

JOHN AWSITER

AN ESSAY ON THE
EFFECTS OF OPIUM.
CONSIDERED AS A
POISON

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John Awsiter
An Essay on the Effects of
Opium. Considered as a Poison

TO THE
President and Fellows
OF THE
Royal College of Physicians

Gentlemen,

I Was induced to write this Essay, from a Desire of throwing a Light upon a Subject, hitherto but triflingly, and, at best, obscurely treated. As I had no beaten Path to direct me, many perhaps are the Errors that may be traced through every Page.

I do not boast an Ability to enforce my Sentiments with that energetic and expressive Beauty of Style some are so happy to possess. I am no Author, and can therefore only rely on your *Candour*, in Behalf of a simple Recital of such Facts as I have experienced.

When I consider the Novelty of the Subject, and the Rareness of Patients poisoned with Opium, I am inclined to flatter myself, you will not discourage, but be rather inclined to cherish under your Wings, every Effort (however weak) that tends to elucidate so extensive a Branch of Science, as Physic. I beg the Honour of subscribing myself,

Gentlemen,
Your most obedient,
Humble Servant,

J. AWSITER.

St. Margaret's Church-Yard, Westminster, January 5, 1762.

PREFATORY DISCOURSE

Among People who are unacquainted with the Nature of Opium, it is a received Opinion, – That as it will, when taken in proper Doses, lull Pain, and procure Rest; so, in large Quantities, that it will terminate a Life of Cares, by an *easy* and *quiet* Death; but it is not so: this argument is directly contrary to the Nature of our Existence, the animal Oeconomy being so formed, as not to bear a total Solution, without some Agonies. Thus, when this Drug is received into the Stomach, in Quality of a Poison, easy Rest is denied, the Senses, roused by their threatened Solution, force the animal Powers into immediate Conflict with the noxious Body, which produces Convulsions, and other dreadful Symptoms, the Forerunners of Death. – The Drug is besides of so strong a Nature, that, though taken only into the Stomach, it can change the Colour of the Skin, and even of the Linen wore next it; a Body also, many Hours after Death, will smell so strongly of it, as to determine whether it was the Instrument of Destruction used.

I might have increased the Bulk of this Essay, by expatiating on the Effects of Opium upon the arterial Fluid; I could inform you, that the Power of it is diffused by the Stimulus of the recurrent Nerves, to their Origin in the Cerebellum, whence, by Consent of Parts, the whole System partakes of the Affect, and the contaminated Fluid is propelled by them, through the Heart into the Arteries, and communicated to the most distant Parts of the Body; also that the Skin is formed by very minute Fibres of the Nerves, interwoven with arterial Fibres and Veins, forming numerous Compages of secerning Vessels, &c. &c. but these are Subjects best suiting the medicinal Powers of Opium, which being derogatory from my Design, are purposely avoided, and, but that these Pages are for the Perusal of more than the Circle of Physical Gentlemen, the Cases alone would have been inserted, without even giving the natural History of the Drug; for this same Reason, the Prescriptions are set down in *English*, and the whole Essay disrobed of technical Expressions, as far as the Subject will allow.

It will be thought, perhaps, that I have made too free with Dr. *Jones*, who is the only *English* Author that has wrote professedly on this Subject; but many of his Sentiments being directly opposite to mine, I was under a Necessity of bringing them into an immediate Point of View. It is therefore hoped, no Person will be so unfriendly, as to impute to me a Malevolence of Disposition, which is a Character I would always diligently avoid.

THE EFFECTS OF OPIUM,

Considered as a POISON, &c

Opium is a Drug brought to us from the Eastern Countries (the Use of it was first known to the *Greeks* who gave it the Name of Ὀπὸς, *Succus*, which was collected from the *Papaver Hortense*, *Semine Albo* of *Caspar Bauhine*) where the Plant, from which it is produced, grows in great Plenty, both wild and cultivated, and is the same with that of the white Poppy in *England*, the Heads of which are very large, and possess a sleeping Power, many Degrees beyond any other Part of it; the Seeds contained in these Heads are very numerous, and partake of this Quality in so small a Proportion, as to be scarce discernible, and rather help, from the soft Oil they contain, to correct the bad Effects of the acrid Juice of the Mother-Plant; they are therefore separated from the Heads, and used in Emulsions, being esteemed both cooling and emollient.

Distinctions were formerly made of the Goodness of this Drug, according to the Places where it was gathered; that of *Thebes* being the most famous; but, as it is now, and has been for some Time past, an Article of general Traffic, not only in the Places where it grows, but throughout all *Europe*, those Distinctions of Country, are necessarily laid aside, and the only Difference now consists in its Purity, or Adulteration by the original Manufacturers or Venders.

It is a natural Supposition, and indeed the *Turkish* Histories sufficiently demonstrate, that the original Use of Opium, or Extract from the Poppy, was first introduced to dissipate Anxieties, Pains, and Perturbations of the Mind, which appears not unlike the Use of intoxicating Drinks, so much requested in *Europe*. Labours of Mind and Body in every Person's Life, being somewhat considerable, a temporary Relief becomes indispensably necessary; and though Opium is not in common Use in *England*, such similar Advantages we instance of Tobacco, with which alone the Soldier can perform his March, and the Sailor his Service, through the rudest Storm, in a Night-watch upon Deck.

In *Europe*, we are not only fond of intoxicating Liquors, but add to their sleeping Qualities by the Use of Tobacco; Smoaking and Snuff-taking are fashionable, and Chewing not uncommon; all which Methods have, until familiarized to the Party, very disagreeable Effects, the Plant containing a corrosive Oil or Sulphur, with a volatile Salt, which makes it partake the Quality of Opium, though in a distant Degree; the *Chinese*, indeed, exceed us, they having a Narcotic Weed, which they smook, a Species of the Poppy.

To treat upon the Effects of Opium, and the various Shapes wherein it may be advantageously used for many Diseases, would frustrate my present Design; therefore I shall confine myself to that Property, which makes it considered as a Poison; and by the Analysis of the various Powers it contains, destroy, or in a great Measure prevent, the fatal Consequences which often attend the immoderate and imprudent Use of this Drug.

The great Doctor *Mead*, in his Tract upon Poisons, gives an Example of such a Power being in Opium, by pouring it, dissolved in warm Water, into a Dog. Had that able Genius, adequate to the Task, pursued his Experiments with that Spirit wherewith he abounded, it would have yet added to the Obligation the World owes him; but over the Means necessary to be used to counteract this Poison, and the Effects of it upon *human* Bodies, he has drawn a Veil, and informs us, that the Cure is to be completed by acid Medicines, and lixivial Salts: Far be it from me to comment upon the Principles

of this Doctrine; he was too just not to be sensible of what he wrote; perhaps he thought the Subject of too delicate a Nature to be made common, and as many People might then indiscriminately use it, it would take from that necessary Fear and Caution, which should prevent their experiencing the extensive Power of this Drug; for there are many Properties in it, if universally known, that would habituate the Use, and make it more in Request with us than the *Turks* themselves, the Result of which Knowledge must prove a general Misfortune.

From the Ease it affords to the Pains of Mind and Body, Opium obtained the Name of *Laudanum*, derived from the *Latin Laudabilis*, or *Laudatum*; yet, though it has this Property of easing Anxieties and Torments of the most excruciating Diseases, the constant Use of it should be rejected, as it will impair the Memory, destroy the Appetite, bring on a Stupor, and by Relaxation, weaken the whole Frame. That it impairs the Nerves, is manifest, for applied to the Ear, to ease Pain, it may cause Deafness; to the Nostrils, to stop an Hæmorrhage, Loss of Smelling; and however applied, whether internally or externally, (unless very sparingly) it will benumb the Part most immediately in Contact with it. When we consider the nervous Coats of the Stomach, and the Action of Opium upon them by constant Use, the Effects may easily be judged; and if a Person so habituated, is prudent enough to throw aside the Use of it, before he is betrayed into some fatal Disease, the Appetite is to be restored by nervous Stimulants, Bracers, and Cold-bathing. Doctor *Jones* advises gradual Decrease of the Opiate, and to use, instead of it, generous Wine in Moderation.

The Production of Opium is from the Fruits or Seed-vessels of the Poppy-Plants, commonly called the Heads; they are gathered while green, which (the Seeds being taken out) are bruised and pressed. The Juice thus collected from them is dried to a Substance, which being wrapped in Leaves, is formed into Balls or Lumps, generally under a Pound Weight, and in that Form transported to all the Markets of *Europe*.

Though it is a received Opinion, that Opium, with us, and other Countries where not manufactured, has not near the Strength of that used by the People where it grows; yet in *Turkey* they can venture to take it in larger Quantities; and hence it is manifest, that the Effects would be more pernicious amongst them, if they did not use it in a most pure State; and though Habit might conduce to the Constitution bearing it in much larger Doses, than we in *England* dare give it, yet certainly the constant Use of it, unless when of a most fine Texture of Parts, must sooner prove hurtful, than the immoderate and constant Drinking of Wines, and Spirits; and by this Means, the Lives of the major Part of the Eastern Countries, where it is so much requested, would drop in the Flower of their Youth, and whole Nations, in the Space of a Century, be depopulated.

The ancient Accounts of the Manner of gathering Opium, was, according to *Diascorides*, by the milky Juice being collected from Time to Time, that distilled from the wounded Head of the Poppy; thus gathered, it is entirely pure, and being taken, gives no disagreeable Sensation to the Stomach. This Extract being almost wholly volatile, immediately enters into Action, and discharges itself by Perspiration, opening the Pores, and refreshing the Spirits, without any attendant Injury; and daily Experience will convince every one who will put it to the Tryal, that the purer the Opium, in the greater Quantity it may be taken, unattended with the Nausea, Vertigo, and Tremor, which are so often the Consequences of it with us, though used in small Doses. *Tournefort*, Page 292, *Materia Medica*, informs us, that Opium, or *Laudanum*, does not only pass off freely by Perspiration, but cures those Distempers arising from Obstructions of the Organs of Respiration in hot Countries, without any Inconvenience whatever, which cannot be said of it, in such Cases, in *England*, though assisted with volatile and cordial Medicines. This seems a palpable Contradiction to the Opinion of Doctor *Jones*, who says, that Opium may be taken in much larger Doses, in Cold, than in hot Climates.

It is a natural Supposition, that when a Country produces a Commodity, in a Manner peculiar to herself, the Manufacturers will embrace the most ready Means of collecting it. The first Consideration generally is, how to make the greatest Emolument with the least Labour; if the Opium, which is brought into *Europe*, were to be taken from the Head of each Poppy, by Incision, as is supposed by

some Authors, the Produce would not be sufficient to supply the Markets; for as the daily Collection of Opium, from one Head, could not exceed one Grain in Weight, and many might fail even of that the Labour, Time, and Hands requisite to gather one Pound only, must necessarily make that Article, five, if not ten Times the Price it now bears. Though it is not improbable, that Opium, being a pure body, and wholly volatile, *may* be gathered by Incision, Yet it is not natural to suppose, that the Quantity of Opium, so nicely produced can answer, in any moderate Proportion, what may be made by gathering the Heads, while green, grinding them, and expressing the Juice, which may be easily inspissated. *Vide Plin. Secund. Lib. 20. Cap. 18.*

Some Authors apprehend, that common Opium is not made alone from the Head, but from the impressed Juice of the whole Plant; and indurated by the Sun's Heat, *See Mathiolus, Scaliger, &c.* But, if the Authority of *Pliny* is not thought sufficient, *Geoffroy* further refutes this Opinion; clearly proving, by extracting the Juice of the Leaves and Stem of the Poppy-Plant, that on the most strict Analysis, it is many Degrees inferior in Strength to the Properties of common Opium. This is also confirmed by the Examination of the Fæces, or impure Parts, remaining from the Solution of our Opium, they having no Similitude to the woody Fibres belonging to the Plant, which might pass with the Juice, by the Force of the Press, but to the light spongy Particles from the Apex or Head, with some little Grit.

We have several Instances of the fæculent Parts of inspissated Vegetable Juices increasing the Violence of their Operation; such are the Aloes of the Shops, Scammony, and grosser Juice of the wild Cucumber, called Elaterium. The *Fæculæ* of Opium, in the State wherein we receive it, will clog the more fine Parts, and prevent their ready Passage through the Pores of the Skin; and as the Time of its Duration in the Body, by such Means, is greatly increased, the Effects must necessarily remain longer, and the deleterious Quality have more Power over the human System. *Wedelius* says, *id certissimum habemus nunquam ab Opio ulla timenda esse incommoda si bene sit depuratum.* Lib. 1. Sect. 2. Cap. 3.

There are several Plants which have a sleeping Property, though not in so great a Degree as the inspissated Juice of the Poppy, yet more poisonous, because they are not endued with that volatile Power to carry themselves off. Thus we find the Juice of Hemlock, Mandrake, Nightshade, and several others of this Class, loaded with an acrid Salt, which, when inwardly taken, will corrode, vellicate, and cause an immediate Inflammation in the Primæ Viæ, to which the Nerves consent by a general Convulsion; and if any of these venene Powers remain long enough in the Body, to insinuate themselves into the Circulation, the debilitated Blood will become stagnant in, or lacerate, the capillary Vessels. Examples of these have been seen in *Indians*, who have taken Poison, which, though not of immediate Power to destroy Life, has manifested itself in Ulcers over the whole Body; and what is related of the Poison of the Seps Hæmorrhous, or Hæmorrhoid Serpent, is very extraordinary, that it will make the Blood flow out from several Parts of the Body; which can only be accounted for by an extream Fluidity of the Blood, and a consequent Velocity in Circulation, increased to such a Degree, as to lacerate the capillary Vessels, and thereby force them to part with their Contents.

From the various and violent Effects I have observed to arise from the Use of different Parcels of Opium, I am inclined to think, that the Juice of some Narcotic Plant is frequently added to that of the Poppy, in order to increase the Quantity of the Drug; and *Bellonius* observes, that Traders in Opium have so far adulterated it, that four Ounces of the pure Drug have sometimes been multiplied to a Pound. I myself have observed, in the Use of two different Opiums upon one Subject, that the one had a mild and proper Effect, and the other, through its Churlishness of Operation in the first Passages and Symptoms, on the following Day, had the Appearance of Poison, though in an inferior Degree. Such may always be suspected of Adulteration with the acrid Juice of some other Plant, and when a Purging ensues the taking of Opium, it most probably arises from a Mixture with the milky Juice of *Spurge*; there being nothing in the Principles or Effects of the pure Drug, to excite Purgation.

This I apprehend to be the Reason why solid Opium sometimes purges, and the Tincture very seldom, the Menstruum used, dissolving only the finer Powers.

To judge of pure Opium in the Lump, is a great Nicety, and what the Buyer ought to be very careful of, that it may answer his Intention of easing, and not injuring his Patient, if he designs using it inwardly; for this Intent, some Authors have given Instructions; but how few are they, who are assiduous to know the different Degrees of Strength each different Lump may contain! It is thought enough, if it has the Appearance of Opium, and the stronger it is in Smell and Taste (provided it is not drossy) they think it will go furthest, and consequently is best.

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