

Texts and Documents

A Newly Discovered Manuscript Dedication by Mark Akenside

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Mark Akenside was one of a number of eighteenth-century men who rose to prominence as both a poet and a doctor. He was born in 1721 in Newcastle upon Tyne, and in 1738 attended Edinburgh University, initially to prepare for becoming a Presbyterian clergyman, but switching after a year to the study of medicine. During his student career, he wrote a long philosophical poem, *The pleasures of imagination*, which became one of the most successful poems of its time, going through four editions within a year, and a further four during his lifetime (not counting various pirated editions emanating from Scotland and Ireland). Apparently using the proceeds from this, he travelled to Leiden to complete his MD, as many Edinburgh students did at this date, returning in late May 1744, when he tried, unsuccessfully, to establish himself as a physician.¹

Having failed in this endeavour, he devoted himself to a literary career for the rest of the decade, enjoying various notable successes, although nothing quite on the scale of *The pleasures of imagination*. In the 1750s, however, he turned his attention to medicine once more. He was elected to the Royal Society on 8 February 1753, having obtained in the previous month (4 January) an MD by Mandamus from Cambridge, allowing him to practise legally as a doctor in London.² In 1754, he became a Fellow of the Royal

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*Dr Robin Dix was a lecturer in the Department of English at Durham University, UK. We regret very much that he did not live to see the publication of this article, as it represents the groundbreaking work on Mark Akenside he conducted throughout his academic life. His colleague Dr Virginia Sampson undertook the final preparation of this article for the press.

In order faithfully to introduce the subject, we include Dr Dix's intended introductory note: This article is about a discovery made when I visited the Wellcome Library for the first time, just days after it reopened following the recent major renovation project at the Euston Road premises. The Library reading rooms offer researchers a splendid working environment, and I should like to thank the staff for the prompt, courteous and knowledgeable attention they gave me. In particular I should like to thank Ms Julianne Simpson in the Rare Materials Reading Room for her

expert help. I should also like to thank the staff of the Rare Books Rooms at Edinburgh University Library and the British Library for their help in addressing my queries; Dr Robert Carver at the English Department, Durham University, for checking my Latin translation; and finally, the two anonymous readers whose helpful comments on this article as originally submitted have helped to make it better than it would otherwise have been.

¹ For fuller details of Akenside's university career, and of his failed attempts to establish himself as a physician, first in Northampton, and then in Hampstead, just north of London, see Robin Dix, 'Akenside's university career: the manuscript evidence', *Notes and Queries*, 1985, n.s. 32: 212–15, and *idem*, 'Relations between Mark Akenside and Sir James Stonhouse in Northampton, 1744', *Notes and Queries*, 1995, n.s. 42: 219–26 respectively.

² For Akenside's election to the Royal Society, see the Society's records of 'Certificates of election',

College of Physicians of London, and rose to prominence quickly, giving the Gulstonian Lectures there in 1755 and the Croonian Lectures the following year, by which time he was already one of the College's Censors. In 1759 he was appointed Harveian Orator at the College. It is not known how wide his practice was, but in 1759 he became Physician at St Thomas' Hospital, and the school of Christ's Hospital, and then in 1761 it was announced that he had been appointed Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Charlotte. While continuing to write new poems, and revise his earlier ones, he also began once more to publish medical research, beginning with a paper, 'An account of a blow upon the heart', which he read to the Royal Society in 1763. The following year, he brought out his book-length study, *De dysenteria commentarius*, which remained a standard text for many years; and in 1768, when the Royal College of Physicians brought out the first volume of its *Medical Transactions*, he supported the new publication by contributing three essays, one of which, 'Observations on cancers', constitutes the first detailed description of multiple neurofibromatosis.³ Some early biographers state that Akenside was working on an essay entitled 'Observations on putrid erysipelas' when he died in 1770, but no trace of this piece has ever come to light.⁴

Whatever the size of Akenside's client list may have been, it is clear that his rise to medical prominence in the scientific and medical institutions of the time was fast and assured. Clearly he must have been seen as producing high quality work, but a further factor in his rise to distinction was surely that he understood the importance of obtaining the support of influential patrons. His day-to-day needs were amply covered by the generous allowance that he received from his friend and patron, Jeremiah Dyson, but when applying for medical and scientific posts, he regularly obtained the support of influential sponsors in the field. Thus, his MD had been dedicated to the eminent physician

vol. 2, no. 42. To practise as a physician legally in London, doctors were required to be members of the Royal College of Physicians, and the College required that their members held Oxford or Cambridge MDs. Akenside was admitted as a licentiate of the College on 26 June 1751, after undergoing three examinations, and received permission to apply for a degree by Mandamus on 30 September 1752, following negotiations between the president of the College, Dr Wasey, and Cambridge University. This was a recognized way by which the College regularized the position of doctors whom it wanted to sponsor but who held other qualifications. Technically, the Mandate (in Akenside's case dated 18 December 1752) was issued by the King to the University in question, and the degree was conferred by the University, rather than by one of its colleges. For information regarding the legal position and Cambridge University, I am indebted to Dr Leedham-Green, Cambridge University Archivist; information regarding the dates of decisions taken by the Royal College of Physicians may be found under the relevant dates in their manuscript book of annals, held at their Regent's Park library.

³ *Morton's medical bibliography* (Garrison and Morton), ed. Jeremy M Norman, 5th ed., Aldershot,

Scolar Press, 1983, p. 624 (entry 4015.1). The date from which the London College of Physicians became entitled to call itself "Royal", is a complex matter: see 'When did the College become Royal?' in Geoffrey Davenport, Ian McDonald and Caroline Moss-Gibbons (eds), *The Royal College of Physicians and its collections: an illustrated history*, London, James & James, 2001, pp. 26–8.

⁴ Other, more detailed, biographies of Akenside are available. His work has always been better known among literary critics than medical historians, doubtless because of the great poetic success he achieved with *The pleasures of imagination*. In the biographical outline given here, I have therefore tried to emphasize the specifically medical aspects of Akenside's career. Those wishing to read a more balanced account of his life and works should consult Charles Theodore Houpt, *Mark Akenside: a biographical and critical study*, New York, Russell and Russell, 1970; *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Oxford DNB*; and Robert Mahony, 'Mark Akenside', in John Sitter (ed.), *Dictionary of literary biography: eighteenth-century British poets*, 2nd series, Detroit, Gale Research, 1991, pp. 3–11.

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Dr Richard Mead, who in turn had advised him that there were career opportunities in Northampton.⁵ Later, in 1758, when it was known that a post would shortly become available at St Thomas' Hospital, he sought the support of the Prime Minister, Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, for his application, as we learn from his brief letter to him of 10 December 1758:

My Lord.

I did myself the honour of waiting on Your Grace to beg the favour of your vote & interest, in order to succeed to whatever vacancy may be declar'd at St. Thomas's Hospital by the general court of Governors, in consequence of Dr Letherland's resignation. Permit me to assure Your Grace that if I be appointed, I shall endeavour to discharge the duty of my office with the utmost diligence & fidelity.⁶

Dustin Griffin suggests that Philip Yorke, later the second Earl of Hardwicke, also provided Akenside with patronage;⁷ and it is true that several of Akenside's close friends, such as Thomas Birch and Daniel Wray, were in his pay as "eyes and ears men", keeping him in touch with news, gossip, books, etc. that they came across in their respective social circles. However, I know of no other evidence that Akenside was in Yorke's employ. Finally, one might cite the number of dignitaries who are recorded as supporting Akenside's election as fellow to the Royal Society and the Royal College of Physicians.

Given the extent of his writings, both medical and literary, one might expect quite a few autograph manuscripts by Akenside to have survived; but in fact, extant manuscripts of his are so rare that the discovery and location of any "new" example needs to be recorded.⁸ We know of letters that have been lost, of the essay on putrid erysipelas that he was drafting when he died, and of other items that seem to have disappeared without trace. The sum total of his extant letters is twenty-two, and these, together with a few other items—a signed receipt, a few legal documents, and five poetical manuscripts—make up all we have left of his lifetime's work in manuscript.⁹ There is

⁵ We learn of Mead's advice in Akenside's letter to Dyson of 17 May [1744], although in fact another physician, James Stonhouse (later Sir James), had recently established a practice there and received the loyal backing of various prominent residents. For fuller details, see Robin Dix, *The literary career of Mark Akenside: including an edition of his non-medical prose*, Madison, NY, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006, pp. 137–8, and for the reference to Mead in Akenside's letter, appendix 1, letter 10, lines 22–6.

⁶ The full text of the manuscript, held at the British Library, BL Add. 32,886, ff. 254–55, is perhaps most conveniently consulted in Dix, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, p. 307 (no. 16).

⁷ Dustin Griffin, *Literary patronage in England, 1650–1800*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 60.

⁸ Indeed, so scarce are his manuscripts, that it has even been suggested that either the son or grandson of his friend and patron, Jeremiah Dyson, might have destroyed all the manuscripts he could find, for fear

of a homosexual construction being placed upon them. Akenside's sexual orientation is not known, but he never married, and the friendship with Dyson, which began when the two were in Edinburgh, was the longest and closest relationship of his life. Dyson's family would have had easy access to the majority of Akenside's papers, which were left to Dyson in his will.

⁹ These documents are noted and, where appropriate, transcribed, in Robin Dix, 'Mark Akenside: unpublished manuscripts', *Durham University Journal*, 1994, n.s., 55: 219–26. There are five autograph poetic manuscripts (Akenside MSS. 1–4 in the Ralph M Williams collection at Amherst College Library, Massachusetts, and a single early draft of another ode in the Devon Record Office, UK); a fair copy of a letter dated 2 Jan. 1726 from William Warburton to Matthew Concanen; an account of a conversation between Richard Palmer and some friends of Akenside on 4 May 1766; a seven-page fair

also one presentation copy with a manuscript dedication to Jeremiah Dyson, his friend and future patron, on the flyleaf, the existence of which has long been known: a copy of his most famous poem, *The pleasures of imagination* (1744), in the Cracherode collection at the British Library.¹⁰

The latest discovery is another presentation copy, dating from 1766, and given to the same friend, Dyson. It is held in the Wellcome Library, callmark 27838/C/1–3;¹¹ and the book in question is *Guilielmi Harveii opera omnia: a Collegio Medicorum Londinensi edita* (London, W Bowyer, 1766). The volume contains the collected works (including the letters then known) of the seventeenth-century anatomist and physician William Harvey. Harvey's stature as the anatomist who discovered the circulation of the blood was such that it need occasion no surprise that the Royal College of Physicians of London should pay him the tribute of compiling this sumptuous edition of his writings more than a century after his death; but Akenside's involvement in the book's production has a significance beyond this, as we shall see.

The dedication on the flyleaf reads as follows:

Jeremiae Dyson
 Marcus Akenside
 Guilielmi Harveii opera
 ex sua sententia edita
 et suo studio emendata
 amico amicus
 dono dabat
 a.d. viij cal. Septembr. MDCCLXVI.¹²

While the style is far less orotund than was the case with the Latin dedication of 1744,¹³ it will be obvious even to a non-Latinist that there is an austere dignity and symmetry in

copy of his medical essay 'Observations on the origin and use of lymphatic vessels in animals' (Royal Society Library, call-mark Letters and Papers III.264), later to appear in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 1757, 50: 322–8; his signature on a contract with his publisher Robert Dodsley (National Library of Scotland MS 581), outlining his duties as editor of Dodsley's periodical, *The Museum*; a signature showing that he witnessed Dyson's marriage to his cousin Dorothy Dyson on 11 June 1756 at St Bartholomew the Great (Parish registers, now kept in the Guildhall Library, London, vol. 6779/2); a signed receipt dated 9 Sept. 1756 for a payment of £10 from the College of Physicians for his delivering the Croonian Lectures, delivered 7–9 Sept. (Royal College of Physicians Library, London, Autograph Letters collection, no call-mark); his signature on his will, dated 6 Dec. 1767 and proved 9 July 1770; finally, there is one other known manuscript dedication to Jeremiah Dyson of a published work, *The pleasures of imagination*, 1744. For further details of this last, see Dix, op. cit., note 5 above, pp. 65–6.

¹⁰ The presentation copy of *The pleasures of imagination* is preserved in the Cracherode collection at the British Library, callmark 671.h.15. Its existence was first noted by David F Foxon, 'Akenside's *The pleasures of imagination*', *The Book Collector*, 1956, 5: 77–8. Cracherode, who helped to set up the British Library, was a friend of Akenside, but it is not known how he came by Dyson's copy of *The pleasures of imagination*.

¹¹ The book is available for consultation in the Rare Materials Reading Room. The dedication was duly noted in the Wellcome catalogue, but had not been picked up by those working on Akenside.

¹² A literal translation might read: "Mark Akenside, friend of Jeremiah Dyson, gave as a gift to his friend, the *Works of William Harvey*, edited according to his own judgement and emended by his own effort, on 25 August 1766."

¹³ The 1744 Latin dedication reads "Viro conjunctissimo / Jeremiae Dyson, / vite, morumque suorum duci, / verum bonarum socio, / studiorum judici, / cujus amicitia / neque sanctius habet quicquam, / neque optat carius; / hocce opusculum / (vos, ô tyrannorum impuræ laudes / et servilium

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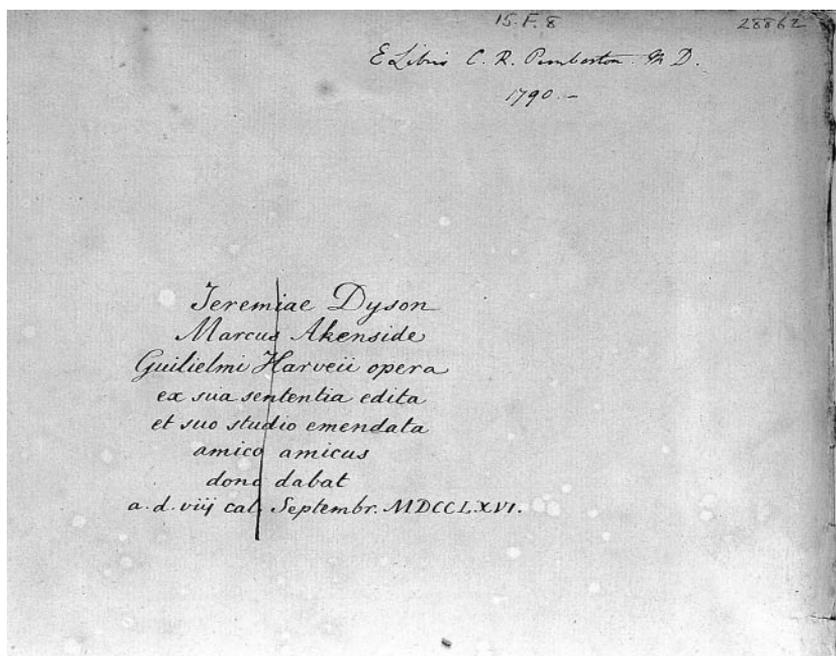


Figure 1: Mark Akenside’s inscription to Jeremiah Dyson on the fly-leaf of William Harvey’s *Opera omnia*, London, W Bowyer, 1766. (Wellcome Library, London.)

the inscription, with a pleasing balance struck between the words “amico amicus”, for example, or in the symmetry and alliteration between the two words “dono dabit”, or indeed the lines beginning “ex sua/et suo”. Akenside’s style is by this date more spare than it was, less grandiloquently Ciceronian; but it remains a striking style nevertheless, and one with carefully constructed rhythms and balanced syntactic units that please the reader with their understated elegance.

By examining the Annals of the College of Physicians for 3 March 1766, we can see Akenside’s involvement in the project. He received the thanks of the College for “the great trouble he has had in preparing Dr Harvey’s works for the press”, and read his preface to the edition aloud to the meeting.¹⁴ This brief essay outlines his major editorial activities, which essentially involved work similar to that which a present-day editor would expect to engage in: he corrected typographical errors, compared the variant

blandimenta poetarum, / abeste procul) / dat, dicat, consecratque / Marcus Akenside. / XVII calendas Jan. A.Æ.C. M,DCC,XLIV.” (“To his closest friend, Jeremiah Dyson, Mark Akenside gives, dedicates, and consecrates this little volume; to the man who has guided his life and manners, been the companion in all true pursuits, the judge of his studies; whose friendship none could value more or wish for more

dearly. For him, I would use none of the insincere blandishments with which servile poets flatter tyrants.”) Foxon explains that it is impossible to determine whether the presentation date was January 16 or 17: if the formula was meant to read “ad XVII cal. Feb.” this would imply January 16.

¹⁴ Annals of the College of Physicians for 3 March 1766, pp. 46–7.

readings in the early editions, and then chose between them, or developed credible emendations, in order to establish the most reliable text possible.¹⁵ Labour-intensive though the task was, it seems clear from the tone of the preface that he enjoyed it.

But it is my contention that his involvement was as much emotional as intellectual. In his student days at Edinburgh and Leiden, Akenside had chosen to write his dissertation on embryology. In 1744, like many Edinburgh students, he crossed the Channel to gain his degree at Leiden by submitting his thesis to the Medical Faculty there. The result was a work at the cutting edge of research at the time, *De ortu et incremento foetus humani*, accepted for his degree and published in May 1744. Although it seems to have been largely forgotten, and does not figure in modern medical histories, it was, as George Potter long ago observed, a groundbreaking work in that it rejected the dominant embryological theory of the time, namely preformationism or the idea that within the eggs or sperm of a creature's parents there were, already in existence, minute versions of their offspring.¹⁶ It predated by about a year works by other, more established researchers whose books had a similar tendency to undermine the ideas of the preformationists. Reproduction, preformationists believed, was essentially the growth, under conditions rendered favourable by mating, of the foetus to the point where it burst from the egg, or the womb, like a flower bursting from the bud. It was a theory which had come to be widely adopted in the late seventeenth century, as technological improvements in the production of lenses enabled scientists to see the myriad creatures of the microscopic world, and habituated them to the existence of what would previously have been the unimaginably tiny forms of life with which Nature teemed.¹⁷

It was in the later 1740s that objections to the notion of a preformed embryo started to be raised. Observed patterns of heredity, for example, should surely have raised questions in the minds of preformationists all along: as children partake of the characteristics of both parents, an embryo could scarcely have been fully formed, either in the egg of the mother, or the sperm of the father. Pierre Louis Maupertuis was publishing studies of mixed heredity around the time that Akenside was in Leiden, and this work by a distinguished scientist may well have given Akenside added confidence in rejecting preformationist thought, even though he was studying in the department where Boerhaave, a famous preformationist, had been professor until just a few years earlier.¹⁸ Contrary to

¹⁵ 'Collegium Medicorum Londinense Lectori S,' called simply 'Praefatio' on the Contents page, p. i.

¹⁶ George R Potter, 'Mark Akenside, prophet of evolution', *Modern Philology*, 1926–7, 24: 55–64. Potter's claims about Akenside's embryology can be supported convincingly enough, but those concerning Akenside's anticipation of evolution are not reliable.

¹⁷ There was also a more scientific reason for accepting preformationism as a theory: it permitted a simple explanation as to why, in the vast majority of cases, foetal development proceeded in a predictable way. For fuller discussion of this, and of the intellectual context within which the seventeenth-century move away from the alternative epigenetic theory took place, as well as the gradual move back towards epigenesis from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, see Shirley A Roe, *Matter, life, and*

generation: eighteenth-century embryology and the Haller-Wolff debate, Cambridge University Press, 1981. For fuller details of Akenside's own thesis, and the reasoning behind his move away from preformationism, see Robin Dix, 'The demise of the preformed embryo: Edinburgh, Leiden and the return of epigenetic embryology,' to be published in David Shuttleton (ed.), *Scottish medicine and literary culture*, (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Maupertuis' research was published in Leiden, and so was probably spoken about in the medical faculty there around the time that Akenside was registered as a student. The more famous book, *Vénus physique*, appeared in 1745, but a preliminary study, *Dissertation physique sur le nègre blanc*, now definitely attributed to Maupertuis, was published in 1744: see Mary Terrall, *The man who flattened the*

this preformationist tendency within the faculty, in 1744, the year in which Akenside received his degree, Abraham Trembley, in *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'un genre de polypes d'eau douce, à bras en forme de cornes*, a book published in Leiden, reported on how, if a hydra was cut in two, each half grew back into a complete hydra—a feat of regeneration impossible in preformationist theory, with its preformed offspring in the reproductive material of one or the other parent.

It may well be that Akenside met Trembley while he was in Leiden in mid-1744, or at least got to know about his research on the implications of the hydra's astonishing regenerative powers. Trembley had been researching this topic for several years, and discussing his findings with friends in Leiden and elsewhere in Europe well before his book appeared, so that the general thrust of his ideas and observations were already known to numerous continental scientists.¹⁹ At the same time, however, it is essential to recall that Akenside was in Leiden for a mere six weeks.²⁰ In this short time, he had to register and fulfil all the formal requirements of the University, settle into his lodgings, complete any outstanding work, prepare for his *viva*, and arrange for the printing and proofreading of his dissertation. To believe that he would also have had time to alter the fundamental embryological assumptions upon which his research to date had been built, stretches credulity to breaking point for anyone who has lived through the frantic last weeks before submitting a dissertation.

It is much more likely, therefore, that he had become convinced of the untenability of preformation while he was working in Edinburgh, quite independently of Trembley's study of the hydra. Of course, it is possible that if he did become acquainted with Trembley or his ideas in Leiden, he drew additional support for his thesis from him. But it is notable that, in what is a very well-referenced piece of work, Trembley's name does not appear, even in the footnotes.

We can legitimately ask, then, how it happened that the lone 21-year-old medical student at Edinburgh might have been inspired to take epigenesis seriously once more as an embryological theory, after it had languished in the shadow of preformationism for almost a century. The last major embryological work in which an epigenetic, as distinct from a preformationist, embryology had been advanced, was William Harvey's *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (1651), a book which the Edinburgh Anatomy

earth: *Maupeituis and the sciences in the Enlightenment*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 209.

¹⁹For further information about Trembley and his research into the hydra, see W H van Seters, *Pierre Lyonet, 1706–1789: sa vie, ses collections de coquillages et de tableaux, ses recherches entomologiques*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pp. 67–8. I should like to thank Dr Emma Spary for drawing this book to my attention.

²⁰For full details of Akenside's residence in Leiden, from his arrival on 31 March 1744 at the earliest (20 March in England, where the Julian calendar was used until 1754) to his departure by 27 May (17 May in England, as we know from the

fact that he wrote a letter to his friend Jeremiah Dyson from London dated 17 May, having just arrived back in England), see Robin Dix, 'The pleasures of speculation: scholarly methodology in eighteenth-century literary studies,' *Br. J. Eighteenth-Cent. Stud.*, 2000, 23: 96–9. The fact that he was able to receive a Leiden degree after a mere six weeks' residence there strikes us as odd today, but a glance at R W Innes Smith, *English-speaking students of medicine at the University of Leyden*, Edinburgh and London, Oliver & Boyd, 1932, shows that whilst many students did stay much longer than six weeks, Akenside's sojourn was not remarkably short; some individuals, indeed, graduated with an MD in just days.

School certainly possessed from an early date.²¹ Harvey is referred to at several points in the dissertation, and I would suggest that when reading him, Akenside arrived independently at his revolutionary decision that the time had come to take epigenesis seriously again.

In other words, although the case is not susceptible of definite proof, the evidence points strongly towards Harvey as the source that gave Akenside the idea of challenging the then-current embryological orthodoxy of preformationism, and, by doing so, laying the ground for a return to the notion on which all modern theories of reproduction are built. If I am right that it was indeed Harvey to whom he was indebted for such a bold new idea, then the splendidly sumptuous edition of Harvey's complete works that he put together in 1766 for the College of Physicians was an act of homage and commemoration that a doctor, now at the pinnacle of his medical career, made to the man whose lead he followed to gain the qualifications he needed in order to pursue the medical profession.

²¹ It is unfortunately not possible to find out when the Anatomy School acquired either of its seventeenth-century editions of Harvey's

Exercitationes, although they were certainly early acquisitions.