

## Artisans and Experts: Evidence and Authority in Early Modern England

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This paper examines the work of artisans in establishing ‘facts’ about the quality of products and substances such as drugs or precious metals in seventeenth century England and how these facts were presented, transmitted and disputed. How particular groups establish authoritative knowledge about the material world is a question that historians and sociologists have approached from a number of angles. Latour describes modern science as a bureaucratic system for establishing and stabilising such knowledge – a system to create facts, if you will.<sup>1</sup> These structures are, however, a recent phenomenon. As Daston, Poovey, Shapiro and others have emphasised, the category of facts, particularly scientific facts, was reconstructed in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Facts came to represent reproducible classes of events, rather than particularities.<sup>2</sup> The question of what systems or methods were used by earlier communities to determine facts about the material world led Shapin to argue that the social status of the observer and investigator was the key determinant in establishing authoritative judgement. In particular, he suggested that early modern gentlemen held a significant advantage in accurately perceiving material truths.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Ash has recently argued that expert mediators became increasingly significant agents *above* craft practitioners in the later sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, early modern artisans are frequently seen by historians as possessing extensive tacit knowledge of their field, but, almost by virtue of this definition, as largely unable to describe and analyze what they do explicitly. Many contemporaries shared the same view: the near impossibility of describing craft processes was one of the problems that troubled both members of the early royal society and the compilers of the *Encyclopedie*. Both groups came to view artisans as almost conspiratorially

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<sup>1</sup> Latour, Bruno. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*; Daston, ‘Description by Omission’.

<sup>3</sup> Shapin, Steven. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Ash, *Power, Knowledge and Expertise*.

incapable of openly informing the interested researcher about how they created their products.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I suggest that this account of artisans' involvement in fact production neglects various situations in which artisans could and did give persuasive accounts of things based on a range of different kinds of evidence. Prominent amongst these were disputes over the quality of products and commodities. In early-modern Europe's mercantilist structures of guild and state regulation, preserving quality was a central concern. What constituted quality and its opposite needed to be defined, defended and transmitted. Much of this process is now lost to us. However, in a few cases we can discern some aspects of how contemporaries went about establishing facts and convincing individuals and groups outside the craft community of their validity. By exploring this material, and the wider context in which artisans operated within elite systems of fact production, this paper seeks to examine how artisans established 'facts' about the quality of products and how they convinced a wider audience about them. Focusing on the interface of artisan and other knowledge communities may offer a way to see if we can identify an 'artisan' approach to knowledge, to parallel Shapin's gentry-centred natural philosophical community.

The paper focuses in on two cases from the seventeenth century where an unusual amount of detail was recorded of the processes of fact production. Both cases – one involving drugs, the other pewter – allow us to observe the systems through which skilled perceptions and tightly delimited sets of practical procedures could be the basis for authoritative judgements. In the process, they reveal the limits on social status as a determinant of authority. They also expose the problems of relying on localised fact production within communities of experts. In particular, they expose how efforts to establish national standards for quality could be undermined by the tension between disseminating standards and avoiding the disputes that the practical constraints on reproducing findings might produce.

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<sup>5</sup> Poni, Carlo, 'The worlds of work', unpublished paper.