CHAPTER NINE

“ALL THAT GLITTERS”:
MARTIN LISTER AND FOOLS’ GOLD, 1677–1684

1. Introduction

From 1677 to 1684, Lister concentrated on publishing books, rather than contributing papers to the *Philosophical Transactions*. This turn of events was precipitated by the sudden death of Henry Oldenburg in September 1677 from an unspecified fever, which according to Robert Hooke, left him “speechless and senseless.” Oldenburg’s wife died shortly after, leaving two small orphaned children, and as Oldenburg used his office at home to deal with Society business, Royal Society correspondence and publication were in disarray.

By December, Robert Hooke and Nehemiah Grew were both appointed secretaries, Hooke was elected to the Council for the first time, and they debated about the future of their journal, the *Philosophical Transactions*. Hooke had been a bitter enemy of Oldenburg, convinced that the former secretary had leaked news of his discoveries to rival natural philosophers, and he wished to end the journal that he saw as having too much content from foreigners at the expense of the English. Grew, as did the majority of subscribers, wished to see the journal continued. As the scholar Marie Boas Hall has noted, in the face of Hooke’s opposition, Grew managed to complete “Oldenburg’s volume XII with six issues, dated 1677/8 to 1678/9, mostly composed of previously unpublished papers which he had found in the archives... together with a few up-to-date letters and papers of which there could not be many, since the Society’s correspondence was lacking.” Grew needed material, and so he wrote to Lister on 20 February 1677/8:

Sir,—After the death of Mr. Oldenburge, at our Anniversary Election of Officers on St. Andrew’s day, the R. Society haveing been pleas’d to choose me their Secretary: since then, have likewise given me order, to

1 Hall, *Shaping*, 309.
3 Hall, *Shaping*, 310.
acquaint yourself, amongst other Ingenious and Learned Persons, That
the continuance of that Correspondence with me, which you began with
Mr Oldenburge, will be most acceptable to them. In need not add, as
well as to myself: you haveing given all of us so great assurance of your
Abilitys to promote our Affaires. Nor shall I be wanting on my part in a
reciprocal communication of what is here done amongst us.4

As a sweetener, Grew then went on to describe Antoine van Leeu-
wenhoek’s reports of seeing in his microscope “ye Animals breed in
Water where in Whole Pepper, and other things severally have been
infus’d.”5 Hooke chimed in, writing to Lister, “I doubt not but you
have heard of the changes that have been made in our Society. It hath
Ille [I’ll] assure you very much revived us and put a new Spirit in all
our proceeding…”6

Despite Grew’s and Hooke’s efforts, Lister did not contribute arti-
cles with anything like his usual enthusiasm due to the Society’s inter-
nal disruptions. Hooke, for his part, refused to take over the journal,
and printed his own publication, the Philosophical Collections, which
appeared intermittently between 1679 and 1682; their irregular appear-
ance led Francis Aston, a friend of Lister’s and fellow of the Society to
inform him in January 1681 that “Mr Hook has put out a Collection
of Philosophicall matters this week, and intends continue them every
month!”7

The Royal Society’s Repository was also in a mess, and Grew was
doing his best to sort it out for his catalogue of the collections.8 He
wrote to Lister in May 1681:

I lately find some things in a little…Box, which were sent by you. They
were…lately layd out of ye way: which I hope may be my excuse that
they are not mentioned, as well as other things of yours. The Collection
was never in my Custody, and when I came to describe It, I found all
things in ye greatest disorder and confusion imaginable.9

Though Lister submitted a paper on millstones with copper plates as
well as a piece on Roman urns to Hooke’s Philosophical Collections, he

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4 Bodleian MS Lister 34, ff. 202r–202v.
5 Bodleian MS Lister 34, ff. 202r–202v.
6 Bodleian MS Lister 34, f. 201. Hooke’s letter is also analyzed in Johns, Nature, 533.
7 Bodleian MS Lister 34, f. 45v.
8 Grew would publish his catalogue of the Repository in 1685. See Grew, Musaeum.
9 Bodleian MS Lister 34, f. 49r.