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# The Watchmen of the Body: How Early Moderns Gained an Education in the Physiology of the Eye

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## Abstract

In the eighteenth century, learned readers were well acquainted with the tenets of physico-theology espoused by Fontenelle, Derham, and afterward made famous by the naturalist William Paley. Building upon traditional body politic rhetoric and a sensory hierarchy that prized vision as the prime source of worldly knowledge, it is not surprising that Paley and those before him should select the example of the eye to evidence the existence of a divine creator.

Detailed knowledge of the eye was not, however, widespread in the early modern medical profession, nor among the public at large. In the mid-eighteenth century, Thomas Gataker of the College of Surgeons candidly acknowledged the medical and surgical professions' lack of contribution to training in and treatment of the eyes, attributing the flourishing of quack oculists in the city to their failure in this area.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the way that medical men and the enquiring English public did gain their knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the human eye. It does so by exploring the contributions made by those practitioners that Gataker sought to dismiss – those oculists and operators who made a living treating the distempers of the eyes, couching cataracts, and, not infrequently, performing their surgeries before audiences of the elite and members of the medical establishment, as well as their day-to-day clientele. It was through their endeavors to carve out a livelihood that oculists ultimately shaped both public and medical understanding of the wonders of the eye.

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