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## A MEDICAL POEM BY DR. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES (BOSTON, 1838)

ON THE EVENING OF 7 FEBRUARY 1838 THE MEMBERS OF THE BOSTON SOCIETY for Medical Improvement assembled at the American House to conduct business as well as to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of their august club.<sup>1</sup> The meeting was called to order at six o'clock and was followed an hour later by a dinner which, according to the Society's young secretary, "did honor to the taste and judgement of its providers." The secretary also noted that he and his fellow members, after an evening of wine, stories, and song, were able to reach their homes "unassisted and unconveyed."<sup>2</sup> The Society's secretary was Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who recorded his own contribution to the evening's merriment with this short, modest sentence: "Dr. Holmes then read a poem." Of the numerous manuscripts acquired by the Francis A. Countway Library during the past two years is one that may be the draft from which Holmes read that festive evening.

Holmes (1809-1894) was famous in his day as a physician, professor of anatomy, poet, and essayist. Despite his discovery of the contagious nature of puerperal (or "childbed") fever, his long tenure as professor of anatomy at Harvard Medical School, and his success as a writer, Holmes is largely forgotten today—even in Boston. His nineteenth-century fame, though, lasted throughout a long life and came to him early. In medicine, Holmes won Harvard's Boylston Prize in 1836 for his essay on auscultation and percussion, and to the general public the twenty-nine-year-old Holmes was known as the author of "Old Ironsides," the poem that saved the famous War of 1812 frigate *Constitution* from demolition.<sup>3</sup>

Five days before the Society's meeting, Holmes wrote to a friend about agonizing over finding time for his patients and for writing a poem "with which I have been saddled for an approaching medical dinner."<sup>4</sup> Despite his agonizing, Holmes' efforts, according to one observer, paid a handsome dividend, for his poem was "conceived in a spirit of playful satire" and delivered "in a most happy and finished manner."<sup>5</sup> However it was conceived and delivered by its author, the poem never appeared in print during Holmes' lifetime, outside of a twelve-line passage that was included in a published 1844 address and several couplets incorporated into two other published poems.<sup>6</sup> In 1894, almost immediately after Holmes' death, the work was privately printed as *An Unpublished Poem*.<sup>7</sup>

The manuscript acquired by the Countway Library, entitled "A Poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, M.D, delivered before the Society for Medical Improvement," is in Holmes' hand and may have been the draft from which he read on 7 February 1838. If not the reading draft, it is, based on Holmes' hand-

<sup>1</sup> The objectives of the Society, which was founded on 19 February 1828, were the "cultivation of confidence and good feeling between members of the profession, the soliciting and imparting of information upon the different branches of medical science, and the establishment of a Cabinet and Library, particularly of works illustrative of Pathology." Its Constitution and By Laws are in the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of 7 February 1838, Boston Society for Medical Improvement, Records, Volume III, Boston

Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes eds., *American National Biography*, 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3: 85-87.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes to Phineas Barnes, 3 February 1838, in John T. Morse (ed.), *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, [1896]), 1: 168.

<sup>5</sup> *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 18 (1838): 50.y.

writing, an early version that differs significantly from the poem published in 1894. The Countway manuscript—apparently never seen by Holmes bibliographers and scholars—consists of 340 lines (on three sheets folded into six leaves), while the printed version consists of 346 lines. The latter includes an extra stanza and two additional couplets (20 additional lines); the manuscript version includes several couplets and lines (for a total of 14 lines) that do not appear in the printed edition. A comparison of the same stanza from each version exemplifies the differences between the Countway manuscript and the printed version.

From *An Unpublished Poem* (1894):

If one great truth defies the sceptic's scorn,  
That truth is this — that children must be born;  
If one great maxim man dare not deny,  
That maxim is — that mortal man must die.  
If long experience be not all a trick,  
Who dares to say that mortals can't be sick?  
These solemn truths by thinking minds allowed,  
Lift the stern reasoner from the vulgar crowd.  
From every truth some vast conclusion flows,  
Truth is the pump and reason is its nose:  
Its handle logic: work it and it brings  
Transcendent streams from transcendental springs.

From the Countway manuscript (differences marked in bold):

If one great truth defies the sceptic's scorn,  
That truth is this, that children must be born;  
If one great maxim **none can** dare deny,  
That maxim is that mortal man must die.  
If long experience **is** not all a trick,  
Who dares to **doubt** that mortals **may** be sick?  
**If any doubts me, do not think me rude**  
**Thrice addled eggling of a gosling brood**  
**I call no names, but calmly let him pass,**  
**The bore, the dolt, the idiot and the ass**  
**For logic soothes the philosophic flood**  
**And nature's axioms are as clear as mud.**  
These solemn truths by thinking minds allowed,  
Lift the stern **reason** from the vulgar crowd.  
From every truth some vast conclusion flows,  
Truth is the pump and reason is its nose:  
Its handle logic: work it and it brings  
Transcendent streams from transcendental springs.

<sup>6</sup> The twelve-line passage appeared in Holmes' *The Position and Prospects of the Medical Student. An Address Delivered Before the Boylston Medical Society of Harvard University* (Boston: [Boylston Medical Society], 1844). See Thomas Franklin Currier, *A Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton (New York: New York University Press, 1953), 248-52, for the history of this "unpublished" poem.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *An Unpublished Poem* (n.p., n.d., [1894]). A slightly abridged version of the 1894

printing appeared the same year in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 131(1894): 377-79. According to Currier and Tilton (p. 248), these two printed versions appeared almost simultaneously. A note at the bottom of the first page of *An Unpublished Poem* stated that the poem was "read at a medical supper party about the year 1845." The error concerning the date of the reading may be attributed to the statement of the editor of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* that the poem was written "about forty-eight years ago."



The Holmes manuscript reveals a wit that could be both irreverent and ribald, one that was toned down in the published version. The poem's content, acceptable, perhaps, to physician-members of a gentleman's club but deemed inappropriate—by Holmes himself and/or his publishers—for public consumption, may explain why it was never published during Holmes' lifetime. On the other hand, the poem may not have been published because Holmes was never satisfied with the quality of the work that caused him so much agony in 1838. This may explain the extensive editing that the poem underwent.

The Countway Library's Rare Books & Special Collections department houses an extensive Oliver Wendell Holmes Collection. The collection is comprised of Holmes' medical library (approximately one thousand volumes), many editions of published works by and about Holmes, photographs and prints, a large collection of manuscript material (personal and professional papers), and a diverse collection of art and artifacts (including furniture). The recently acquired manuscript (purchased in 1998 on the Boston Medical Library Board of Trustees Rare Books Fund) is a fine addition to the Countway's collection of Holmesiana.

This acquisition will be of interest to literary scholars and historians of medicine as they attempt to re-examine Holmes and how his medical career both influenced and was influenced by his literary endeavors.

THOMAS A. HORROCKS is Associate Director for Special Collections & Curator of Rare Books and Joseph Garland Librarian, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.