused, he ordered the constables to break down the door, which they did. Once inside, he confronted Jane and proposed that she come with them. At first she refused the offer, claiming that Mather, a personal friend, had 'behaved to me like a gentleman' and had promised to release her. Dickens retorted that Mather was no friend, but a 'villain', and that if she did not leave with him then, she would never leave at all. Upon this, she relented and left the house in the company of Dickens and the 'ladies'.[2]

Events did not end there, however. Horsman decided to take Mather and Belcombe to court. Together with the surgeon-apothecary, William Matterson, Horsman's uncle, Francis Bulmer, cousin, William Bulmer, and servant, Helen Scott, the two medics were charged with false imprisonment and trespass and ordered to appear before the assizes in August. The situation had become so tense, and Mather's public reputation so fragile, that when Matterson accused him of acting in an 'ungentleman-like and unprofessional-like' manner, Mather had, by his own admission, seized up a poker, exclaiming, '[i]f you repeat those expressions, I'll break your head!'.[3]

Mather had good reason to be worried. History seemed to be repeating itself. Just over five years before, a similar scandal had enveloped the York Lunatic Asylum and had resulted in the public disgrace of its principal medical officers. Between 1813 and 1815 the York Lunatic Asylum became the target of a vocal

[1] The 'wrongful' confinement of men and women in public and, particularly, in private madhouses was both a common practice and an established literary trope in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. P. McCandless, 'Liberty and lunacy: the Victorians and wrongful confinement', in A. Scull, ed., *Madhouses, mad-doctors and madmen: the social history of psychiatry in the Victorian era* (Philadelphia, 1981); M. J. Kurata, 'Wrongful confinement and the betrayal of women by men, medicine and law', in K. O. Garrigan, ed., *Victorian scandals: representations of gender and class* (Ohio, 1992); J. J. Schwieso, 'Religious fanaticism and wrongful confinement in Victorian England: the affair of Louisa Nottidge', *Social History of Medicine*, 9 (1996), pp. 159–74; E. A. Foyster, 'At the limits of liberty: married women and confinement in eighteenth-century England', *Continuity and Change*, 17 (2002), pp. 39–62.

[2] *A full and impartial report of the case of Jane Horsman vs. Francis Bulmer the elder, the Rev. William Bulmer, Alexander Mather, Wm. Matterson, Wm. Belcombe M. D. and Helen Scott, being an action of trespass and false imprisonment tried at the summer assizes for the county of York, August 4, 1819, before the Hon. Sir George Wood, Knight of one of the barons of his majesty's Court of Exchequer and a special jury. Taken from the shorthand notes of Mr Fraser* (York, 1819); A. Mather, *A plain narrative of facts relative to the reception and treatment of Jane Horsman at the establishment in Clifton of which Br Belcombe and Mr Mather are proprietors; with some preliminary observations on insanity in general and some remarks on the circumstances preceding and attending the late trial of Horsman against Bulmer and others* (York, 1819); J. Gray, *Horsmania: Mr J. Gray's statements and observations occasioned by the publications of Mr Mather* (York, 1819).

[3] Mather, *A plain narrative of facts*, p. 52.

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group of men who sought to reform the conditions in which the patients were held and the treatment to which they were subjected. In 1815 this scandal exploded on to the national stage, as the York Asylum, together with Bedlam, became the subject of a parliamentary inquiry into the state of madhouses. The findings of the select committee were damning, and although legislative action was some time in coming, their investigation marked the beginnings of a significant transformation in the management and treatment of the insane.

As such, the York Lunatic Asylum occupies a central place within the historiography of early nineteenth-century asylum reform and the events of 1813 to 1815 have been discussed at varying lengths by Kathleen Jones, Roy Porter, Andrew Scull, and Anne Digby, among others.[4] Much of this scholarship is distinctly triumphalist in both content and tone, and differs little from the accounts supplied by interested parties like Jonathan Gray in 1815 or Charles Gaskell in 1902.[5] Such accounts tend to discuss asylum reform as if it were the 'natural' response to a self-evident 'evil'. The reformers are represented as 'humane', 'public-spirited', and 'honest', the staff and governors of the Asylum as 'shifty', 'corrupt', or at best 'supine'.[6] Post-Foucauldian and neo-Marxist accounts have critiqued these assumptions about the humanitarian 'imperative', but in their place have erected an equally reductive bourgeois social control model that views asylum reform as an ideological constituent of the transition to a capitalist market economy.[7]

Thus, despite more recent attempts to integrate class and gender into the frameworks of analysis, scholarship on the history of asylums and asylum reform remains narrow in its focus.[8] Apparently unable to escape the intellectual shadow of Foucault, it continues to prioritize the concept of 'custody', with the asylum functioning as the institutional embodiment of shifting conceptualizations and understandings of the mentally ill and of their place in society. My intention in this article is not so much to critique this material, as to move outside of it and to approach the subject of asylum reform from a different angle. After all, despite the best efforts of many scholars to situate changing *perceptions* of madness

[4] K. Jones, *Lunacy, law and conscience, 1744–1845: the social history of the care of the insane* (London, 1955), pp. 83–92; R. Porter, *Mind-forg'd manacles: a history of madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 133–5, 144; A. Scull, *Museums of madness: the social organization of insanity in nineteenth-century England* (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 73–7; A. Digby, *From York Lunatic Asylum to Bootham Park Hospital*, Borthwick Paper, no. 69 (1986); idem, 'Changes in the asylum: the case of York, 1777–1815', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 36 (1983), pp. 218–39. The 1813–15 scandal has even been the subject of a television documentary, *The asylum war* (BBC Television, 1995).

[5] J. Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum: with an appendix containing minutes of evidence on the cases of abuse lately inquired into by a committee etc. addressed to William Wilberforce Esq., one of the contributors to Lupton's fund* (York, 1815); C. M. Gaskell, *Passages in the history of York Lunatic Asylum, 1772–1901* (Wakefield, 1902).

[6] Porter, *Mind-forg'd manacles*, pp. 135, 144.

[7] A. Scull, 'Moral treatment reconsidered: some sociological comments on an episode in the history of British psychiatry', in Scull, ed., *Madhouses, mad-doctors and madmen*; idem, *Museums of madness*, pp. 13–48. See also M. Foucault, *Madness and civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason* (London, 1969).

[8] J. Andrews and A. Digby, eds., *Sex and seclusion, class and custody: perspectives on gender and class in the history of British and Irish psychiatry* (Amsterdam, 2004).

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within their social and cultural contexts, these medical historical accounts have frequently failed to do the same for the asylum as an *institution* and have been largely unwilling or unable to link their reform to more general cultural currents.

Drawing on more recent, mainstream historical scholarship, I therefore want to pick out some threads from this particular case study and weave them into a wider historiographical fabric.[9] First, I want to demonstrate how the scandal which engulfed the York Lunatic Asylum from 1813 to 1815 constituted a clash between competing notions of social power and public authority. Indeed, despite the emphasis of past scholarship, the immediate debates surrounding the York Asylum made curiously little reference to theories of madness. Instead, they focused on the asylum as charitable institution and on the rights, roles, and responsibilities of its governors and staff. In attacking the existing administration, the reformers repeatedly invoked the languages of 'pubic' and 'private'. Post-Habermasian scholarship has attempted to unpack the complex meanings of these terms, both for contemporaries and as tools of historical analysis. As Kathleen Wilson has suggested, the concept of the 'public', like that of its ideological counterpart, the 'people', was central to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political discourse, conjuring, as it did, the rhetorically appealing image of a disinterested and inherently virtuous civil polity.[10] Likewise, the 'private', whilst it has often been linked to domesticity and the social space of the household, had an equal, though perhaps less well-understood, discursive resonance. For many Georgian commentators, the 'private' connoted self-interest. Of course, there was nothing inherently wrong with self-interest. A man's business was, after all, his own affair and, as Mandeveille suggested, could even contribute towards the collective good.[11] But when self-interest became the structuring ideology of social relations within the public sphere, it tended, in the eyes of many an observer, towards nepotism, oligarchy, and corruption. Having said all this, we must be very wary in our reading of such languages. After all, as scholars such as John Brewer have argued, the meanings of these terms were by no means fixed.[12] What one chose to celebrate as 'public' or decry as 'private' was contingent upon differing political, social, and religious perspectives, and was the subject of debate and dispute. Thus, although the governors of the York Asylum regarded their institution as a public one, dedicated, as it was, to essentially 'public' goals, the reformers of the early nineteenth century frequently

[9] A. Burns and J. Innes, eds., *Rethinking the age of reform: Britain, 1780–1850* (Cambridge, 2003).

[10] K. Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 17–25; L. G. Mitchell, 'The Whigs, the people and reform', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 100 (1999), pp. 25–42; P. Harling, 'Parliament, the state and "old corruption": conceptualising reform, c. 1790–1832', in Burns and Innes, eds., *Rethinking the age of reform*.

[11] J. G. Schochet,'Vices, benefits and civil society: Mandeville, Habermas and the distinction between the public and the private', in P. R. Backscheider and T. Dykstal, eds., *The intersections of the public and the private spheres in early-modern England* (London, 1996).

[12] J. Brewer, 'This, that and the other: public, social and private in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', in D. Castiglione and L. Sharpe, eds., *Shifting the boundaries: transformation of the languages of public and private in the eighteenth century* (Exeter, 1995).

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criticized it as a 'private' institution. Yet, for all their complexity, such languages were not free-floating, but were rooted in distinctive and mutually opposed conceptions of civil society. As we shall see, the governors, most of whom were drawn from county society, operated within a habitus predicated on the values of gentility, patronage, and polite, informal association. As such, their conception of the 'public' was limited to those, like themselves, who enjoyed wealth, influence, and a stake in existing social, political, and economic structures. For the reformers, however, the 'public', like the 'people', had different associations. Unlike the governors these men were predominantly drawn from the ranks of urban tradesmen and professionals, particularly lawyers, and were predominantly evangelical Anglicans or adherents of 'rational' dissent. They were, in other words, members of an ideological, if not necessarily structural, 'middle class'.[13] Their conception of the 'public' was, hence, broader and potentially more radical than their opponents, encompassing the politically disenfranchized and socially 'marginal'. Moreover, in their use of the 'private' they challenged the informal ties of patronage and association through which such voluntary charities invariably functioned. By examining their 'conquest' of the asylum, we can therefore gain an insight, not only into the cultures of early nineteenth-century reform, but also into the changing composition and roles of urban elites, a snapshot, as it were, which captures a pivotal moment in the decline of civil gentility and the rise of middle-class commerce as the hegemonic ideology of English urban society.[14]

Secondly, and relatedly, whilst revisionist social historical accounts of early nineteenth-century asylum reform have tended to focus on the treatment and experiences of the mad, in this article I want to examine how such reformatory action affected the social identities and reputations of those engaged in their care.[15] In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the public expression of what it meant to be a physician, surgeon, and even an apothecary, was structured by what I term a culture of 'medico-gentility'.[16] Within this paradigm, medical identities were dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on the

[13] D. Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain* (Cambridge, 1995).

[14] R. G. Wilson, *Gentleman merchants: the merchant community in Leeds, 1700–1830* (Manchester, 1971); R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780–1850: an analysis', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 95–118; idem, *Class, sect and party: the making of the British middle class: Leeds, 1820–1850* (Manchester, 1990); S. Nenadic, 'Businessmen, the urban middle classes, and the "dominance" of manufacturers in nineteenth-century Britain', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), pp. 66–85; P. Shapely, 'Charity, status and leadership: charitable image and the Manchester man', *Journal of Social History*, 32 (1998), pp. 157–77; A. Kidd and D. Nicholls, eds., *Gender, civic culture and consumerism: middle-class identity in Britain, 1800–1940* (Manchester, 1999); S. Gunn, *The public culture of the Victorian middle class: ritual and authority and the English industrial city, 1840–1914* (Manchester, 2000).

[15] Scull, *Museums of madness*, pp. 125–63, is one of the few works to consider the threat to medical authority posed by asylum reform.

[16] On the cultural construction of the medical gentleman, see M. Fissell, 'Innocent and honourable bribes: medical manners in eighteenth-century Britain', in R. Baker, D. Porter, and R. Porter, eds., *The codification of medical morality: historical and philosophical studies of the formalization of western medical morality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*, I: *Medical ethics and etiquette in the eighteenth century* (London, 1993);

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social performance of gentility. Medical practitioners could cultivate a reputation as leisured men of liberal education through the pursuit of such 'polite' and/or enlightened pursuits as agricultural improvement, botany, or antiquarianism.[17] They might also seek to establish associations with local civic and county worthies and play an active role in a culture of public sociability through their involvement in local political or social clubs.[18] However, one of the most important arenas for the elaboration of these identities was provided by local medical charitable institutions. By working *pro bono* at such institutions as the York County Hospital, York Lunatic Asylum, and York Dispensary these men were able to present themselves as benevolent and genteel citizens with an investment in local civic and county identities and a commitment to fulfilling those responsibilities which came with their imagined social status.[19]

For those holding positions at such charitable institutions, this performance of gentility was predicated on the possession of visible and specific areas of competence and authority. Although technically subject to lay governors, the medical officers at the Asylum were allowed an almost total dominion over what I refer to as the 'medical space' of the institution. It might be worth clarifying what I mean by this term. At Bedlam in London, where a similar scandal erupted in 1815–16, the therapeutic regime, established and administered by the physician and apothecary, became one of the key points of contention between the reformers and the existing administration. This was not the case at York, where it was the custodial care of patients and the behaviour of the keepers which elicited most concern. And yet, as we shall see, by virtue of the authority credited to them as the heads of an institutional 'household', the physician, Charles Best, and his assistant, the apothecary, Charles Atkinson, were held accountable for all matters relating to the physical, moral, and mental well-being of the patients. It is these matters, as opposed to the functional aspects of administration, which I include under the term 'medical space'.

As Mather's comments suggest, for contemporary medical practitioners the issues of authority, *public* identity, and social reputation were inextricably intertwined (even within the context of a *private* madhouse). During the 'Asylum Revolution', this authority was called into question, as the reformers sought to instigate a rigorous system of visitation, subjecting the medical staff to routine

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J. V. Pickstone, 'Thomas Percival and the production of medical ethics', in Baker, Porter, and Porter, eds., *The codification of medical morality*.

[17] M. Brown, '"For the dignity of the faculty": fashioning medical identities, York, c. 1760–c. 1850' (Ph.D. thesis, York, 2004), pp. 90–126. For more on 'polite' science, see J. Golinski, *Science as public culture: chemistry and enlightenment in Britain, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1992); J. Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the Enlightenment: useful knowledge and polite culture* (Cambridge, 1994).

[18] M. Brown, 'From the Doctors' Club to the Medical Society: medicine, gentility and social space in York, 1780–1840', in M. Hallett and J. Rendall, eds., *Eighteenth-century York: culture, space and society* (York, 2003); Brown, '"For the dignity of the faculty"', pp. 62–89.

[19] A. Borsay, *Medicine and charity in Georgian Bath: a social history of the General Infirmary, c. 1739–1830* (Aldershot, 1999); Brown, '"For the dignity of the faculty"', pp. 85–8.

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regulation and inspection.[20] In defending their authority, medical practitioners such as Best, Atkinson, and, later, Mather, repeatedly appealed to their status as gentlemen. However, lay visitation challenged the claims to humanity, benevolence, and disinterestedness which underwrote such social identities. In so doing, the reform of the York Asylum, and of medical charities in general, contributed, in a significant way, to the demise of 'medico-gentility' as a dominant mode of medical self-presentation.

This article opens with a brief account of the early years of the York Lunatic Asylum under its first physician, Alexander Hunter. In particular, it examines an incident in the late 1780s, when a small group of governors tried unsuccessfully to challenge Hunter's authority. Though often invoked by later reformers, this affair offers an illuminating contrast to the later controversy, demonstrating how such challenges could fail when they lacked the moral, political, and cultural force they were later to possess. After examining the events of 1813 to 1815, it concludes by returning to the case of Jane Horsman and situating the 'Asylum Revolution' within a wider historical framework.

## II

The York Lunatic Asylum was founded in 1772 by a predominantly Rockinghamite Whig clique. Among its original twenty-five proponents was Alexander Hunter, an Edinburgh- and Paris-educated physician who had arrived in York in 1762 to take up a physician's post at the city's County Hospital, having previously practised in Gainsborough and Beverley. Hunter had already published an anonymous medical analysis of Buxton's spa waters before coming to York, and in 1768 he had a revised and expanded edition published under his own name.[21] His principal interest was agricultural improvement and in 1770 he was one of the founding members of the York Agricultural Society, a short-lived body, but one which provided the platform for a series of transactions entitled *Georgical essays*, which Hunter edited and contributed to. At the time of his first involvement with the Lunatic Asylum he was also working on his magnum opus, a two-volume edition of John Evelyn's *Sylva: or a discourse of forest trees and the propagation of timber in his majesty's dominions* (1662). This project came to fruition in 1776, and would eventually run to five editions. It was instrumental in Hunter's election to the Royal Society in 1775 and secured the patronage of such luminaries as its president, Joseph Banks.[22] Hunter was, in short, a man who was defined as

[20] The term 'Asylum Revolution' is taken from a letter written by Jonathan Gray and included in Mather, *A plain narrative of facts*, p. 42. It appears to have been a term of general usage, especially amongst the reformers.

[21] *A treatise on the nature and virtues of Buxton waters* (London, 1761); A. Hunter, *A treatise on the nature and virtues of Buxton water with a preliminary account of the external and internal use of natural and artificial warm waters amongst the antients* (2nd edn, London, 1768).

[22] Kew Gardens, Banks Collection, 1.47, 1.55, 1.56, 1.229, and 1.233.

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much by his identity as an enlightenment gentleman of liberal interests as by the practice of medicine.[23]

Hunter's role in promoting the Asylum appears to have been active. His *Memoir* claimed that, '[i]n 1772, he successfully projected a plan of a Lunatic Asylum at York', adding that '[i]n the prosecution of this scheme he took unwearied pains.'[24] As well as subscribing money to the institution, Hunter, together with the lord mayor and fellow promoter, Charles Turner MP, was given the task of locating and purchasing an appropriate site for the Asylum.[25]

The institution was initially dogged by financial difficulties and it was not until 1777 that it was finally ready to receive patients. At a meeting in September of that year, the governors appointed Hunter sole physician to the institution. This meeting was attended by only six governors, one of whom was Hunter, suggesting that the decision was taken without widespread consultation. However, as Jonathan Gray later noted, 'Dr Hunter's appointment by this Committee, although never confirmed, must have been acquiesced in by the governors at large.'[26] Given his active involvement in its foundation, it seems unlikely that anyone else had been considered for the post.[27] Indeed, some governors seem to have had an interest in his social and vocational advancement. At least three of the original promoters (now governors) were members of the same Rockinghamite political club.[28] One, John Dealtry, himself an established local doctor, may have been a relative, and another, Sir Thomas Frankland, the 5th Baronet of Thirkleby, was instrumental in Hunter's election to the Royal Society.[29]

Although Hunter was appointed sole physician, he was not to be the only medical officer. A special committee, which included Hunter himself, together with his colleagues Thomas Withers, Allen Swainston, and Edward Wallis, proposed that an apothecary be appointed, and recommended that he should have attended either Bedlam or St Luke's, the two principal metropolitan public asylums.[30] Clearly, having had no experience whatsoever in the practical large-scale management of the insane, Hunter was keen to recruit someone who knew what he was doing, or at least did not require a training he was at that stage

[23] Anne Digby, 'Alexander Hunter (1729?–1809)', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (*DNB*); Brown, '"For the dignity of the faculty"', ch. 3.

[24] A. Hunter, ed., *Silva: or a discourse of forest trees and the propagation of timber in his majesty's dominions* (4th edition, York, 1812), p. xii.

[25] Digby, *From York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 2.

[26] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 12.

[27] John Monro also presided as sole physician at Bethlem. J. Andrews and A. Scull, *Undertaker of the mind: John Monro and mad-doctoring in eighteenth-century England* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), pp. 15–16.

[28] These men were William Milner, George Armytage, and Thomas Gascoigne, *York Courant*, 11 Nov. 1788.

[29] Hunter, ed., *Silva*, p. xii; Royal Society, Election Certificate, 1774/26 (Cert. III, 203; A03677).

[30] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 11–12. For more on Bedlam and St Luke's, see C. N. French, *The story of St Luke's Hospital* (London, 1951); J. Andrews et al., *The history of Bethlem* (London, 1997).

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unqualified to provide. However, even if the office of apothecary was central to the day-to-day administration of the Asylum, it was Hunter who was unquestionably in charge.[31] Indeed, so dominant did Hunter become, that Anne Digby has characterized the early history of the institution as the 'Physician's Asylum'.[32]

Historians have often regarded voluntary medical charities, such as the York Asylum, as embodying that openness and inclusiveness which characterized the eighteenth-century 'public sphere' and differentiated it, in the opinion of many contemporaries, from the closed structures of the Georgian state.[33] And yet, looking at the mechanisms of Hunter's election and the extent of his authority, it is clear that, in many cases, such institutions also operated through similar systems of patronage and obligation. In part, this can be seen as a product of circumstance; what Mary Fissell has called the 'abdication of the governors'.[34] Her research on the Bristol Infirmary, founded in the 1730s, reveals that, at first, with an enthusiasm born of novelty and a commitment to an inquiring and sustained relationship with the objects of charity, the governors took an active role in its administration. However, as time wore on, this enthusiasm abated, and power devolved to the medical staff as fewer and fewer governors took the time to attend meetings. This was a feature of many eighteenth-century medical charities and the same situation may very well have pertained at the York Asylum. More substantively, however, it seems that these informal power relations were rooted in the very ideology of civil gentility which gave rise to such institutions in the first place. As a subscriber, a governor, and the principal medical officer, Hunter was credited with the authority to regulate the 'medical space' of the Asylum. Although it was still the governors' prerogative to accept or reject petitions for assistance, they rarely, if ever, interfered with medical issues, attending instead to the more routine aspects of administration. As a later commentator noted:

> At the quarterly meetings, four or five Governors with difficulty collected, summed up the items of a tradesman's bill, contracted the butcher for the ensuing three months, ordered a wall to be pulled down, or a door to be blocked up – wished each other good morning – and retired.[35]

Although intended as a criticism of how moribund they had become under Hunter, this account could be read as a description of the ideal of gentlemanly conduct within a charitable institution. Likewise, in caricaturing their

[31] The apothecary was also responsible for the majority of quotidian medical care at Bethlem. Andrews and Scull, *Undertaker of the mind*, pp. 16–17.

[32] Digby, *From York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 9.

[33] K. Wilson, 'Urban culture and political activism in Hanoverian England: the example of voluntary hospitals', in E. Hellmuth, ed., *The transformation of political culture: England and Germany in the late eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1990); idem, *The sense of the people*, pp. 73–83.

[34] M. Fissell, *Patients, power and the poor in eighteenth-century Bristol* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 110–25.

[35] A New Governor, *A vindication of Mr. Higgins from the charges of Corrector: including a sketch of recent transactions at the York Lunatic Asylum in a letter addressed to Earl Fitzwilliam* (York, 1814), p. 7.

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complacency in the face of the 'abuse' of the patients, the same author demonstrated how the Asylum functioned as the very apotheosis of contemporary social relations:

> [I]t was the *habit* of the Governors to think all was right – and in fact they had seen nothing which was wrong – the passage to the Committee-room was well swept – a cheerful fire blazed in the chimney – the table was covered with a decent green cloth – the apothecary bowed – the matron courtesyed – the head-keeper obsequiously held the door with his hand – and an under keeper attended with humble reverence, as often as the bell called him into the Governors' presence.[36]

Hunter's conduct as physician appears to have conformed to this model of conduct. If the staff were the servants of a grand house with their own internal hierarchies, then Hunter was their benevolent, if often absent, patriarch. In his will, he not only bequeathed money to his own household servants, but left legacies to even the most menial of his underlings at the Asylum.[37]

One of the consequences of the decline in the governors' attendance and the extension of Hunter's authority was that the Asylum became, in one sense at least, less 'public'. Announcements of meetings continued to appear periodically in the local newspapers and anyone, at least in principle, could ask for a copy of the rules and a printed account of the 'current state' of the Asylum.[38] However, as time wore on, this became increasingly difficult and a later critic noted that 'inaccessibility to any of the rules is one of the first principles in the clandestine conduct of this institution'.[39]

This retreat from public scrutiny and accountability did not go unnoticed. In 1788, three Asylum governors mounted a challenge to Hunter's authority. They were the poet and precentor of York Minster, the Rev. William Mason, the recorder for the York Corporation, William Withers, and the political polemicist, Dr Burgh. Mason, the group's most eloquent spokesman, objected strenuously to Hunter's recent proposal that he should be allowed a salary of £200 per annum.[40] This proposal indicates the problems facing practitioners engaged in charitable medical practice. Although such positions conferred *cultural capital*, they were, in principle at least, *financially* unrewarding. Like most of those who attended the poor at contemporary medical charities, Hunter worked for free.[41] Mason was unsympathetic to this tension between public image and financial necessity, however. He wrote to the secretary of the Asylum, Michael Eastburn, asking for a copy of Hunter's proposal.[42] Soon afterwards, he published a pamphlet and sent a letter to the *York Courant*, in which he outlined his principal

[36] Ibid., p. 9.

[37] Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, Will of A. Hunter (Sept. 1809).

[38] This was a printed sheet listing the number of patients admitted, cured, relieved, or discharged during a particular period.

[39] York City Library (YCL), Dr Burgh to William Wilberforce (10 Nov. 1791).

[40] York Minster Library (YML), A. Hunter to governors of the York Lunatic Asylum (24 Aug. 1787).

[41] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 12.

[42] YML, minutes of the governors of the Lunatic Asylum, held at the York Tavern (3 Jan. 1788).

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objections.[43] Mason maintained that the Asylum had been established for the relief of parish paupers, not those of 'middling rank' as Hunter had claimed. In 1784, Hunter had pressed for the admission of a number of 'superior' (i.e. wealthier) patients, whose increased payments, both he and many of the governors maintained, would defray the costs of admitting paupers.[44] In reality, however, he was taking fees from them.[45]

What was perhaps most significant about this controversy was the fact that Mason chose to 'go public' with his accusations. Whilst claiming that his letter to the *Courant* was not intended for publication, he appealed to the 'graver citizens who are the constant readers of your impartial paper' to concur with his objections.[46] In response, Hunter sent his own letter to the governors and to the press.[47] He began with a quotation from Addison: 'I know no evil so destructive to society as literary incendiary.'[48] This rhetoric continued throughout the letter. Hunter suggested that, in attacking the public reputations of both the Asylum and himself, Mason had broken the unwritten code of gentlemanly conduct. Claiming that he desired to be treated with 'civility … decency and propriety', he stated: 'I shall pass over in silence the many low and illiberal attacks made by Mr Mason upon the constitution of the Asylum and the honour of the Governors, and, in particular, upon the attending physician.'[49]

Despite their appeals to the literate public, the challenge posed by Mason, Burgh, and Withers was soon subsumed into the space of the committee room. They were asked to attend a meeting of the governors where their objections were to be heard. Their reception was unfavourable. The other governors made no attempt to restrain Hunter when he launched a verbal attack on Dr Burgh, stating that he had 'long thought him a scoundrel and had never had any reason to alter his opinion'.[50] They swept aside Mason's concerns and reiterated their acquiescence to Hunter's self-regulated dominion of the Asylum, thanking him for 'his great attention to all the interests of this institution'. Their verdict on his opponents was damning:

> Resolved … that such Governors [Mason et al.] as profess themselves friends to the Asylum would express their good-will to it much better by attending in their places at the times of the meeting, and there giving their advice for the regulation and improvement of the Institution, than by prejudicing the minds of the public by their misrepresentations.[51]

There was clearly more to the governors' actions than simple nepotism. Mason and his associates had overstepped the boundaries of gentlemanly protocol, and

[43] W. Mason, *Animadversions on the present state of the York Lunatic Asylum; in which the case of parish paupers is distinctly considered in series of propositions* (York, 1788); *York Courant*, 11 Jan. 1788.

[44] Gray claimed that Hunter had exerted 'influence … upon the Committee' in this regard. Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 13–14.

[45] Ibid., p. 14.

[46] *York Courant*, 11 Jan. 1788.

[47] *A letter from a subscriber to the York Lunatic Asylum to the governors of that charity* (York, 1788).

[48] Ibid., p. 1.

[49] Ibid., pp. 5, 18.

[50] *Incontestable proofs from internal evidence that S. W. Nicoll Esq. is not the author of 'a vindication' of Mr. Higgins from the charges of Corrector (although Mr. Higgins attributes it to him) in a letter addressed to Earl Fitzwilliam* (York, 1815?), p. 60.

[51] *A letter from a subscriber*, pp. 20–1.

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by appealing to the undifferentiated newspaper-reading 'public', rather than their social equals (or superiors), they had broken the vertical ties of deference that regulated social action within such voluntary charities. The governors of the Asylum often employed the rhetoric of the 'public', both in representations of the institution's utility and in their pleas for donations. And yet, whilst they claimed to be open to public scrutiny, it was clear that the Asylum was also a 'private' space; it was regulated and controlled by its benevolent patrons and the governors could not suffer such internal disputes to enter the world of 'public' print.[52]

Mason and his associates were not entirely silenced by this censure. Despite Mason's limited appeals to the 'public', their initial challenge had been articulated from within the cultural space of the Asylum. Their subsequent criticisms, however, entailed a subtle, but highly significant, change of emphasis. Instead of that preoccupation with the particulars of administration, which characterized their previously *internal* discourse, they now exhibited the concerns of disgruntled *outsiders*. Thus, rather than seeking to steer the course of the Asylum from within, they attacked the institution itself, and the cultural forms that had given it birth. For example, in 1791,William Wilberforce had written to Dr Burgh expressing concern over the administration of the Asylum. Burgh's reply characterized the institution as a 'private madhouse' whose conduct was 'clandestine'. 'Criminal deviations' had taken place, he claimed, which had 'defrauded' the 'public'. Interestingly, Burgh also made reference to the architectural grandeur of the Asylum and its projection of civic and county pride. Like many of those who were critical of the 'inappropriate' magnificence of Bedlam, Burgh contrasted the public and private aspects of the structure, claiming that the building was both 'a magnificent edifice and [a] pompous display of human degradation'.[53] Burgh's criticisms of the Asylum were prescient, for they articulated the same concerns over the regulation and inspection of 'private' space that were to become a staple of later debates. Also significant was the involvement of William Wilberforce, a Yorkshire MP. Wilberforce, an evangelical philanthropist concerned with the regulation and moral reformation of the poor, was typical of the self-appointed 'reformers' who would later be found in the vanguard of the assault on the *ancien régime* of the York Lunatic Asylum.

For the moment, however, the physician's hegemony appeared secure. Not only had Hunter survived the challenge posed to his authority by Mason and the

[52] One could contrast this failure with the contemporaneous success of a group of local Whigs and dissenters in reforming the Manchester Infirmary. Here, too, the issue had been one of 'publicness', with a supposedly voluntary charity having come under the effective control of a small cabal of surgeons. J. V. Pickstone and S. V. F. Butler, 'The politics of medicine in the early industrial city: a study of hospital reform and medical relief in late eighteenth-century Manchester', *Medical History*, 28 (1984), pp. 227–49; Pickstone, 'Thomas Percival', pp. 168–9.

[53] YCL, Dr Burgh to William Wilberforce (10 Nov. 1791). On the debates about the 'appropriateness' of asylum architecture, see C. Stevenson, *Medicine and magnificence: British hospital and asylum architecture, 1660–1815* (New Haven, 2000), pp. 14–18, 85–105.

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others, but he had also gained further concessions from the governors. In 1790, they allowed him to open a private asylum in Acomb, even though this was contrary to the original rules.[54] In 1809, Hunter died and the post of sole physician to the public Asylum passed to his protégé and successor, the consumptive Edinburgh graduate, Dr Charles Best.[55] However, whilst Hunter had successfully invoked the rhetoric of genteel civility in defence of his authority, Best's attempts to do so met with failure. In order to discover why, it is necessary to examine the nature and significance of the challenge posed by early nineteenth-century asylum reform.

## III

One of the more notable changes that took place in York between the Asylum controversy of 1788, and that of 1813 to 1815, was the foundation of the Retreat. The Retreat had been established by the Quaker tea and coffee merchant, William Tuke, in 1792, in response to the suspicious death of the Leeds Quaker, Hannah Mills, in the public asylum. It was denominationally specific, catering only for the Quaker insane. Under the administration of the Tukes, and the medical attendance of the superintendent, George Jepson, and the physician, Thomas Fowler (later William Belcombe), patients at the Retreat were subjected to what was referred to as 'moral therapy'.[56] This treatment avoided physical restraint wherever possible and sought instead to instil an internal moral restraint in the lunatic through what Samuel Tuke called the 'desire of esteem'.[57]

Ever since its foundation, the Retreat had been a thorn in the side of the public asylum. Although the 1807 select committee on pauper and criminal lunatics had commended the York Asylum, the widespread praise of the methods of treatment practised at the Retreat risked the drawing of unfavourable comparisons.[58] Moreover, unlike the Asylum, the Retreat had gained recognition as something approaching a national institution. Because of its confessional specificity, it drew in patients from around the country. The asylum, on the other hand, largely restricted itself to Yorkshire. This fact helped raise the profile of the Retreat, and, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it attracted a range of visitors from doctors to foreign dignitaries.[59]

[54] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 20–1.

[55] Ibid., p. 23, appendix, pp. 3–4.

[56] S. Tuke, *Description of the Retreat, an institution near York for insane persons of the Society of Friends. Containing an account of its origins and progress, the modes of treatment, and a statement of cases* (York, 1813), pp. x–xii, 131–87; M. Glover, *The Retreat, York: an early Quaker experiment in the treatment of mental illness* (York, 1984); A. Digby, *Madness, morality and medicine: a study of the York Retreat, 1796–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); K. A. Stewart, *The York Retreat in the light of the Quaker way: moral treatment theory: humane therapy or mind control?* (York, 1989).

[57] Tuke, *Description of the Retreat*, p. 157; Foucault, *Madness and civilization*, pp. 248–9.

[58] Scull, *Museums of madness*, pp. 59–60; *Report from the select committee appointed to enquire into the state of pauper and criminal lunatics in England and Wales* (1807), appendix, pp. 18–19.

[59] Tuke, *Description of the Retreat*, appendix pp. 221–7.

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The Retreat was not only of interest to medical practitioners; it was grounded in a wider social, political, and religious movement. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the rise of an increasingly vocal group of philanthropic men and women committed to social and moral reform. Most of these individuals were religious dissenters or were on the evangelical wing of the Church of England. Although many were excluded by their religious beliefs from positions within the established social and political hierarchy, theirs was a national establishment all of its own. Indeed, for a limited time, they were able to fund and publish their own journal, the *Philanthropist*. In York this movement was particularly apparent. William Wilberforce, the great figurehead of philanthropic reform, was a county MP. His election campaign, combined with the growing influence of evangelical ideology, galvanized a previously disparate dissenting community into something approaching a homogeneous entity with shared interests and goals. In York, the economically significant Quaker population had traditionally played little role in public affairs. However, in his active support for Wilberforce, Samuel Tuke broke this mould and led the way for much more open Quaker activity.[60] Men such as Tuke found like-minded activists in York's Unitarian and evangelical 'communities'. The Unitarian influence was particularly strong, as together with the Rev. Charles Wellbeloved, the Unitarian matriarch, Catherine Cappe, stood at the centre of an intranational and international network of dissenting and philanthropic interest.[61] Also significant was evangelical Anglicanism, centred on the Rev. William Richardson and the parish of St Michael le Belfry. One of the most well-known, and publicly visible, evangelical families were the Grays, led by the solicitor, William, his wife, Faith, and their son, Jonathan.

Although this movement had an obvious religious dimension, it also attracted individuals whose motives were more overtly political. One of these was S. W. Nicoll, attorney and recorder for the York corporation. Nicoll was a leading member of the York Whig Club and a politically radical exponent of reform. He was avowedly opposed to the political power exercised by the aristocratic elites, and called for the enfranchisement of 'the people', broadly conceived.[62] Together, this heterogeneous group made a significant impact on the social and political landscape of early nineteenth-century York. They founded such morally and socially reforming societies as the Anti-Slavery Society, the Auxiliary Bible

[60] Tuke, *Memoirs of Samuel Tuke, with some notices of his ancestors and descendants*, I (London, 1860), p. 95; S. Wright, *Friends in York: the dynamics of a Quaker revival, 1780–1860* (Keele, 1995), pp. 23, 101–2.

[61] G. M. Ditchfield, 'English rational dissent and philanthropy, c. 1760–c. 1810', in H. Cunningham and J. Innes, eds., *Charity, philanthropy and reform: from the 1690s to 1850* (New York, 1998); H. Plant, *Unitarianism, philanthropy and feminism in York, 1728–1821: the career of Catherine Cappe*, Borthwick Paper, no. 103 (2003); idem, 'Gender and the aristocracy of dissent: a comparative study of the beliefs, status and roles of women in Quaker and Unitarian communities, 1780–1830, with particular reference to Yorkshire' (D.Phil. thesis, York, 2000).

[62] S. W. Nicoll, *A letter to the members of the York Whig Club* (York, 1819); idem, *A second letter to members of the York Whig Club* (York, 1819); P. Brett, *The rise and fall of the York Whig Club, 1818–1830*, Borthwick Paper, no. 76 (1989).

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Society, the Missionary and Religious Tract Societies, and the Society for the Prevention and Discouragement of Vice and Profaneness. As well as the moral reform of the poor, these individuals also took an active interest in the regulation of institutional life. Many of them drew their inspiration from the pioneering activities of John Howard in the field of penal reform. They were particularly concerned with institutions, such as prisons, workhouses, hospitals, and asylums, which might promote the moral degradation of their inmates or which subjected them to conditions, punishments, or restraints which imposed upon their individual liberties. There was more to this than a simple interest in the personal freedom of the individual, however. Many of these reformers saw such institutions as indicative of 'Old Corruption', the nepotism, oligarchy, and even tyranny, of the political and social establishment.[63] As one York-based reformer put it, their concern was with 'those numerous establishments and endowments – *half public and half private* in their nature – by which I mean hospitals, schools, infirmaries and asylums, at once the honour and disgrace of the nation'.[64] Many of these men and women were excluded from established positions within the social and political hierarchy. In opening up such spaces to their authority, they thereby sought to extend their own social and political influence. Yet even though there may have been a strong element of self-interest in their actions, they certainly did not present it as such. These individuals saw themselves, not only as the representatives of an evangelical or dissenting movement, but as the guardians and enforcers of an authority vested in the 'public' at large. In this particular case, their stated aim was to break open the 'private' space of the Asylum, self-regulated by medical practitioners and the local elites, and subject it to the regulation and surveillance of a publicly mandated authority.[65]

The controversy surrounding the York Lunatic Asylum began in September 1813 when its physician, Charles Best, wrote an anonymous letter of complaint to the *York Chronicle*.[66] In it, Best launched an attack on Samuel Tuke and his recently published *Description of the Retreat* (1813). This book, an historical account of the foundation and administration of the Retreat, and panegyric to 'moral therapy', was, Best argued, a thinly veiled attack on his practice at the York Asylum, and by extension, his private 'House of Retirement'. He maintained that remarks in Tuke's work were calculated to discredit him and were: '[T]hrown out against other establishments for the same purpose, the intended application of which, no

[63] W. D. Rubenstein, 'The end of "old corruption" in Britain, 1780–1860', *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), pp. 55–86; P. Harling, 'Rethinking "old corruption"', *Past and Present*, 147 (1995), pp. 127–58; idem, *The waning of 'old corruption': the politics of economical reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996); idem, 'Parliament, the state and "old corruption": conceptualising reform, c. 1790–1832', in Burns and Innes, eds., *Rethinking the age of reform*.

[64] A New Governor, *A vindication of Mr. Higgins*, p. 6. Emphasis added.

[65] On the associations between 'philanthropy' and surveillance, see A. J. Kidd, 'Philanthropy and the "social history paradigm"', *Social History*, 21 (1996), pp. 180–92.

[66] *York Chronicle*, 25 Sept. 1813. The letter was signed 'Evigilator'.

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one could misunderstand, and which were as strikingly illiberal as they were grossly unfounded.'[67]

Best also took offence at a public handbill, recently circulated around York by Dr Belcombe, physician to the Retreat. This handbill announced Belcombe's intention to establish his own private asylum, and in it, he claimed that the system he practised there would be the same as the 'mild methods' he practised at the Retreat. Best evidently believed that such claims posed a threat to his public reputation as a medical practitioner with expertise in the management of the insane. He argued that Belcombe's statements 'were intended to impose a belief upon its readers that methods of treatment of an opposite direction were employed at the other Establishments for insane persons in York and its vicinity'. Such an 'insinuation', Best maintained, was both 'perfectly unprofessional and palpably incorrect'.[68]

Best's letter prompted a triangular row between Tuke, Belcombe, and himself in the letter pages of York's newspapers. Initially, this row was dominated by a familiar intra-medical dispute between Best and Belcombe over the propriety of medical advertisement. Best castigated Belcombe as a quack, and argued that he had overstepped the boundaries of gentlemanly medical conduct.[69] However, for Tuke and his reformist allies, this debate offered an ideal opportunity publicly to oppose the existing Asylum administration. In October, Tuke's friend and fellow Quaker, Samuel Wemyss, wrote to the *York Herald*, pointing out that 'the controversy appears, like too many others, to consist of charge and exculpation between the parties at variance, when it ought to assume a more important form, as having relation to the *public at large*'.[70]

Wemyss's letter was infused with a language of the 'public' interest, and his concern with the public regulation of private space was one that would come to dominate the reform of the York Lunatic Asylum. He portrayed the Asylum as a secretive institution, and compared it to that other great object of reforming interest, the prison. Quoting *Hamlet*, he called upon Best to 'unlock the secrets of the prison-house', and referred to the 'benevolent zeal of Howard in exploring prisons of a different kind'. Wemyss's letter also alluded to the political dimensions of the debate. Although it is difficult to establish class-based dichotomies with regard to reform, it is clear that Wemyss was tapping into an emergent, radical, 'middle-class' belief that their exclusion from the arenas of social and political power was the product of aristocratic oligarchy. Thus, he claimed, the 'office of a Reformer' was a 'hopeless' one because 'the parties requiring Reformation are powerful and affluent and strongly entrenched behind prescriptive usages and customs'.[71]

[67] Ibid. [68] Ibid. [69] *York Chronicle*, 25 Sept., 7 and 14 Oct. 1813; *York Courant*, 11 Oct. 1813.
[70] *York Herald*, 16. Oct. 1813. Emphasis added. It was no accident that Weymss chose to publish his letter in the city's most actively reforming newspaper. Tuke, *Memoirs of Samuel Tuke*, I, p. 219.
[71] *York Herald*, 16 Oct. 1813.

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For all their epistolary fury, however, it is unlikely that the York-based reformers would have engaged in any constructive social action had not a magistrate for the West Riding of Yorkshire, named Godfrey Higgins, entered the fray. Higgins is an intriguing, if somewhat obscure, character. He studied law at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, but did not take a degree and was never called to the bar, opting instead to take a commission in the 3rd West York militia. In 1800, on the death of his father, he inherited a considerable estate at Skellow Grange, near Doncaster. Higgins's religious beliefs are best described as unconventional. He allegedly believed that although a Nazarite, Christ had probably been born a Samaritan and was a member of the monastic order of Pythagorean Essenes who led the life of a hermit. His political ideology was similarly radical and was informed by Benthamite utilitarianism.[72]

As magistrate, Higgins had been responsible for the committal of a man named William Vickers (or Vicars) to the York Asylum. Vickers's wife had allegedly begged him not to send her husband there, as she feared he might be mistreated. When he returned from his stay at the Asylum, his wife again sought Higgins out, claiming that he had indeed been 'ill-used'. Vickers was examined by a local surgeon, Charles Maples, who observed that he was infested with lice and that his leg was in a 'state of mortification'.[73]

Armed with this case, Higgins decided to act. Interestingly, however, he did not pursue the expected course of action. Rather than approaching the governors of the Asylum, he resolved, almost immediately, to publish his findings and his accusations of abuse. Higgins's decision was a political one. In ignoring the protocols of that culture of civil interaction on which the Asylum was founded, Higgins appealed to a different form of authority. This was the 'public authority' to which he frequently referred and it was an authority, which, in his opinion, was most effectively channelled through his magisterial office. From the outset, Higgins was perhaps the most vociferous and implacable of Best's opponents. This may have had something to do with the fact that, as a relative outsider, he was not so sensitive to Best's public reputation and familial connections.[74] Even reformers like S. W. Nicoll expressed a concern that Higgins was out to destroy Best.[75] Whatever their reservation, however, he was quickly received by the reformers and was greeted as an ally.[76]

Needless to say, the governors of the Asylum took great offence when Higgins published his accusations. One of them remarked that it constituted a 'flagrant

[72] *DNB*. One biographical account claims that '[a]s a politician, his opinions were extreme'. E. Hailstone, ed., *Portraits of Yorkshire worthies selected from the national exhibition of works of art at Leeds, 1868*, II (London, 1869), p. 181.

[73] G. Higgins, *A letter to the Right Honourable Earl Fitzwilliam, lord lieutenant of the West Riding of the County of York respecting the investigation which has lately taken place into the abuses at the York Lunatic Asylum; together with various letters, reports etc. and the new code of regulations for its future management* (Doncaster, 1814), pp. 3–4; *York Herald*, 27 Nov. 1813.

[74] Higgins claimed to know nothing of the Asylum or of its physician. Higgins, *A letter to the Right Honourable Earl Fitzwilliam*, p. 4. [75] Ibid., pp. 49–50. [76] Tuke, *Memoirs of Samuel Tuke*, I, pp. 224–5.

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breach of good manners', whilst another dismissed them as an 'unseemly novelty'.[77] Best and the Asylum's governors attempted to blunt this challenge by inviting Higgins, and the other reformers, to attend the quarterly meeting in December 1813.[78] There they would be given an opportunity to present their case. Both Best and the governors knew that their opponents would be at a crippling disadvantage on entering the 'private' space of the committee room. The reformers were equally aware that their arguments, ill formed and lacking in any real proof, would hold little truck.[79] It is unsurprising therefore, that when this quarterly meeting was held, the governors dismissed them, just as they had dismissed those of Mason and his associates some twenty-five years before. As with Mason, they censured Higgins for his breach of protocol in appealing to the public through the newspapers:

> Resolved, That whilst the Governors are at all times ready and anxious to promote an inquiry into the supposed existence of any abuse in the conduct of this institution, they cannot but regret the mode by which an 'ex-parte' statement of this case, which has come this day under consideration, has been circulated in several Newspapers previous to an opportunity being afforded to the Governors of a regular investigation on the grounds of complaint.[80]

Despite this setback, the reformers continued to push their case through an increasingly competitive and radical local press. As we have already observed, their principal desire was to subject the Asylum to 'public' scrutiny. As such, they consistently demanded the introduction of visitors to monitor the condition of the patients and regulate the conduct of the staff.

Visitation within charitable medical institutions has received little attention from historians, but it is clear that, in this context at least, it had far-reaching consequences for medical authority, and, by extension, medical identity. The concept was by no means new. From its opening in 1777, the governors had elected a committee to investigate the running of the Asylum. However, as with most aspects of the Asylum's administration, it appears that visitation was subject to Hunter's authority, and he was often appointed as one of the visitors himself.[81] Moreover, it was evidently far from thorough. When asked by the parliamentary select committee whether the governors ever inspected the patients' quarters, Best replied: '[t]hat I cannot say; they examined the beer and the bread; there was a *repugnance* on the part of the Governors to enter the rooms where the patients were confined'.[82]

[77] Corrector, *A few free remarks on Mr Godfrey Higgins' publications respecting the York Lunatic Asylum* (York, 1814), p. 13; *Incontestable proofs*, pp. 96–7.

[78] *York Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1813.

[79] *York Chronicle*, 18 Nov. 1813.

[80] Higgins, *A letter to the Right Honourable Earl Fitzwilliam*, appendix pp. 16–17; *York Herald*, 4 Dec. 1813.

[81] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 22–3.

[82] *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee appointed to consider of provisions being made for the better regulation of madhouses, in England*, p. 144. Emphasis added.

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The reformers called for a markedly different system of visitation. Significantly, they maintained that medical practitioners, especially those actually engaged at the asylum, should play no role. Such practitioners, they argued, had an 'interest' in the institution and could not therefore be regarded as objective witnesses. As Steven Shapin has observed for an earlier period, notions of credibility were inextricably linked to social reputation.[83] The reformers' argument ran counter to a public medical identity founded on notions of gentility and disinterested benevolence. It assumed that medical practitioners were not disinterested, but were motivated by financial imperatives. Most importantly perhaps, this proviso challenged practitioners' authority over the 'medical space' of the Asylum. Not all the reformers were agreed on the form that visitation should take. Higgins felt that, as the representatives of public authority, magistrates, like him, should investigate public asylums, just as they had the legal right to investigate private ones. Nicoll and Tuke, on the other hand, favoured the appointment of 'responsible' and 'disinterested' laymen and women, doubtless drawn from the same group of self-selecting philanthropists to which they belonged. Regardless of their differences, all were agreed that this responsibility should not fall to the governors, or their medical lackeys. Instead, Best, and the apothecary, Atkinson, were themselves to be subjected to regular and thorough surveillance, for as Nicoll claimed, 'the keeper must himself be kept'.[84] This system of visitation was also to go much further than previous forms. In a later work on the subject, Nicoll characterized earlier visitations by governors as inefficient in part because of their genteel manners. These men, he argued: '[I]n some measure converse … [and] out of politeness, keep together, never going on before the head person in the company; and on the whole, saunter along, half in attention, and seeing thoroughly into nothing.'[85]

In contrast, the ideal visitor was a 'no nonsense … man of business', preferably a 'respectable tradesmen'. Uninhibited by refined manners, this visitor would be able to baffle the efforts of the asylum staff to conceal abuse and neglect: '[H]e must have reached the garret, whilst he was yet thought to remain in the kitchen, be in the airing-court before the keeper had locked up the cell he has scarce left.'

Not only was he to be a man of action, but he was also to possess a keen eye and a hardy constitution: 'He must not be a man of *refined niceness*; but firmly endure, both in eye, ear and nostril, what an ordinary man would shrink from with horror.'[86]

Nicoll anticipated the antagonism that such a form of visitation would engender. He remarked that both the governors and the medical staff would resent having their 'private' institution invaded by 'strangers', especially if that stranger was 'some tradesman from the next street'.[87] Yet for Nicoll, such anxiety was a

[83] S. Shapin, *A social history of truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England* (Chicago, 1994).

[84] S. W. Nicoll, *An enquiry into the present state of visitation in asylums for the reception of the insane and into the modes by which such visitation may be improved* (London, 1828), p. 3.

[85] Ibid., p. 64. [86] Ibid., p. 75. Emphasis added. [87] Ibid., p. 74.

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positive advantage. As in the political and social realms, it was only through the invasive surveillance of like-minded middle-class reformers that abuse and corruption could be eradicated. These men were to be the physical manifestation of what he described as the 'voice of the public'.[88] Yet for medical practitioners, such as Best and Atkinson, visitation posed a direct threat to the dominion which they exercised over the Asylum. In challenging their competence, and in subjecting them to the authority of magistrates and tradesman, these reforms turned them into little more than servants and, as such, were an affront to their self-professed identities as gentlemen.

In December 1813, an incident occurred that made the prospects of reform ever more real. That month, a number of the reformers discovered a clause in the rules of the Asylum that allowed anyone subscribing more than £20 to become a governor. Approximately forty-five individuals took advantage of this provision and secured seats in the committee room. These 'new' governors, as they termed themselves, included most of the leading reformers. Amongst their number were Samuel Tuke and his grandfather, William, Godfrey Higgins, S. W. Nicoll, the evangelical solicitors, William and Jonathan Gray, and the Unitarian minister, Charles Wellbeloved.[89] In infiltrating the Asylum, these reformers blurred the lines between the public and the private. Conversations which had previously taken place within the 'private' space of the committee room were now communicated to the local newspapers. Needless to say, the election of these men was greatly resented by many of the older governors. This was due in part to the fact that as outsiders, they had adopted positions which opposed the existing administration. However, this resentment also had religious and class dimensions. One of the senior governors, and one of Best's most vocal supporters, was Edward Vernon Harcourt, the archbishop of York, and figurehead of York's Anglican community. Most of the other senior governors also came from established Anglican families. The reformers, on the other hand, were mostly dissenters or evangelicals. Thus, when the reformers later proposed that a chaplain be appointed to the asylum, one of the clerical governors reportedly commented that they might have 'some mad Methodist perhaps'.[90] Furthermore, whereas many of the old governors, like Earl Fitzwilliam, were established, wealthy members of local society, many of the reformers were socially inferior. This is not to say that they were not respectable. S. W. Nicoll, for example, was a leading member of the corporation, and the Grays were a prominent, if recently established, York family. Nevertheless, as members of a largely urban commercial class, there was an evident degree of social snobbery in their pejorative nickname of the 'two guinea governors'.[91] Indeed, Nicoll and Higgins were allegedly taunted that their donations of £20 'did not make them gentlemen'.[92]

[88] Ibid., p. 23. [89] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 33–4. [90] Ibid., pp. 70–1.
[91] E. Gray, *Papers and diaries of a York family, 1764–1839* (London, 1927), p. 156.
[92] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 98.

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By the end of 1813, the reformers had secured a majority of seats on the governing committee; in early 1814 they extended their authority even further. In March, Godfrey Higgins was in York for the Assizes. While in town, he paid a surprise visit to the Asylum. Acting as the very embodiment of Nicoll's ideal visitor, he forced his way past the servants and into the medical domain of the patients' quarters. In a language charged with associations of privacy and secrecy, he claimed that he had stumbled across a door 'of a retired appearance … which was almost concealed by another opening upon it'. In a remarkable incident, Higgins 'ordered' that the door be opened and when the keeper refused, he threatened him with a nearby poker.[93] Upon this, the key was produced and the space opened up for Higgins's 'investigation'. Higgins's description of the 'cells' he found beyond this door is reminiscent of the moralistic language employed by other contemporary social investigators in describing the living conditions of the poor. In a vivid rendering of filth and squalor, he wrote that:

> On entering the first cell [of four], I found it in a state dreadful beyond description: some miserable bedding was lying on straw, which was daubed wet with excrement and urine; the boarded floor was perfectly saturated with filth; the walls also besmeared with excrement; the round air hole, about eight inches in diameter, partly filled with it – this cell was about eight feet and a half square, perfectly dark when the door was shut and the stench almost intolerable.[94]

Higgins published his findings in both the *York Herald* and the *Doncaster Gazette*. He described the Asylum as being in a 'shocking state', and made frequent references to it as a 'private' and 'secret' space. He portrayed himself as a man opening this 'private' space to public scrutiny, claiming that '[w]ith unhallowed hand, I have violently torn aside the veil which concealed the secrets of *this filthy temple* of MOLOCH'.[95]

Higgins's opponents questioned by what authority he had entered the Asylum, let alone threatened the staff. One characterized him as a 'prying mischief-maker' and claimed that the law did not endow magistrates with the power to 'interfere' in the affairs of the Asylum.[96] Another stated that had he been present, he 'would *smack* the door in his face and drive him to his *legal* redress', adding '[t]ell me not of Mr H's thoughts, let him show his *authority*, or he may as well be silent'.[97] Higgins's actions were most keenly felt by Best. In invading the 'medical space' of the Asylum, Higgins had directly challenged his authority. In a letter to the *Herald*, Best therefore accused him of launching an 'attack … personally and particularly levelled at me'.[98]

[93] Higgins, *A letter to the Right Honourable Earl Fitzwilliam*, pp. 13–14; *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee*, p. 1.

[94] Higgins, *A letter to the Right Honourable Earl Fitzwilliam*, p. 14; *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee*, pp. 1, 10–11.

[95] G. Higgins, *A letter to the committee of the House of Commons appointed to inquire into the abuses in madhouses* (1815), p. 58.

[96] *Incontestable proofs*, pp. 104, 35.

[97] Corrector, *A few free remarks*, pp. 10–11.

[98] *York Herald*, 2 Apr. 1814.

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In a series of meetings throughout 1814, Best's authority and that of his assistant, Charles Atkinson, came under increasing scrutiny. As his authority was called into question, so too was his public reputation. As Nicoll observed, '[h]e [Best] always considered his own character to be involved in the past state of the Asylum'.[99] Best still had influential supporters amongst the older governors, and it is striking how frequently they appealed to gentility in defending him. Higgins accused them of blazoning forth the names of his 'friends' in an 'undignified' manner, and alleged that they sought to defend him by using 'unmeaning phrases' such as 'gentlemanly man' and 'man of unquestionable honour'.[100] However, Best's friends were fighting a losing battle. Although the committee appointed to investigate Higgins's 'cells' found that Best had had 'no INTENTION' of hiding them from the governors, they also passed a resolution thanking the magistrate for his exertions.[101] Moreover, this committee appointed the first visitors to inspect the Asylum in twenty-seven years.[102] The medical hegemony established by Hunter, and enjoyed by his successor, had been effectively destroyed.

Events came to a head in August 1814 at the Annual Court of Governors. Significantly, the meeting was not held in the committee room at the Asylum, but in York's Guildhall. Whilst this was partly due to the large numbers attending the meeting, it also expressed the reformers' desire to 'open up' the Asylum to public scrutiny. The meeting started reasonably well for Best. His supporters took the initiative and managed to secure him a salary of 300 guineas a year, in lieu of fees. He was also allowed to retain his private asylum in Acomb. However, a blow was dealt to his medical authority when it was resolved that the friends of patients might call any 'regular Physician' to attend them. From then on, things went downhill for him. Higgins reiterated his demand that all the staff of the Asylum be dismissed and their positions declared vacant. Best's supporters claimed that this was 'a personal attack upon the Doctor', but he was nevertheless compelled to take the stand. Under interrogation, Best revealed that he had been taking fees from patients for many years, but claimed that this practice had been established by Hunter and was known to the governors. On this admission, Best was subjected to the withering criticism of Earl Fitzwilliam and his son, Lord Milton. According to Jonathan Gray, Best was 'baited', and 'stood there like a culprit palliating these accusations as well as he could, but compelled to answer and confess that he had pocketed the money'.[103] Without such aristocratic support Best was highly vulnerable. Lord Milton moved to support Higgins's motion, stating that if they were to 'pounce on the head', then the physician must be dismissed.[104] In the end, however, Best had enough supporters to ensure that he was retained. The other members of staff were not so lucky.[105] All the servants,

[99] Higgins, *A letter to the committee of the House of Commons*, appendix, p. 1.
[100] Ibid., p. 57. [101] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 62–3. [102] Ibid., p. 64.
[103] Gray, *Papers and diaries of a York family*, p. 159.
[104] Gray, *History of the York Lunatic Asylum*, p. 85. [105] Ibid., p. 85.

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the steward, and the apothecary were dismissed. Charles Atkinson, the apothecary, was acutely aware of the damage that had been done to his standing. As a relatively low-status surgeon-apothecary and a Catholic to boot, Atkinson's public reputation was especially fragile and dependent upon a carefully fashioned image of medico-gentility. Even some of the reformers were sympathetic to his plight. Gray noted that 'Atkinson is to be pitied.'[106] Others were critical of Higgins for 'exulting in the sufferings of a civilised, well-meaning man'.[107] Soon after his dismissal, Atkinson published a vitriolic attack on Higgins, and a spirited defence of his reputation. He claimed that he had been assaulted with 'blackguard language' and treated like a 'vagabond servant'. He also cast aspersions on the social status of his reformist opponents, dismissing them as a 'vulgar tribe' and as 'low-bred, foul and vulgar carcasses'. Atkinson maintained that he had been the victim of 'party malice' and had paid the price for being a Roman Catholic. He concluded, however, by defending his identity as a gentleman: 'My early life was schooled with gentlemen! I am the son of a gentleman! My education was that of a gentleman! And my profession is so.'[108]

Even if Best had not been sacked, his was a Pyrrhic victory. The Annual Court found that 'no criminality' attached to him for the embezzlement of Asylum's funds. However, this was hardly a positive vindication of his honour, integrity, or gentility. Even though he was retained as physician, Best's public reputation and his authority over the Asylum lay in tatters. Gray observed that his supporters 'give it out that Best is completely acquitted of blame', but maintained that their claims 'will hardly make the public believe that an escape from Botany Bay or the hulks, which some of our great Governors seem to think he merits, is any cause for triumph'.[109] Indeed, so tenuous was Best's reputation that he later wrote a threatening letter to the editor of the *York Herald*, the politically radical William Hargrove, stating that if 'one syllable' of libel against him appeared in his paper, he would take him to court.[110]

The reformers' victory had been total. At a meeting in September 1814, a committee was appointed that included S. W. Nicoll, Jonathan Gray, and two members of the Tuke family. The first visitors were also named, amongst whom were Charles Wellbeloved and William Tuke. This group of reforming philanthropists had opened up the 'private' space of the Asylum to their scrutiny and authority. From now on, the Asylum, once dominated by the county gentry, would be administered by a group of urban dissenters and political radicals and the physician's dominion, once total, would be subjected to penetrative lay surveillance and regulation. Meanwhile, Best's public reputation, already tarnished, was to suffer further. In 1815, those who were agitating for asylum reform managed to secure a parliamentary select committee to investigate the state of madhouses in England and Wales. Although the committee was politically

[106] Gray, *Papers and diaries of a York family*, p. 159. [107] Corrector, *A few free remarks*, p. 14.
[108] C. Atkinson, *Retaliation; or hints to some of the governors of the York Lunatic Asylum* (York, 1817), pp. 4, 5, 6. [109] Gray, *Papers and diaries of a York family*, p. 159. [110] *York Herald*, 24 Dec. 1814.

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heterogeneous, it was dominated by reformers, including Samuel Whitbread and George Rose as well as Lord Milton, the increasingly politically radical MP and governor of the York Asylum. Best was soon called to give evidence to the committee. Things did not go well for him, however, and his combative manner alienated even potentially sympathetic members of the panel.[111] Halfway through the proceedings, Best tendered his resignation, citing ill health. A long-suffering consumptive, he left England for Nice. There he remained for eighteen months before his death in 1817.

## IV

The reform of the Lunatic Asylum was the most visible, and perhaps the most aggressive, example of the subjection of charitable institutions and their medical officers to a lay 'public' authority, but it was not an isolated incident. Events at the York Asylum were mirrored by those at Bedlam, where, in the aftermath of the 1815 select committee, the apothecary, John Haslam, was sacked and the physician, Thomas Monro, forced to resign.[112] Moreover, in the 1810s, those associated with the reforming coterie that had 'opened up' the Asylum sought to do the same for a number of other local medical institutions.

We have already seen how, in 1819, Alexander Mather and William Belcombe were taken to court by their former charge, Jane Horsman, for false imprisonment and trespass. According to the *Courant*, the trial 'excited an extraordinary degree of interest in the City of York and many parts of the county', due in part to 'the respectability of some of the party'. The archbishop of York secured a seat next to the judge, whilst the body of the courtroom was 'crowded beyond description – the galleries … ready to bend under the weight and numbers of spectators'.[113] At the conclusion of the trial, the Bulmers, as well as Mather, Matterson, and Belcombe, were found guilty on both counts (Helen Scott was acquitted). However, rather than the £2,000 damages, which Horsman had requested, the defendants were ordered to pay a mere £50. Yet despite the token sum, and the fact that the judge had noted that 'no improper conduct appears to have taken place on the part of Dr Belcombe and Mr Mather', the humiliation was keenly felt.[114]

Mather was particularly offended that Jonathan Gray, with whom he had a 'private friendship', should have acted against him, both during the incident itself, and as a witness in court.[115] Revealingly, in his attack upon Gray, he appealed to the protocols of civil gentility. He claimed that Gray had 'transgressed the limits of civilised life' and that, rather than acting with 'Christianlike and gentlemanlike liberality', he had conducted himself in a manner 'inconsistent with true urbanity of manners'.[116] He repeatedly sought to remind Gray of

[111] Digby, *From York Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 22–3.
[112] Scull, *Museums of madness*, p. 78.
[113] *York Courant*, 9 Aug. 1819.
[114] *A full and impartial report of the case of Jane Horsman*, p. 135.
[115] Mather, *A plain narrative of facts*, p. 35.
[116] Ibid., pp. 42, 48, 52.

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the irreparable damage he had inflicted on both his social and vocational reputation. Referring to Belcombe and himself as 'medical gentlemen', and 'men … who … have maintained a highly respectable rank in society', he asked '[w]hat reparation have you offered to British subjects – members of society as respectable as yourself and Dickens – for classing them with felons … [and] aiming a deadly blow at their *social* and *professional* existence?'.[117]

In his defence, Gray, who had taken an active part in the reform of the public asylum, claimed that he had acted, in both circumstances, from a commitment to *principle*, rather than from personal animosity. In a letter to a colleague, he maintained that 'the characters of Dr Belcombe and Mr Mather stand so high that it cannot be suspected that they have acted from any mercenary motives'. Rather, they acted on the 'high, but mistaken, notion of the prerogatives of the keepers of Madhouses'. However, despite Gray's attempts to draw a distinction between principles and persons, it is clear that for Mather, as for many contemporary practitioners, the link between 'prerogatives' (i.e. social authority) and public identity was an inseparable one:

> Was it to be supposed that Dr Belcombe, on such an application [Gray's demand that Horsman be released], could forget his own *respectability*, and be so pusillanimous as to say, 'Oh yes! Sir, since you desire it, I will set her at liberty directly. 'Tis true I have received a Certificate, and I took her into the House as a person 'disturbed in her mind' etc. and I have found her so; but I will concede that I have done wrong when an Attorney calls me to account'?[118]

## V

In this article I have sought, through the medium of the York Lunatic Asylum, to unite two distinct historiographical traditions. On the one hand, there is a body of medical historical literature which continues to view asylum reform through the analytical prism of madness, and, on the other, there are mainstream historical accounts of early nineteenth-century reform which, with their traditional focus on the explicitly political issue of the franchise, have, until recently, tended to restrict consideration of its wider conceptual scope. However, as I have demonstrated, the true historical significance of early nineteenth-century asylum reform can only be understood if we cut across such historiographical boundaries. Post-Foucauldian medical historical scholarship has tended to see events at York as the victory of a particular therapeutic and ideological regime, namely moral therapy, wherein the mad were freed from physical shackles of restraint whilst being simultaneously subject to the internalized shackles of a domesticated bourgeois consciousness. And yet, whilst it would be disingenuous to claim that asylum reform was not *about* madness, it was only so inasmuch as prison reform was *about* criminals or anti-slavery was *about* the economics of sugar production.

[117] Ibid., pp. 9, 14, 42. Emphasis added.

[118] Ibid., pp. 33–4. Emphasis added.

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After all, in their public representations at least, the reformers of the York asylum did not, as Foucault would have it, seek to subject the inmates to routine surveillance. Rather, it was the medical staff and keepers who were to be monitored and the administration which was to be rendered publicly 'visible' and accountable. The reform of the York Lunatic Asylum was thus as much about controlling the wellsprings of social, cultural, and political authority as it was about controlling the mad and it should therefore be of as much interest to historians of the 'age of reform' as it has been to historians of psychiatry. Indeed, the events I have described can be seen to embody a fundamental transformation in the cultures and practices of reform in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. As Philip Harling has suggested, later eighteenth-century assaults on 'Old Corruption', such as those initiated by Wyvil, were primarily concerned with 'economical reform', with ridding the state of jobbery and financial inefficiency.[119] Such concerns were clearly evident in Mason's and his associates' initial objection to Hunter's proposed salary in the late 1780s. However, with the events of 1813 to 1815 we witness the emergence of a rather different, and much wider, conception of reform, one that sought nothing less than the restructuring of social and political relations. It was, after all, no coincidence that the reformers would later couch these events in terms of 'revolution', rather than 'improvement' or 'amelioration'. Let us not be reticent about this. Despite the work of Dror Wahrman in nuancing entrenched assumptions about the inexorable 'rise of the middle class', most of the reformers of the York Lunatic Asylum *were* drawn from the 'middling ranks' of society.[120] They were, as we have seen, conscious of this fact, and of their relative social and political marginality. So too were their opponents. Moreover, in their stated opposition to nepotism, corruption, and abuse which they saw as the necessary consequence of the informal, oligarchical administration of the asylum, they anticipated later radical and Whig-radical assaults on the social and political hegemony of the aristocracy which would, through the course of the 1820s and early 1830s, come to form the basis of middle-class political identity. The reform of the York Lunatic Asylum not only prefigured the political conflict of the post-Napoleonic era; it also signalled the decline of gentility and the rise of commerce in the habitus of English urban society, a process which transformed the terrain of political and social discourse. During the late eighteenth century, York's political culture had been dominated by Charles Wentworth, marquess of Rockingham, a wealthy landowner and former prime minister. In contrast, by the 1830s the key political figures were the Tory, George Hudson, a former linen draper, and his Whig opponents, James Meek, a Methodist banker, George Leeman, a Congregationalist lawyer, and the Quaker, Samuel Tuke, who was, we should remind ourselves, a tea and coffee merchant.

[119] Harling, 'Rethinking "old corruption"'; idem, *The waning of 'old corruption'*; idem, 'Parliament, the state and "old corruption"'.

[120] Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class*.

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At an even higher level of historical metanarrative, if the administration of the asylum functioned as the microcosmic expression of wider social, cultural, and political concerns, then its reform in the 1810s also has significant implications for Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere. In terms of voluntary association, civil interaction, and even in its appeals to the 'public good', the *ancien régime* of the York Asylum appears to embody many of the qualities of Habermas's public sphere of discourse. And yet, in its attachment to social reputation and status, as well as in its reliance upon oligarchy and elite patronage, it seems rooted in much earlier forms of cultural organization and practice. By contrast, the reformers' collaborative actions, appeals to the public, and use of the local press, suggest, if anything, a maturation of the public sphere into a truly discursive arena for the construction of 'public opinion'. And yet, here too, the picture is blurred, for the forms of surveillance, accountability, and regulation, which they advocated, seem to anticipate the interventionist state which, Habermas claims, marked the demise of the 'true' public sphere.[121] In early nineteenth-century asylum reform, then, we can perhaps detect a bridge between the liberal constitutional and social welfare states and between the Georgian world of voluntary association and that Victorian world of 'scientific' expertise and state management.

Finally, this article has also sought to move away from the traditional focus on the mad in order to demonstrate how the cultural shifts embodied in the reform of the York Lunatic Asylum affected the social identities of medical practitioners associated with such institutions. At one level, the introduction of surveillance and regulation challenged the social authority of the medical practitioner as gentleman, and, at another, the demise of civil gentility and polite association and the rise of political factionalism in the years immediately preceding the Napoleonic wars occluded the social, cultural, and ideological channels through which medico-gentility was constructed. John Pickstone has detected similar patterns in Manchester with the medico-ethical work of Thomas Percival.[122] As in that case, Atkinson's and Mather's vigorous defence of their status as gentleman can be seen, not as a testament to the continued cultural resonance of medico-gentility, but, in their articulation of what had once been unspoken, of its untenability. Indeed, Higgins's reference to 'unmeaning phrases', such as 'gentlemanly man', suggest that, by the 1810s, it had become, for some at least, culturally unintelligible.[123]

The events at York and Clifton were therefore commensurate with a shift in the trajectory of medical identity. Whilst they doubtless continued to think of themselves as benevolent and respectable citizens, after the 1810s the social performances and rhetoric of medical practitioners began increasingly to emphasize

[121] J. Habermas, trans. T. Burger, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Boston, MA, 1989), pp. 222–34; G. Eley, 'Nations, publics, and political cultures: placing Habermas in the nineteenth century', in C. Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (Boston, MA, 1992).

[122] Pickstone, 'Thomas Percival'.

[123] Higgins, *A letter to the committee of the House of Commons*, p. 57.

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their role as medical experts and public servants dedicated to the health and welfare of the social body, rather than as local gentlemen of liberal tastes and education. In York, these alternative forms of identity and performance were fashioned through their response to the cholera epidemic of 1832, the formation of the York Medical Society in the same year, and the subsequent establishment of the York Medical School in 1834. Early nineteenth-century asylum reform was, in other words, of crucial importance in the construction of medical modernity.

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