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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Valentine Greatrakes

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Supernaturalism

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Abstract

Commentators have at times overstated the reach and impact of scientific rationalism at the close of the seventeenth century, and in doing so have been led to underestimate the links between scientific and magical thinking lasting until at least the early decades of the eighteenth century. Valentine Greatrakes was a miracle healer, pranotherapist, esoteric and magical provocateur of emotions who gained widespread popularity in Restoration England. His influence on irrational crowds provides evidence of both a conscious and an unconscious desire to recover the atmosphere of magical and charismatic sociability.

In 1666 Valentine Greatrakes (Affane, County of Waterford, 14 February 1628 – 28 November 1682) achieved ephemeral but widespread fame as a miracle healer: he was believed to have touched and restored to health thousands of men, women, and children suffering from a large range of acute diseases and chronic conditions. Contemporary observer Lyonell Beacher testifies that he saw: '[Greatrakes] touch many of the Kings Evil [...] and many also whom he had cured of that Distemper, came to acknowledge it, which is the utmost reward he accepts from any: The same day I saw him touch 60'.¹ The richly symbolic gestures of the laying on of hands, with its ready-made power to evoke the heavier emotional moods of awe, pathos, melancholy, terror and horror, proved to be attractive to large audiences. Greatrakes's healing the king's evil by touch wore away what remained of the belief in divine kingship already shaken by a cycle of upheavals of the established order marked by the civil wars and the Restoration of Charles II (1660).

Although a minor event amid the turmoil of Restoration England, Greatrakes's popularity as a miracle worker, disproving the Church of England's doctrine that miracles had ceased and reducing the royal mystique of the King's touch, influenced public opinion towards the most famous miracle healer of the age, King Charles II himself. Greatrakes's encroaching on the prerogative of the monarch and his past as a veteran of the Parliamentarian army, as well as the origin of his healing 'impulse' in 1662, two years after the Restoration, are trivial proof to indicate his healing activities were planned as a political or religious protest. However, some 'Low-church' Anglicans were more than happy that Greatrakes was determined 'to abate the pride of papists that make Miracles the undeniable Manifesto of the truth of their Church'² According to Hebert Croft for instance, the Bishop of Gloucester, Greatrakes's cures were 'beyond all the power of Nature.' As for John Beale, a Somerset rector, these were 'convincing evidence of the powerful name of our Lord Jesus, in a season that needed some evidence, that all revelations were not fanatical'.³

Valentine Greatrakes truly was a celebrity in Restoration England. That Greatrakes was '[t]he great discourse now at the Coffee-Houses and every where' in 1666, when he was in London to perform his prodigious cures, is testified by Joseph Glanvill, in a letter to Robert Hunt esq.:

Mr. G[reatrakes] the famous Irish Stroker, [...] undergoes various censures here, some take him to be a Conjurer, and some an Impostor, but others again adore him as an Apostle. I confess I think the man is free from all design, of a very agreeable conversation, not addicted to any Vice, nor to any Sect, or Party, but is, I believe, a sincere Protestant. I was three weeks together with him at my *Lord Conways*, and saw him, I think, lay his hands upon a thousand persons; and *really* there is some thing in it more then *ordinary*.⁴

As Glanvill reports, during Greatrakes's stay at Conway House, more than one thousand sufferers received his touch. Greatrakes arrived at Ragley Hall (in Warwickshire) in January 1666 to cure Edward Conway's wife, Viscountess Anne, a Quaker convert deeply interested in the intellectual life of Restoration England, afflicted by chronic headaches. The residence

of the Conways 'housed one of the greatest private libraries in the land and was the unofficial weekend retreat of half the members of the nascent Royal Society'. Although Greatrakes failed to heal Lady Anne, he reached the attention of the 'Conways' resident alchemist [...] the Dutch Paracelsan physician Mercury von Helmont',⁵ as well as of the *Virtuosi*, i.e. the network of leading philosophers gathered by Anne.⁶ Most notable, among these, were the chief of the Cambridge Platonists Henry More (a close and lasting friend of Viscountess Anne), Ralph Cudworth (author of *The True Intellectual System of the World*, 1678), Benjamin Whichcote, and the Dean of Connors George Rust. All these men of culture and leading thinkers of that time 'watched the Stroker in action, and all of them believed on empirical grounds in the genuine nature of the medical cures reported' (Fleming 411). These influential men were deeply impressed by Greatrakes's personal charisma and apparent gift and spread the news in their numerous letters and correspondences of the queer wonder throughout the country (Duffy 259). 'Greatrix the Stroker [was] Believed in by Boyle',⁷ the celebrated President of the newly founded Royal Society, and he puzzled and bewitched English society. Even the King, Charles II,⁸ as well as other eminent figures at court and in the various institutions of government and learning (Glanvill 86), devoted their attention to Greatrakes's method of gathering together ordinary people, thus favouring social concord. The agreement that was reached on the enthusiastically positive judgment not only from the crowds of his followers, but virtually with no exception⁹ from the influential personalities of the time (Royalists as well as Republicans) was particularly relevant.

Greatrakes 'never sought after' the sick; rather it was God that 'alwayes sent Patients' to him (Greatrakes 25), to such an extent that at his home in Affane, Greatrakes complained that he would have had 'no time to follow [his] own occasions, nor enjoy the company of [his] Family and Friends' (Greatrakes 35). God sent 'great crowds' to him (Greatrakes 36). These crowds were made up by those individuals who had failed to ensure their security and freedom (including Republicans and Quakers) and were looking for new ways to protect themselves within the Restoration restrictive system. Since they were unable to find places of aggregation in the overall institutional framework, they 'applied themselves' to Greatrakes in a shapeless, scattered mass (Greatrakes 25). The crowds often enlarged and were so unruly that Greatrakes feared for his life. At Worcester, for example, in front of such a commotion, he felt he was 'like to be bruised to death' (Greatrakes 36).

By the summer of 1666, weary of the restlessness of London, he returned to his small property in Affane. However, he kept on healing the sick throughout his entire life, and kept in touch with members of the elitarian group he had joined in England. He went on exchanging lengthy letters with the magistrate Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, one of his 'leading patrons in London, and the President of the Royal Society Robert Boyle, 'one of [his] admirers' (Elmer 7). Greatrakes was thus a perceptive social net-worker as well as an *ante-litteram* self-promoting publicist: he carried out journalistic activities dealing with the collection, processing and dissemination of news and information through various mass communication channels (such as printed matter, correspondence). In his 1688 letter to Robert Boyle, which constitute his biographical *Account*, he included an extensive section with all the collected *data* (letters and testimonials) for all of his successful healings, signed by honourable witnesses such as Boyle and Godfrey themselves, Henry More and Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth and the poet Andrew Marvell, all of who bore 'Testimony to the

Truth of what appeared, and to encourage [Greatrakes] to give this Account to the World' (Greatrakes 96).

This enthusiasm surrounding the appearance of Valentine Greatrakes highlights the new social climate that pervaded Britain and reveals the multifaceted attitudes towards miraculous healing in Restoration England. Moreover it gives us a glimpse into the profound and secret learning of the alchemists — who were not all, it should be said, unenlightened pseudoscientists. Some of them accidentally made discoveries about interactions between chemical compounds in their quest to transmute base metals into precious ones.

The period of political upheaval between the establishment of a Republic and the Restoration of the Monarchy was also one in which long-standing political and religious ideas and beliefs were increasingly challenged by the emergence of a scientific, rationalist and empiricist culture. Still, science and faith were not regarded as mutually exclusive at this time. Neither the empiricists nor the Enlightenment natural philosophers were necessarily materialists, atheists or agnostics. Being under the influence of the mechanistic materialism of the scientific revolution was not to dismiss all sense of a spiritual relation between humanity and the natural world. Aristocrat and natural philosopher Robert Boyle,¹⁰ reflected deeply on philosophical and theological issues related to science. His complex and contradictory personality was fascinated by alchemy and magic. Boyle's special attention devoted to the irrational side of human experience troubled the rational vision he heralded, but without ever falling into a charismatic, esoteric and magical sociability.

The public interest in the wonders produced by Greatrakes who could, temporarily at least, carry masses into a brighter world, reveals not only a continuing urge to seek out traces of the divine in nature, but also the desire to build a form of society that would in its turn acknowledge and reverence the divine, and in doing so reject the scientific materialism of the early seventeenth century. Far from being antithetical, science and spiritualist pseudo-science pursued similar concerns: the commitment to truth, the recognition of universal law, belief in the unity of and interrelatedness within Nature, the role of the imagination in constructing knowledge, the tolerance of contradiction and the openness to mystery – all these were the values of the prevailing scientific culture, but they were implicitly assimilated into a wide range of pseudo-science:

To reduce the relations between science and religion to a polarity between reason and superstition is inadmissible, even for that period [of Empiricism] when it had such rhetorical force [...] Although certain scientific discoveries could be invoked to support a materialist philosophy, they were usually susceptible to less radical interpretations. And in the confrontation between skepticism and Christianity, science could still be on the side of the angels – especially in England where arguments for design retained a strategic role. Whereas in France, the materialist La Mettrie would claim that the study of nature made only unbelievers, the contrary claim of Robert Boyle, that one

could only be an atheist if one had not studied nature, was the more common sentiment in the English-speaking world.¹¹

Even in a period characterized by scientific progress and rationalistic philosophy, the occult was thus in great demand: miracles,¹² superstition and witchcraft were phenomena widely shared by public opinion and diffused in seventeenth-century Britain. These phenomena fascinated the masses. Although George Rust writes to Joseph Glanvill: '[Greatrakes's] cure seldom succeeds without reiterated touches, his Patients often relapse, he fails frequently, he can do nothing where there is any Decay in nature, and many Distempers are not at all obedient to his touch' (Glanvill 86), however most of his performances rolled amazingly towards its predetermined cheerful ending of the rehabilitation of the injured. His audiences were made to feel that they had witnessed a significant, almost a religious spectacle; they returned to the real world, somehow enlightened, or at least awed, by the wonders they had seen. The amazing Valentine appeared ennobled by his ability to control Evil by conjuring mysterious or magic forces. In general, Greatrakes's performances were an elaborate tribute to love, life and union among his followers.¹³ After all, he lived in a context permeated by the Royal Society Masonic ideals whose funding principles were tolerance and brotherhood. And many alchemists were more interested in transmutation as a metaphor for the elevation of the human soul than in striking it rich by means of hocus pocus.

Thought of as a demon or an angel, or an 'Apostle' by the locals, he becomes for us one of the numinous spectres of the medieval romances, reminding us of the traditional romance motifs of the revival of life and fertility in a previously barren land, namely the wounded social conditions of the British people of that time (body politic of Britain (See Elmer, 2–3, 10, 40, 91–92, 109–110). It is thus no wonder that Greatrakes's actions were received enthusiastically by many prominent figures in church and state, who were eager to seek reconciliation and union in the early years of the Restoration.¹⁴ '[S]ickening division' (Elmer 74) characterized society which did not miraculously find a quick cohesion around a popular leadership of the entire nation after the Restoration of Charles II. The outcome of these antagonistic dynamics is channelled into the search for traditional spiritual values ??to cling to, in the lack of stability of social, economic, political and cultural values. These social and political dynamics contributed to a period of uncertainty, in which people found themselves caught up in the irrational behaviour of crowds. The bewildered and disrupted crowds found refuge in the forms of naturalistic spiritualism previously opposed by forms of mechanistic materialism. In this phase of transition, in the absence of a new political, social and economic power based on the popular aggregation of the masses, a new path could be found. This new path led to the abandonment of the presuppositions of rational politics and naturalistic science, with their consequent materialism and reduction of spirituality.

Valentine Greatrakes emerges as a miracle worker within this new social climate in which the study of nature, the deepening of its mysteries, its secrets and the unveiling of its profound laws encouraged a higher spirituality. The supernatural was thus often invoked to provide a kind of help that mere historical events and mortals' actions could not produce. This reliance on exterior forces, whether purely seraphic, demonic or 'masked' in the form of fate or

chance, turned obscure aspiring leaders, like Valentine Greatrakes, into public figures. A magical and charismatic sociability was spreading in society around saviour and esoteric characters such as Valentine Greatrakes.

The sociologist Gustave Lebon, the leading scholar of the psychology of crowds, highlighted in 1895 the irrational states that pervade the actions of a manipulable crowd and alter the rational capacities of individuals.¹⁵ The crowd, subjugated by the charismatic figure of Valentine Greatrakes, identified him with faith in the naturalistic spirituality of a thaumaturge, who with his prodigies aggregated the irrational dynamics of the crowd, in the unresolved transition between the old and the new power. The void of meanings that the common people had crossed in the failure of their own momentum to popular power, after the Restoration of royal authoritarianism, did not allow the passive acceptance of a Restoration that limited the freedoms desired and experienced with the anti-monarchical revolution and the Republic. A particular re-aggregation of the conscience of the crowd was then sought around an atypical character like Valentine Greatrakes who captured the unconscious depths of the masses, attracted by the values of mystery and esoteric freedom rather than spiritual and rational freedom. We may say that, in the case of Valentine Greatrakes, a charismatic sociability developed which was linked to the faith in and the cult of a salvific, esoteric leader.¹⁶ Greatrakes represents a figure who fed the tension to freedom of the crowd, in search of a guide. As the crowd was unable to govern itself, it identified with a character who, whatever his merits or demerits, in any case promised a supernatural capacity to perform miracles of a salvific kind. A transitional solution itself against the disappointment produced by the failing ambition to acquire the rights of freedom of the Republic, before the advent of the rational constitutionalism of the Glorious Revolution (1688). The period of transition from the Restoration of Charles II up to the time of the Glorious Revolution, establishing the constitutional, liberal monarchy of William of Orange, was characterized by figures such as Valentine Greatrakes for their ‘appeal to a wide range of people who for a variety of reasons shared a common concern and anxiety for the fate of church and state in Restoration England’ (Elmer 104).

1. Lyonell Beacher, *Wonders if not miracles, or, A relation of the wonderful performances of Vanlentine Gertrux*. (London: 1665). <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A27152.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, p. 7.

2. Valentine Greatrakes, *A Brief Account of Mr Valentine Greatrak's And DIvers of the Strange Cures By him lately Performed* (London: J. Downing, 1723), p.28

3. See Eamon Duffy, ‘Valentine Greatrakes, the Irish Stroker: Miracle, Science, and Orthodoxy in Restoration England’, *Studies in Church History* (Volume 17: Religion and Humanism, 198), p. 251 – 274, p. 261.

4. Joseph Glanvill, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism* (London: Printed by E. C. for James Collins, at the Kings Head in Westminster-Hall, 1668), p. 84-85.

5. John V. Fleming, ‘Sanative Contagion Among Cambridge Platonists’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (159, no. 4, 2015), p. 409-14, p. 410. Accessed September 3, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26159193>

6. The extensive correspondence kept by Lady Anne can be found in Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Sarah Hutton (eds), *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their Friends 1642-1684* (Oxford University Press, 1930; 1992, chapter five: Valentine Greatrakes).

7. Charles Richard Weld, *A History of the Royal Society, with Memoirs of the Presidents* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1848), p. 72, 90–91.

8. Scepticism towards Greatrakes was expressed by David Lloyd in *Wonders no miracles, or, Mr. Valentine Greatrates gift of healing examined upon occasion of a sad effect of his stroaking*, March the 7, 1665, at one Mr. Cressets house in Charter-house-yard: in a letter to a reverend divine, living near that place, Oxford Text Archive, 2003.
 9. Peter Elmer, *The Miraculous Conformist: Valentine Greatrakes, the Body Politic, and the Politics of Healing in Restoration Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 96.
 10. See Michael Hunter, *Boyle: Between God and Science* (New Haven, Conn./London: Yale University Press, 2009).
 11. John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion. Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 13-14.
 12. See Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).
 13. Greatrakes attributed 'his success to God, publicly expressing gratitude, and inviting the patient to join with him in the act of thanksgiving.' See Benjamin Franklin, *Report of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, And Other Commissioners, Charged by the King of France, with the Examination of the Animal Magnetism, as Now Practised at Paris. Translated from the French. With an Historical Introduction* (London: J. Johnson, 1785).
 14. Many of those who had supported the Royalist cause must have viewed the Restoration as just what its name implies – the restoration of an order which had been briefly interrupted – and have welcomed it. However seditious sects, most notably Quacks and Anabaptists, that had multiplied under Cromwell's Republic, represented significant non-conformist voices in English society. See Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 408-410.
 15. Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* [1895] (Paris: Édition Félix Alcan, 1905), p. 191.
 16. See Brian Cowan, 'Celebrity, Politics and Sociability in Post-Revolutionary England', *La sociabilité en France et en Grande-Bretagne au Siècle des Lumières: L'insociable sociabilité. Résistances et résilience: Tome VI*, dir. Katherine Aske et Kimberley Page-Jones (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2017), p. 165-190, p. 173-177. See also Marc Bloch *Les Rois thaumaturges. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Strasbourg and Paris: Istra; London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1924) and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).
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Further Reading

In the DIGIT.EN.S Anthology

Lyonell Beacher, *Wonders if not miracles, or, A relation of the wonderful performances of Vanlentine Gertrux of Assance neer Youghall in Ireland who cureth all manner of diseases with a stroak of his hand and prayer as is testified by many eare and eye witnesses* (London, 1665), [p. 5-8](#).