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Charles Fitz-Geffry and the ‘Wars of the Theatres’

Hitherto overlooked in the literature on the ‘Wars of the Theatres’, 1599–1601, are a number of Latin epigrams in Charles Fitz-Geffry’s *Affaniae* (1601) and a letter concerning them by Fitz-Geffry’s friend Degory Wheare (preserved in Wheare’s letter-book, Bodl. MS Selden Supra 81).¹ The letter in particular is revealing in showing the interactions that led up to Fitz-Geffry’s epigrams and in its concern for adequately obscuring the identity of those being mocked. Fitz-Geffry was primarily an Oxford-based poet, who through this work was encountering the more London-centred literary world, penning poems that ventured into the literary conflicts raging at the time.

Wheare’s letter was written from Oxford in May of 1601 to Francis Rous and George Spry in London, who had been friends and fellow students with Wheare and Fitz-Geffry at Broadgates Hall, Oxford.² Previous surviving letters from Wheare to Rous and Spry had announced the coming publication of *Affaniae* and Wheare had sent sections of it to his London friends for comment. The first part of this letter concerns Wheare’s own poems (which, it would seem, are also epigrams); he then turns to those of Fitz-Geffry, clearly responding to suggestions from Rous and Spry:

De Fabri et Satyrographi nominibus e Caroli poematiis liturâ tollendis cogitabimus: interim tamen ne vos lateat, priorem istum non honoris causâ nominatum [de] sed deridiculi et joci: quod si aliter intellexistis false fuistis. lepide enim fungum perstrinxit inanis gloriolæ et immortalitatis (si diis placet) cupidissimum; quod ex secundo versu (licet obscuriuscule) perspicere est. neque fingit quicquam poeta noster Revera enim nasutus iste ffaber ad me quondam veniebat et obnixè rogabat ut hanc gratiam a Carolo impetrarem nempe ut quædam Epigrammata nomini suo inscriberet: meruimus sane inquit tum quod Carolum amamus, tum quod Musis etiam³ favemus: præterea curavimus semper ut cresceret eius fama, apud Danielem, Draitonam, Ionsonium et alios. ridebam herclè Asinum blandientem et nescio quid auræ aucupantem, dicebamque me facturum: hinc ortum est

illud carmen De grege versificum etc./ Sed si homo minus placeat removebimus e choro; locum tamen sortitus est suo dignum ingenio, videlicet inter *præstigiatores* et *Bardum*. De Marstono ipse Carolus viderit, ego sic [s] censeo καὶ κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει, etc. ideoque a Ionsonio ejusque similibus eum male audire. si me error tenuerit, et ob nequitiam infamis ille fuerit, scribite et agnoscam. in præpositione correptâ si quid ego judico manifestum est vitium, sed emendabitur. præla transmarina subire non potest hic liber ob causas in superioribus literis allatas.

[We will consider whether the names of Faber and Satyrographus [the writer of satires] should be erased from Charles' poems: meanwhile, however, it should not be concealed from you that the first one is named not because of honour, but as an absurdity and a joke, but if you thought otherwise you were wrong. For he charmingly offends the fool, most desirous of a little empty glory and immortality (if it pleases the gods); a thing which is ascertained out of the second line (although slightly more obscurely). Nor does our poet in fact imagine anything, for that long-nosed (*or* clever) craftsman came to me once and vigorously asked that I entreat this favour from Charles: truly that he should write certain epigrams on his own name. He said, 'Surely I have deserved (this) both because I love Charles and also because I support the Muses. Moreover I have always taken care for his fame to grow, among Daniel, Drayton, Jonson, and others.' By Hercules I laughed at the Ass, flattering and snatching at some bit of gold, and I said that I would do (it): hence arises that song 'Of the flock of versifiers', etc. But if the man should be less pleasing we will remove him from the troop; however, he has received a place worthy of his cleverness, between a juggler and a bard (*or* a stupid man). Charles himself will have seen 'Of Marston'; I judge it is this way — '(one) potter also envies (another) potter', etc, and therefore it is badly received by Jonson and his ilk. If I am in error, and he was defamed as a result of villainy, write and I will admit if what I judge to be clear is a fault in an arbitrary preference, and what is more, it will be emended. This book cannot go to overseas presses because of the reasons offered in previous letters].

Whare's first reference is to the Fitz-Geffry poem entitled 'Ad Fabrianum' (2:63) in the printed text:

De grege versificum quidam, quem dicere nolo
 (Tu, Fabriane catus, quem volo, coniiicias)
 Flagiciis a me crebis contendit, et instat
 Ut libris vivat carminibusque meis.

Victuram ergo aliis ausint promittere famam,
 Quam mihi, quam nequeant carmina nostra sibi?
 At si tantus amor sit in ora venire nepotum,
 Inque libris vatium carminibusque legi,
 Davisios laedat mihi, Ionsoniosque lacessat,
 In Nashum dicat turpia quaeque trucem.
 Haud aliter speret vatium per carmina famam,
 Haud aliter meruit scilicet ille cani.

[There is a certain member of the versifying flock, whom I do not wish to name (You, clever Fabrianus, can guess whom I mean), who pesters me with frequent entreaties, and begs that he might live in my poems. So shouldn't others promise him enduring fame, rather than me, whose poems cannot achieve this for themselves? But if he has such a desire to be in the mouths of our descendants, and to be read of in poets' verses, as far as I am concerned he may bother the Davises, injure the Jonsons, and slander savage Nashe. Scarce otherwise might he aspire to fame in poetry, scarce otherwise has he deserved to be sung about.]⁴

The poem itself is playing with the question of naming the ambitious poet, who had hoped to be celebrated under his own name among the many panegyric poems in *Affaniae*. Instead, Fitz-Geffry had exercised his power as epigrammatist to depict him with a fictionalized name in a satiric epigram. However, Wheare's letter makes it clear that Rous and Spry felt that 'Faber', the fictional name originally employed, was too obvious. Although Wheare's thought had been to blot it, and leave the epigram headless, in the final printed version Fitz-Geffry changed the name to 'Fabrianus', and slyly suggested that they both know his identity. Who was Faber? The Latin word is a fairly general one for craftsman or worker. The most likely candidate is John Weever, an epigrammatist heavily involved in the topical satire of the period 1598–1601 and who, according to E.A.J. Honigmann, was mocked as Simplicius Faber in Marston's *What You Will*.⁵ This play was a central one in the 'Wars of the Theatres' and some have dated it to April 1601.⁶ Hence, it may be that Rous and Spry recognized that Fitz-Geffry's poem too closely built upon Simplicius Faber and that the identity would be dangerously obvious. Further support for identifying this figure with Weever is the reference to him as 'Asinum blandientem': Asinius Bubo in Dekker's *Satiromastix* has long been recognized as another depiction of Weever.⁷ That play, however, has been dated by most scholars to the second half of 1601.⁸

Fitz-Geffry has frustrated ‘Faber’s’ desire for poetic fame, both because he is left unnamed, and because his poem is placed amongst other mocking poems — literally between poems to the ‘impostor’ Martin and the slow ‘Bardus’ — rather than among the English poets celebrated in *Affaniae* 2:11–25, which include Daniel, Drayton and Jonson. Fitz-Geffry has even taunted Faber-Fabrianus on the whole business of personation in the second line, which Wheare particularly points to. He also suggests that Faber will only achieve immortality through the work of such well-known satirists as Sir John Davies, Jonson, and Thomas Nashe.⁹ The claim may be a disingenuous one: to actually name the fellow when he is being mocked would tend toward libel, and Wheare’s correspondents, Francis Rous and George Spry, had obviously raised this issue amongst a host of similar concerns.

Wheare’s other concern was the lemma ‘Satyrographi’ [the nominative would be ‘Satyrographus’]. No poem with such a title (or a similar one) appears in *Affaniae*, so here perhaps Wheare’s idea of a blot has been followed. The most likely poem is 2:58, which is left untitled [or ‘headless’] in the printed text.

Sceleste scurra, quid tibi vexatio est,
 Misellum ocellum, non ocellum, pessuma
 Rabiesque septem rabularum, putida
 Latrina pestilentiarum, verminans
 Canis cadaver, carcinoma narium,
 Dicteriorum olida cloaca, scommatum
 Insulsiorum abyssus, heluo vorax
 Gurgēs? Nam ab omnibus quot uspiam sient
 Triviis, plateis, angiportis, angulis,
 Converrit et corradit infameis iocos,
 Ut ad sepulchra Ruffa de rogis cibos.
 Quin et theatra, compita, lupanaria,
 Et cum tabernis carceres tonsoriis
 Deciesque viciesque circinat die,
 Et quicquid usquequaque pestilentiae est,
 Quicquid cicutae, vel venenati salis
 Compilat et catillat, haurit et vorat,
 Ut in alienos expuat tandem sinus,
 Scolopendra ut unco laesa ferro, protenus
 Eructat intestina, virus saepia.

Quando ergo quicquid undecunque luridi
 Puris luisque, pituitae stiriae,
 Muci atque tabis, faecis atque toxicis,
 Vappaeque rancidae, aut salivae spurcidae,
 In hanc cloacam confluat sacerrumam,
 Velut Amphitrites omne flumen in sinus,
 (Quid expeditius?) venite adsistite
 Quibus alma curae Faustitas, cordi Salus.
 Immundus uno mundus en piamine
 Lustrandus ut sit undequaue puritas,
 Et hoc catharma consecretur hostia
 Sterculio deo, aut Cloacinae deae.

[You scurvy buffoon, what trouble does my wretched eye of mine, this non-eye, cause you, you frenzy of seven ranters, you putrid latrine of pestilences, wormy dead dog, cancer of the nose, stinking sewer of wit, abyss of tasteless jests, you greedy gobbling glutton? For from all the crossroads, avenues, alleys and street-corners in the world he sweeps up and scrapes together his infamous jokes, just as Ruffa gets her meals from graveyard tombs. Indeed, ten, twenty times a day he flits through theaters, crossroads, brothels, jails, together with taverns and barber-shops, and whatever of pestilence there may be anywhere, whether of hemlock or venomous wit, he gathers and licks up, drinks down and swallows, so he may spew them in other men's laps, as the nereid worm, hurt by a fish-hook, straight-way vomits up its guts, its poisonous secretion. So whenever anything, from any source, of lurid pus, icy phlegm, diseased mucus, toxic dregs, rancid stale wine, or nasty spittle comes flowing into this accursed sewer (as every river flows into the bosom of Amphitrite — what could be more natural?), come a-running bearing aid, all you to whom Prosperity is beloved and Salvation dear, so that this unclean world may be cleansed by a single expiatory sacrifice, and purity may reign everywhere, and that this offscouring may be consecrated as an offering to Sterculius the god and the goddess Cloacina.]¹⁰

This is the most savage poem in *Affaniae*, one in which Fitz-Geffry drops the urbane, detached tone typical of the Martialian epigram for something closer to Juvenalian satire. It is the third and climactic poem in a series addressed to a poet who has mocked Fitz-Geffry's loss of an eye.

In epigram 2:5 of *Chrestoleros* (1598), Thomas Bastard mocks his host who has only one eye:

Mine hoast he hath but one eye which good is,
 As for condtions [sic] good, one lesse then this,
 I pray ye gwestes as many as come hether,
 In his behalfe to put these both together.

One-eyedness is a physical feature difficult to search for in a biographical dictionary, but a number of circumstances allow us to identify Charles Fitz-Geffry as the subject of this poem and thus recognize his epigrams in response.¹¹ The strongest clue is the reference to ‘abiesque septem rabularum’ [a frenzy of seven ranters], which would seem to confirm that this is a response to Bastard, whose *Chrestoleros* was in seven books.¹² From Bastard 4:3 we know that his book circulated at Oxford and he had long been associated with the town and university; thus, some contact with Fitz-Geffry in the 1590s was likely, and perhaps even an ongoing literary skirmish between the two. *Chrestoleros* includes a number of epigrams on ‘Carus’, one of which (6:2) seems to be responding to Carus’ charge that Bastard fills his epigrams ‘with fond trifles and delightes’.

One objection to identifying Bastard in Fitz-Geffry’s vicious poem is the original title ‘Satyrographi’; there are certainly other prominent ‘writers of satire’ in the late 1590s and early 1600s, and by that time Bastard was better known through *Chrestoleros* as an epigrammatist. However, he had achieved widespread notoriety earlier for the satiric attacks in ‘Bastard’s libel’, for which he was expelled from Oxford.¹³

The explicit references to Jonson and Marston in the latter part of Wheare’s letter are of a quite different sort. The poem in question would seem to be 2:96:

AD IOANNEM MARSTONIUM

Gloria, Marstoni, satyrarum proxima primae,
 Primaque, fas primas si numerare duas.
 Sin primam duplicare nefas, tu gloria saltem,
 Marstoni primae, proxima semper eris.
 Nec te paeniteat stationis, Iane. Secundus,
 Cum duo sint tantum, est neuter, et ambo pares.

[Marston, glory of satire next to the first, and first if one can reckon two firsts. If one cannot double the first, at least, Marston, you will always be the glory next to the first. Nor should you rue this rank, Jack. When there are only two, neither is second, and the both are equal.]¹⁴

At first sight, this comment would seem to be an intervention on Fitz-Geffry's part in the Joseph Hall-Marston conflict. He attempts to mollify Marston's resentment of Hall by praising both, but in the process rather ties himself in knots. Hall may have been 'first' chronologically, but Fitz-Geffry suggests that there are only two satirists, and they of equal rank. (Earlier in Book 2.19 and 20, he had praised the satires of Joseph Hall.) Wheare's response suggests that Rous and Spry had raised concerns that there was something inappropriate here, possibly based upon Jonson's objection to the praise of Marston.¹⁵ Perhaps some at least of Fitz-Geffry's epigrams were circulating in London just before publication. The Middle Temple seems a likely location for such circulation; Rous had entered it on May 5, Marston was long associated with it, and Jonson also had a number of close associates there, including John Hoskins and Richard Martin.¹⁶ However, Wheare in Oxford seems to have a better sense of the competitive dynamics at work in the London literary world and is thus less concerned with Jonson's reaction. Through the Greek proverb that he quotes he suggests that an element of envy is involved in the dispute; such, of course, would be expected given the ongoing conflict between the two playwrights, which was at its height in 1601.

The poems and letters discussed here show the careful line observed by a poet as he lampooned others in the heated literary climate of 1601 and the role of self-censorship in the movement toward print. Names are cautiously modified but rarely left out entirely, so that identities can be discerned by those in the know. The final lines of the letter contain Wheare's rejection of a continental printer, an alternative that Rous and Spry must have suggested. By implication, their concerns about the libelling of individuals are such that they feared *Affaniae* could not be printed in England in its current state.

Notes

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- 1 The only significant biographical discussion of Wheare is by J.H.M. Salmon in *The Oxford DNB*.
- 2 Bodl. MS Selden Supra 81, fol. 21r. The letter is dated 8 Kal. Mai 1601, which would be Apr. 24; however, it was clearly written later than the letter which Wheare sent on 'Non Mai 1601' [May 7] (fol. 19r) with the first two parts of *Affaniae*. I suspect that it should read 8 Kal. Jun (May 25), and that the error is simply a mental slip on Wheare's part.

- 3 'Etiam' has been added above the line.
- 4 Trans. Dana F. Sutton, 'Affaniae Book II', *Charles Fitzgeoffrey: Affaniae and Cenotaphia (1601)*, The Philological Museum, 18 February 2006, <<http://www.philological-bham.ac.uk/affaniae/2eng.html>>
- 5 *John Weever: A Biography of a Literary Associate of Shakespeare and Jonson, Together with a Photographic Facsimile of Weever's Epigrammes (1599)* (Manchester, UK, 1987), 40. Another possibility would be Robert Weever (author of *Itys*, which appeared in 1598). Note that Thomas Campion also mocks 'Faber' who pathetically seeks the favour of a great lord: see his *Poemata* in *Works*, Percival Vivian (ed.) (1909; reprint, Oxford, 1966), 1.196.
- 6 Roscoe Addison Small, *The Stage-Quarrel between Ben Jonson and the So-Called Poetasters* (1899; reprint, New York, 1966), 101–7.
- 7 Small, *Stage-quarrel*, 126, identifies him with Simplicius Faber, but does not make the connection of either with Weever.
- 8 Matthew Steggle, *Wars of the Theatres: The Poetics of Personation in the Age of Jonson* (Victoria, 1998), 23.
- 9 Davies might also be John Davies of Hereford, who was active in Oxford in these years; however, his career in print did not begin until 1602, and at the time of this letter Sir John Davies had wider renown as a satirist.
- 10 Trans. Sutton, 'Affaniae Book II'.
- 11 The first (2:56) is entitled 'Ad Leporinum'. Previously in the volume (2:26–8) Fitz-Geffry had presented another series about Leporinus ('hare-like'), who is characterized as a drunk, atheist, and ranter (the Latin term is 'rabula', the same as in 2:58), who has now been imprisoned.
- 12 Another possibility would be William Rankins, *Seaven Satyres. Applied to the weeke* (London, 1598; STC: 20700); however, these fairly moralistic and impersonal satires seem unlikely to have stirred the savage counterattack of Fitz-Geffry. Of course, Weever's *Epigrammes* was divided into seven 'weeks', but I find no possible reference to Fitz-Geffry in that volume.
- 13 For a recent affirmation of Bastard's authorship of the 'Libel', see Mark Nicholls, 'The Authorship of "Thomas Bastard's Oxford Libel"', *Notes and Queries* 52 (2005), 186–9.
- 14 Trans. Sutton, 'Affaniae Book II'.
- 15 See James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War* (New York, 2001), 155–74, for a recent discussion of the Jonson-Marston aspect of the Wars of the Theatres in 1600–1.
- 16 David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 56–7. See also Steggle, *Wars of the Theatres*, 50.