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INTRODUCTION

John Dunton's "Question Project"



THE PUBLICATION THAT INITIATED the world's first personal advice column did not begin with that aim in mind. Rather, its founder, the printer John Dunton, envisioned a series of inexpensive single pages (broadsheets) printed on both sides, the eclectic contents of which would be supplied by questions from readers, with responses from Dunton and his associates. The successful venture—the *Athenian Gazette, or Casuistical Mercury*, known more succinctly as the *Athenian Mercury*—eventually published thousands of inquiries and replies on a wide variety of topics. But at the instigation of its readers, it also developed into a source of published advice on personal matters, the world's first. And it became the longest-lasting periodical in seventeenth-century England, its popularity at least partly a result of its public attention to private questions.

Dunton later recalled that he was walking in a London park with a friend one day in the early spring of 1691 when the idea for such a publication suddenly occurred to him. In retrospect, the premise seems simple, but in its own day it was unique. Dunton proposed a weekly broadsheet periodical aimed primarily at

FIGURE 1 (*opposite*). *An Emblem of the Athenian Society* by Fredrik Hendrik van Hove. Frontispiece to *The Young Students Library* (1692), published by John Dunton. This image presents the Athenian Society as a large group of bewigged experts responding to pleas from both wealthy querists (the top row) and ordinary folk (the lower row), with accompanying poetry. The first lines read “behind ye scenes sit mighty we / nor are we known nor will we be,” indicating the initial anonymity of the Athenians. Collections of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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the male patrons of London's many coffeehouses. Those men, known for wide-ranging discussions held over the newfangled drink, would pose questions anonymously; the Athenian Society, supposedly a large team of experts but essentially comprising Dunton and his two brothers-in-law, Richard Sault and Samuel Wesley, would answer them.

Dunton, then thirty-two, was a bookseller with eclectic interests; Sault, his initial collaborator, was a part-time mathematical tutor; and the twenty-nine-year-old Wesley, whom they quickly recruited to join them, was a struggling clergyman and writer who probably welcomed the chance to earn extra income. Dunton, Sault, and Wesley drew up a formal contract for what Dunton called "the question project."

Sault and Wesley agreed to draft answers to questions Dunton supplied, to meet each week to go over them, and on Fridays to submit sufficient copy for the next week's issues. Dunton could then alter or reorder that copy as he wished. For their work, he promised to pay the two men together ten shillings a week after publication (the equivalent of approximately \$140 in 2020 dollars). The broadsheets sold for a penny each to individual purchasers and by subscription to coffeehouses. Dunton at first concealed his involvement, identifying himself only as the Athenians' "bookseller." Letters were to be sent to a coffeehouse rather than to his print office, and Dunton did not publicly identify himself as the *Mercury's* printer until many months had passed.

Dunton's project met with immediate success, developing into a major cultural phenomenon that spawned several rivals and even a parody in the form of a play, *The New Athenian Comedy*. The first call for questions on 17 March 1691 elicited such a plethora of queries that his initial plan quickly expanded to appearing twice weekly, on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Each broadsheet included eight to twelve questions and answers, or fifteen to twenty in a typical week. After twenty issues had appeared, Dunton bound the ephemeral one-page two-sided sheets into

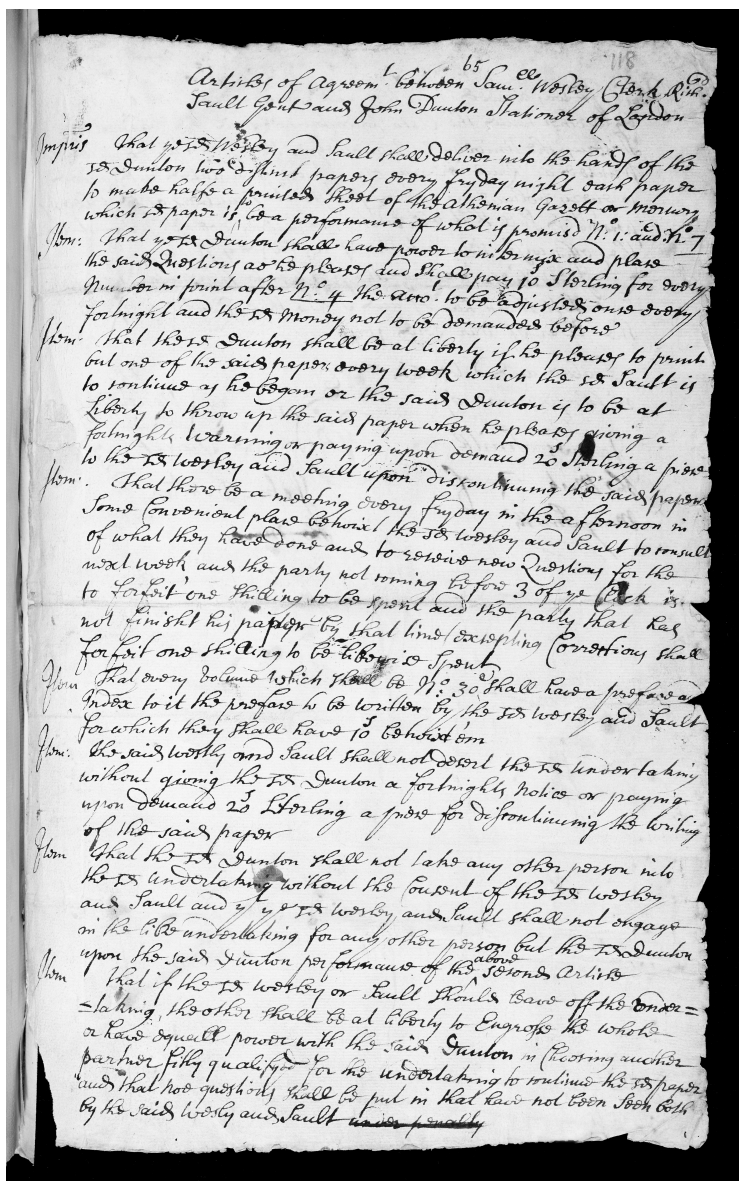


FIGURE 2. Contract of John Dunton, Richard Sault, and Samuel Wesley for what would become the *Athenian Mercury*. 10 April 1691. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Rawl. D72, fol. 118r.

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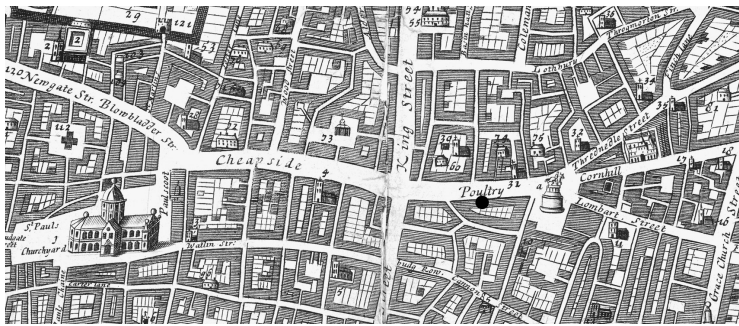


FIGURE 3. John Dunton published the *Athenian Mercury* from his print office “at [the sign of] the Raven in The Poultry,” a short street in central London near other printers and coffeehouses. The dot marks its location. Heritage-Images / London Metropolitan Archives (City of London) / akg-images.

large volumes that his “Mercury women”—recruited from ubiquitous street vendors—hawked to coffeehouse owners for two shillings sixpence (about \$35 in 2020 dollars), contending that customers would enjoy perusing them while chatting over hot beverages. The bound volumes contained indexes, allowing people to locate and read topics of interest in back issues, which in turn elicited more questions and helped to ensure the publication’s continuation.

Eventually, Dunton produced twenty volumes, the last of which included only ten numbers (rather than the usual twenty, plus frequent supplements), because the final period of publication included a months-long hiatus that followed the death of his wife. A few years later, beset by financial difficulties, he sold the copyright to another printer, Andrew Bell, who produced a three-volume compilation titled *The Athenian Oracle*. In that version, the *Mercury*’s contents remained available to readers even into the nineteenth century.

The questions, which Dunton anticipated as a coffeehouse habitué himself, ranged widely over many subjects. Among the inquiries were some on the Bible (Who was Cain’s wife? Did Adam and Eve eat actual apples?), science (What is a star? Why

To be plain, we are sensible 'tis in your Power to Damn or Save a poor Paper at your Pleasure, let Bookfeller or Author do what they will : You are the Messengers of Fate, and a Bloody Fight it self won't do without your Pains and Labour — So much for Interest, now a little for Gratitude — We must own Athens had fallen long e're this, had not you (like Minerva's as you are) strenuously supported it ; not Vander's self e're Walkt more dirty Steps than you on its behalf, nor with more Vigour declaims against its Rivals and Enemies — And besides all this, there's something of Kindred in the Case, at least we are half Name-fakes, a quarter of which wou'd be more than sufficient whereon to ground a Dedication. Thus wishing you good Customers to your New Votes of Parliament, and brave roaring News twice a Week for this Seven Years next ensuing, We rest,

And all that.

FIGURE 4. Portion of the preface to volume II of the *Athenian Mercury* (II July–21 October 1693), dedicated to “the Worshipfull Society of Mercury Women,” who sold newspapers and broadsheets to the London public and were “half Name-sakes” to the publication itself. Without them, Dunton wrote, his venture would have failed. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

does a dolphin follow a ship until frightened away?), medicine (What causes smallpox? Can a crooked person be made straight again?), military tactics (Is it better to attack an enemy's country or to guard one's own?), and law (If a man dies, does his apprentice have to serve the widow?). The three men occasionally consulted others for expert opinions, but their contract forbade additions to the team, and no one else ever formally joined their enterprise or participated more than sporadically. Dunton had created a source where coffeehouse patrons could find answers to questions that arose in their discussions or ask additional ones not previously dealt with in the *Mercury*.

The Athenians tried to eschew politics, since the topic was especially fraught after a dramatic change of government two years earlier. In 1689, Protestant members of Parliament had ousted the Catholic Stuarts from the English throne, formally concluding decades of turmoil that had begun in the 1640s with civil war between Parliament and the Stuart monarchs. The Protestant Mary II and her Dutch cousin and husband, William of Orange, jointly

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assumed the throne in 1689, but their rule was still contested by many supporters of the Stuarts. Even after 1695, when Parliament's 1643 censorship law for "correcting and regulating all abuses of the press" was allowed to lapse, Dunton tried to avoid including political opinions in the *Mercury*, other than broadly supporting the regime of William and Mary. A several-month suspension of publication during 1692, caused by a communication that ran afoul of the censors, taught Dunton an important lesson that stayed with him for the rest of the decade.

After just a few weeks, the publication's anonymous correspondents began to broach a theme that the three men had not anticipated: inquiries about personal relationships, including courtship, marriage, and sexual behavior. The first set of such questions—thirteen in all—came from a man; the Athenians printed them and their answers in the thirteenth issue in early May 1691. Those queries were broadly and impersonally phrased: for example, Should a person marry someone they "cannot" love in order to gain access to a good estate? Don't most people marry too young? Is a woman worse off in marriage than a man?

In the same issue, the Athenians noted another unexpected development: "a lady in the country" had written to inquire "whether her sex might not send us questions as well as men." Dunton's initial publication plan centered on an exclusively male audience, for only men frequented coffeehouses, although some women worked in them. That letter surely surprised Dunton and his colleagues, not only because it came from "the country" instead of London but also because it was from a woman, who must have accessed the *Mercury* through a male relative or acquaintance. Yet the Athenians adapted quickly, explaining that they would "answer all manner of questions sent to us by either sex." Accordingly, a few weeks later a woman submitted a similar group of impersonally phrased questions (e.g., Is it proper for women to be learned? Is beauty real or imaginary?), which the Athenians answered in their eighteenth issue in late May 1691. The next month, at the end of what be-

came the first bound volume, they responded to the first explicitly personal query they received—from a man accused of fathering a child out of wedlock (included in the selections in this book, along with several other examples of the initial questions). And so, when Dunton gathered the broadsheets to create the second volume, he changed the title page to reflect openness to female as well as male querists, as he termed those submitting questions.

Without intending to do so, and wholly in response to queries posed by their readers, the Athenians had initiated the first personal advice column ever published. Anonymity was clearly the key: concealing the identity of correspondents formed a part of Dunton's conception of "the question project" from the outset. A survey of a randomly selected volume (six, published in early 1692) by the scholar Helen Berry revealed that nearly one-third of the more than two hundred inquiries in that volume fell into the category of questions about personal relationships. Dunton often grouped such queries from both men and women into "ladies issues"; in the first five volumes, 45 percent of those inquiries came from men and 23 percent from women; 33 percent were not identifiable by gender.

Although the Oxford-educated Wesley was the only formally trained cleric in the group, Dunton was the son and grandson of ministers, and the three men shared a broadly based Protestant outlook. They aligned themselves with the campaign for the Reformation of Manners, a movement led by Queen Mary II that sought to combat perceived excesses of the day, especially prostitution and clandestine marriage. Themes of religion, sexuality, and morality were entwined in the minds of both the *Mercury's* readers and the Athenians themselves. Their responses to correspondents who described various types of sexual misbehavior rarely expressed sympathy for questioners' plight but instead frequently decried the immorality involved. Yet occasionally even in such instances the advice offered was judicious and must have been welcome.



FIGURE 5. *The Coffeehouse Mob*, frontispiece to part 4 of *Vulgus Britannicus: or the British Hudibras* by Edward Ward (London, 1710). The male patrons read newspapers and broadsheets like the *Athenian Mercury* while they argue, drink, and smoke. In the rear, a female employee—the only woman in the room—serves coffee; next to her, coffeepots heat on a large stove. Collections of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

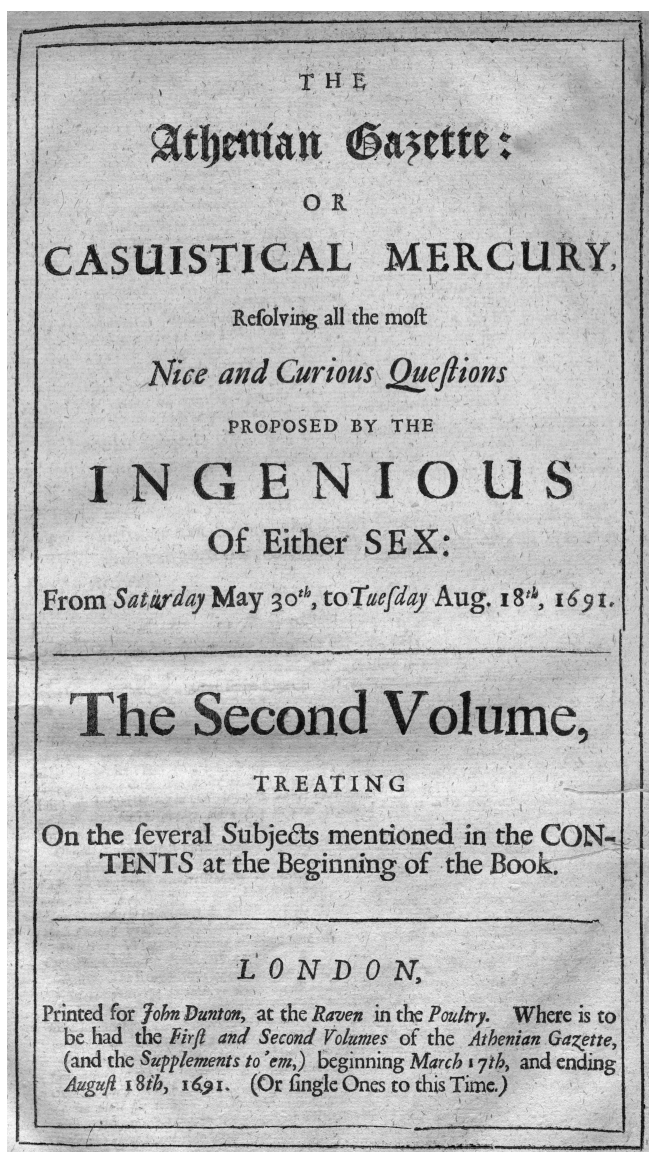


FIGURE 6. The second bound volume of the *Athenian Mercury* added the line “of either sex” to the title page, which reflected the Athenians’ openness to receiving questions from men and women alike. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

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One anonymous reader, after perusing broadsheets that contained what they termed “pitiful” personal inquiries, charged the Athenians with detracting from the publication’s learned reputation by dealing with such matters. But Dunton and his colleagues insisted on the importance of the topics their correspondents raised. “Many questions not only have an influence on the happiness of particular men and the peace of families, but even the good and welfare of larger societies and the whole commonwealth, which consists of families and single persons,” the Athenians commented [3:13, 8 September 1691].¹ So, ignoring the pointed criticism from at least one member of their audience, the Athenians continued to offer personal advice to those who asked for it. And many continued to ask . . . for the next six years.

The questions, whether accurately representing the correspondents’ own experiences or not (some said they were writing on behalf of “a friend,” which the Athenians often explicitly recognized as a fiction), open a remarkable window into the private lives of men and women in an era long before our own. Even though the queries often formally referred to the problems of “gentlemen” and “ladies,” their content reveals that the authors were not for the most part drawn from the ranks of the very wealthy but instead had middling status or aspired to upward mobility. Many, though by no means all, were young, just starting out in marriage or a trade. They confronted all the problems common to that stage of life, including conducting courtships, acquiring property, and engaging in premarital negotiations. In an era in which literacy was increasing significantly, especially in the ranks of urban tradesmen and tradeswomen, reading and writing were no longer optional but required skills for those who hoped to improve their lot in life.

¹ See the last paragraph in this introduction for an explanation of citation practice.

Many specific circumstances differ from those in the twenty-first century. Custom and law dictated that young people should defer to their parents when deciding whom to marry. If parents refused consent, the Athenians might suggest that youthful questioners should not marry at all, or should postpone a wedding until after they reached the age of twenty-one or their parents had died. Yet at times they also could offer helpful advice on how to persuade recalcitrant parents to accept a son's or daughter's choice of a spouse. Financial prospects were thought to be nearly as important to successful marriage formation as love or affection, so money frequently played a role in questions and answers about wedlock, especially when parents were involved. (Yet the Athenians usually stressed the importance of love, or at least affection, over finances.) Within the bonds of matrimony, Athenians and others expected husbands to take the lead in all marital affairs, but exceptions were possible.

Perhaps most striking in many letters is the evident confusion about what constituted a valid marriage. Parliament did not adopt a marriage law until 1753, and so six decades earlier a person's matrimonial status could appear uncertain. The Church of England placed great emphasis on the mutual consent of couples as embodied in explicit promises of marriage and premarital contracts. Canon law after 1604 nominally insisted that people be married by a clergyman in a church, but requirements for place and time were so restrictive that in practice they were often circumvented. Correspondents wondered about what constituted enforceable marriage contracts and whether or how they could be voided. Indeed, writers sometimes expressed uncertainty about whether they were married or to whom, with several identifying multiple possible spouses. Confronted by their readers' confusion, the Athenians offered varying definitions of their own, usually insisting that public ceremonies in church were important, but at other times stressing that mutual consent in private was the key to a valid marital union.

Adding to the uncertainties surrounding marriage, under ecclesiastical law formal divorces were almost impossible to obtain, thus encouraging informal solutions to problems posed by marital difficulties. The Athenians' advice to those complaining of abusive spouses—especially offered to mistreated wives—tended to be limited to a few unappealing options, such as turning to charity from the church for assistance for oneself and children. One man termed the quest for divorce “tedious” when he explained why he simply exchanged one wife for another without attempting to follow legal procedures. Even if an ecclesiastical court allowed a divorce “from bed and board” (essentially, a separation agreement obtainable on proof that a partner had committed adultery), neither partner could legally remarry as long as the other lived. Correspondents themselves proposed or adopted a variety of creative solutions to the divorce conundrum, most of them illegal and immoral in the Athenians' eyes.

Although marriage laws are less confusing in the twenty-first century, other dilemmas described in the *Mercury* still appear frequently in newspaper and magazine advice columns. Lonely people wondered how best to meet and attract a potential partner. Some correspondents sought methods to ease a conscience troubled by prior misbehavior. Spouses asked how to handle contentious marriages while remaining wedded to each other. Writers complained about tense relationships with in-laws. Both men and women disclosed entering into intimate relationships they later regretted, inquiring about how to extract themselves with the least amount of difficulty. When one half of a courting couple began “slighting”—in modern parlance, “ghosting”—the other, the injured party would request guidance. And many single or married people admitted to engaging in sex outside of wedlock, detailing subsequent emotional and financial tangles with complex implications they asked the Athenians to address.

The Athenians were men of their own time but were also more supportive of women—and thus less misogynistic—than

most, and they prided themselves on that attitude. Through their openness to queries posed by women, and responses that stressed the same standards of sexual probity for both male and female correspondents, they underscored their relatively evenhanded treatment of gender politics. Yet simultaneously they expressed attitudes toward lower-status individuals and children that today's readers will likely find jarring.

I first encountered the contents of the 1690s letters while researching an earlier book, *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* (published in 2011). Since I am a scholar of women's and gender history, the similarities and differences of the personal concerns of today and those of more than three centuries ago attracted my interest. Contemporary advice columns by authors like Amy Dickinson and Carolyn Hax follow in the footsteps not only of early twentieth-century columnists like "Beatrice Fairfax" (Marie Manning Gasch), of the Hearst syndicate, and mid-twentieth-century columns by "Ann Landers" and "Dear Abby," but also of the Athenians. Unlike such modern writers, Dunton and his colleagues had not intended to become "agony aunts" but followed the lead of their readers in doing so. In that regard the correspondents of the *Athenian Mercury* resembled the Jewish immigrants who, in 1906, began to write anonymously in Yiddish to the editors of *Der Forverts* (*The Forward*) to request advice, leading to the publication of a regular column, *A Bintel Brief*.

I selected the questions and answers that follow from the twenty volumes of the *Athenian Mercury* and the subsequent compilation, *The Athenian Oracle*, with the aim of revealing the sort of personal problems for which readers in the late seventeenth century sought advice from the Athenians. As a reputed large group of experts, the three men responded to wide-ranging inquiries with an aura of authority that persisted even after Dunton's key role became known.

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Although I have chosen to focus solely on queries about courtship, marriage, and sexual behavior, some questions to the Athenians raised other practical or ethical issues (e.g., Should a witness expose a thief? Where can a man who has spent his inheritance find honest employment?). The letters illuminate themes common in the 1690s in their emphasis on the interconnections among religion, morality, law, and sexuality. Did the writers truthfully describe their circumstances or possibly those of actual acquaintances? Even in the 1690s readers occasionally charged the Athenians with making it all up, but Dunton and his associates insisted that they faithfully recorded the questions they were asked, and sometimes they, too, wondered in print if the letters might be fictional. They do appear to have edited more than a few queries for grammar and clarity.

Accordingly, it is perhaps appropriate that as editor I have done the same. Seventeenth-century prose is often convoluted, with phrasing, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling alien to current readers. I have shortened sentences and modernized and regularized the language of both correspondents and Athenians. Ellipses indicate places where I have cut extraneous phrases for ease of reading, except when lengthy sentences precede or follow the passages I have edited, when ellipses are omitted. I have also rephrased or summarized convoluted sentences replete with double negatives to make them easier to understand, and I have silently replaced words unknown today or those whose meaning has changed since the 1690s. Despite these editorial alterations, I have sought to retain as much of the original language and phrasing as possible so that readers can see the individuality of the correspondents and the Athenians' various replies. One word I have not changed is "spark," which they used in a deprecating manner to refer to problematic beaux courting young women. Another I have not altered is "friends," which seventeenth-century writers used to refer to parents or, more broadly, relatives in general, a usage that becomes evident in many of the questions and answers.

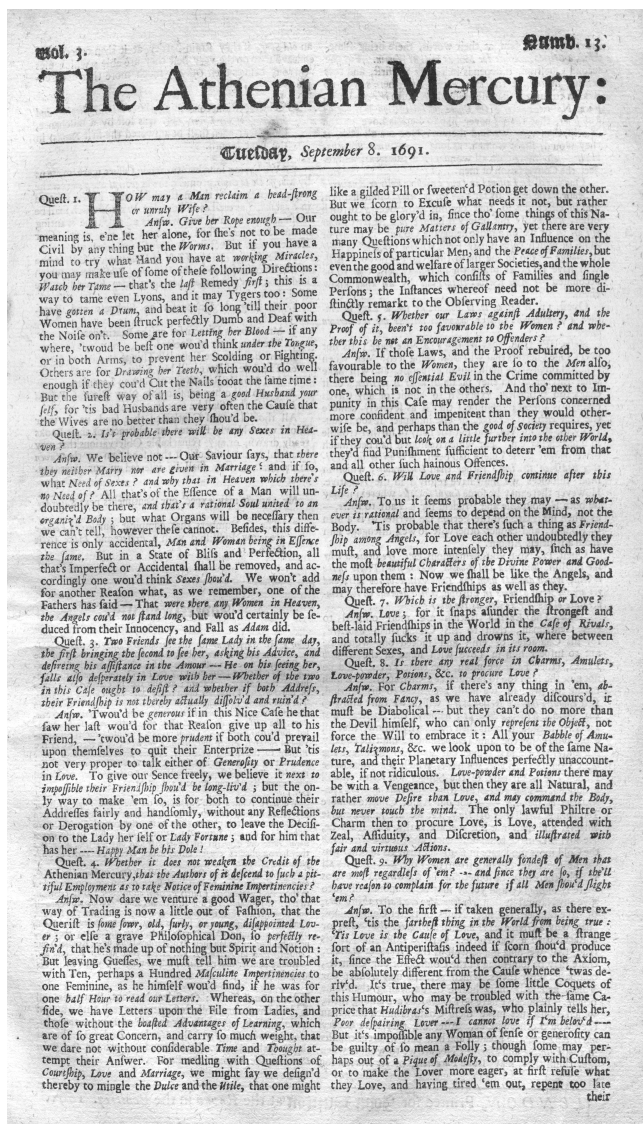


FIGURE 7. A recto page from the *Athenian Mercury*, volume 3, number 13, Tuesday, 8 September 1691. Questions 1, 3, and 8 on this page have been edited and are included in this book, along with a quotation taken from the Athenians' answer to question 4 in the introduction. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The book is organized into six topical chapters: courtship, choosing a spouse, parental consent, promises and vows, matrimony, and dangerous liaisons. On occasion the themes in the different sections overlap; readers should not expect neat divisions.

Citations accompany every question-and-answer pair, so readers who wish to do so may consult the originals in the digital ProQuest British Periodicals Collection; in the Burney Collection at the British Library (available digitally through Gale Primary Sources); or in surviving published copies of the *Mercury* or the *Oracle*. I was fortunate to have access to such printed copies at the Cambridge University Library, the Huntington Library, and the Cornell University Library at various times during my research, as well as to the online sources, thanks to Cornell University's subscriptions to the online services.

The citations, in square brackets after each Q & A, take the following form: the correct question number (preceded by Q and occasionally followed by another number, in curly brackets, when the printed number was incorrect); the volume number; the issue number, when there is one; and the publication date, when given. Sometimes, especially when the Q & A is from a supplement printed at the end of a volume, there are missing dates or issue numbers, which are identified to the extent possible.

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