The examination of the King’s physicians

At the end of November 1788, the formidable ‘Dr Willis, a physician of ... peculiar skill and practice in intellectual maladies’ was summoned to the royal palace at Kew.² This invitation, issued reluctantly by Queen Charlotte, was a last resort. It had become increasingly clear that King George was sinking into insanity, and that the royal physicians were either unable or (understandably) unwilling to exercise the requisite medical authority over their patient and sovereign. The King’s bouts of delusional raving continued to get worse. So it was that the controversial Dr Francis Willis, the keeper of a mad–house in Lincolnshire, came to meet the King at Kew on 5 December 1788. On the occasion of this first encounter, the King, noticing Dr Willis’s clerical attire, asked him whether he was in the employment of the church. Willis replied that he had been formerly but now ‘attended chiefly to physick’. The King’s equerry Robert Fulke Greville records that his Majesty replied to this ‘with Emotion & Agitation, “You have quitted a profession I have always loved, & You have Embraced one I most heartily detest”’.³ After this meeting, Willis told the King that ‘his ideas were now deranged’ and that he would require Willis’s constant attention and ‘management’.⁴ Around the same time, the Prince of Wales wrote to his brother that their father had suffered ‘a total loss of all rationality’ and was now ‘a compleat lunatick’.⁵ The arrival of Willis, his son (also a physician) and their entourage of assistants into the midst of the royal household at Kew and, especially, the other royal physicians, led to weeks of jealousies, conflicts and contested diagnoses and treatments. Willis insisted on complete authority over who had access to the King, and relied upon methods of physical restraint (sometimes using a restraining-chair, sometimes a strait-waistcoat), combined with a quasi-mesmeric
technique of commanding the King’s submission with his gaze. (This episode has been well documented by historians of medicine and dramatized in Alan Bennett’s play, the Madness of the George III and the film based on it.)

The controversy about the efficacy and propriety of Willis’s regime was at its height in January 1789, when a period of regency seemed likely to become a necessity. For six days, a Parliamentary Select Committee interviewed Willis and the other physicians, to try to ascertain the prospects, if any, of his Majesty recovering sufficiently to retake the reins of government in the near future. The exchanges were published by order of Parliament, as well as in various commercial editions, and in the daily press. Almost the entirety of The Times for 16 January, for example, was taken up with extended extracts from ‘The Examination of the King’s Physicians’, focussing especially on what Willis himself had to say. When challenged on his policy of excluding others from seeing the King without his express permission, Willis replied that the unexpected appearance of physicians or family members might ‘excite troublesome emotions’ and that such troublesome emotions might ‘retard the cure of the patient’. In answer to another question, Willis spoke of the great benefit his Majesty had enjoyed from being allowed, at the appropriate time, to see his wife and daughters. To allow him to continue in ‘anxiety’ at his separation from his family would have been harmful, Willis said. Even a brief glimpse of his daughters had had the effect of ‘softening him into tears’; the King ‘shewed the greatest marks of parental affection I ever saw’. The committee asked whether ‘observing those emotions, which may naturally take place at the sight of relations or friends’ provided the doctor with any basis for judging on the likelihood of a cure in this case. Willis replied that it was a very favourable symptom for a patient to show ‘affection rather than aversion’ in such circumstances. Willis made much of the King’s recently recovered ability to read literature and make intelligent comments upon what he had read (although he was taken to task by the committee for having allowed the King, inadvertently it seems, to get his hands on a copy of the uncomfortably apposite King Lear). All parties to the discussion agreed that recovery would be indicated by further signs that ‘the understanding is strengthened’ and that his Majesty’s ‘frequent gusts of passion’ (brought on by contradiction or irritation) were becoming less frequent and shorter in duration. Subsequently, the King made a surprisingly rapid recovery, to the extent that the regency, which had seemed inevitable, was forestalled. On 19 March, the Lord Mayor of London attended his Majesty at Kew and, speaking on behalf of the ‘Aldermen and Commons of the City of London’, begged leave to approach the throne with ‘the