

ON THE NEGLECTED SOURCES OF SOME EPIGRAMS  
BY THOMAS MORE

The first edition of Sir Thomas More's epigrams, published with the third edition of *Utopia* at Basel, 1518, explicitly raised the issue of sources. The title page announced the collection in these terms : *Epigrammata clarissimi disertissimique viri Thomae Mori, pleraque e Graecis versa*. The principal source for More's Latin poems was the well-known *Greek Anthology*. John Marsden, author of the important nineteenth-century commentary, stated that barely one-fourth of More's epigrams were, in fact, from the Greek.<sup>1</sup> Hoyt M. Hudson, the twentieth-century authority on Renaissance epigrams, increased that figure to about one-third, or 85 poems.<sup>2</sup> The collaborators on the standard modern edition, Leicester Bradner and C.A. Lynch (assisted by the eminent classicist James Hutton), reviewed the problem extensively and found that at least 102 epigrams, including 17 in the *Progymnasmata* (where rival versions by More and his friend William Lily appear together with the Greek texts), are translations or close adaptations of Greek poems.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Bradner and Lynch noted that three derive from Diogenes Laertius, four are based on a sentence from Aristotle, one translates Arsenius, and three adapt a Latin epigram by Martial. The titles of two epigrams designate them as translations of English songs. With these, Bradner and Lynch declared, "we come to the end of More's known sources".

In the present survey I shall point to sources for two other epigrams, and in the process solve a minor textual mystery concerning the first edition of *Epigrammata*. I shall also indicate a possible prototype from which More could have adapted a pair of epigrams. Finally, I shall suggest an antecedent which might have influenced the idea and design of one other epigram.

In the first edition of *Epigrammata* (1518), Epigram 221, "In scurram pauperem", appears at the top of page 261. The page preceding bears the catch-word *De histrione*. Of this circumstance Bradner and Lynch said, "No such title follows in any copy of

that edition which we have seen. The catch-word in 1520 [the second edition] refers correctly to Ep. 221".<sup>4</sup> The explanation of this mystery seems to be as follows: the epigram "In scurram pauperem" represents a versification of what must have been a well-known jest of the early Renaissance. Two prior versions of the jest survive; in each, the character which More designates "scurra" is referred to as "histrion". One of these versions, in Heinrich Bebel's *Facetiae* (1508) carries the title "De histrione". Bebel's probable source for the jest was *Mensa Philosophica* (1475), attributed to either Theobaldo Anguilberto or Michael Scot. *Mensa Philosophica* is a discourse on table manners. The fourth book contains numerous *facetiae* appropriate for table conversation, which are grouped according to the occupations of their protagonists. The jest in question appears under the general heading "De histrionibus".

It seems fair to surmise that More, thinking of the *histrion* of the earlier jest, had originally assigned the title "De histrione" to his epigram. Sometime during the process of printing he must have changed his title to "In scurram pauperem", the printer neglecting to alter the catch-word accordingly.

Here is More's epigram:

*In scurram pauperem*

Scurra ubi iam fures totam sibi nocte videret  
Scrutanteis magna sedulitate domum  
Risit et, O media quid vos hic nocte videtis,  
Miror, ait. Media nil ego cerno die.

Here is Bebel's version:

*De histrione.*

Quidam histrionum cum noctu quosdam fures in domo sua  
deprehendisset, ait ad illos. Nescio quod vos nocte hic  
invenire velitis, cum sereno die ego nihil invenire possim.<sup>5</sup>

Here is the jest as told in *Mensa Philosophica*:

Quidam histrionum videns latrones in domo sua dixit, nescio  
quid vos hic potestis invenire in nocte: cum ego nihil invenire  
possim claro die.<sup>6</sup>

While it would be difficult to argue that More based his epigram on one or the other of the extant texts, on some printed

version now lost, or simply on oral recountings, there can be no doubt that he was retelling an existing jest.<sup>7</sup>

The remaining epigrams to be considered have their origin in what may be loosely designated the Aesopic corpus. As accepted in More's time, this included not only 200-odd Greek fables of ancient origin, associated with the legendary Aesop, but also some scores of brief "moral" narratives (some of them actually quite bawdy) composed or transmitted in Latin, Greek, or vernacular prose or verse. Aesopic stories were very popular and highly esteemed in pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> With the invention of printing, the late fifteenth century saw a proliferation of "Aesop" texts in several languages.<sup>9</sup> One authority listed 178 incunabula editions, a figure certain to be far short of the actual number published.<sup>10</sup> When we add to these the putative hundreds of Aesop manuscripts, thousands of incidental quotations and allusions in print and manuscript, and the incalculable domain of oral transmission, we can see the difficulty of identifying precise texts as sources for still other versions of given stories.

What can be stated with certainty is that More's Epigram 206, "De chirurgo et anu", constitutes a versified rendering of an Aesopic narrative. Here is More's epigram:

*De chirurgo et anu*

Unxit anus aegros velans chirurgus ocellos  
Utile persuadens hoc fore quinque dies.  
Interea mappas, pelves, mortaria, discos,  
Quicquid onus tutum non facit inde rapit.  
Quum sanata oculos circumtulit illa revinctos  
Instrumenta suae sentit abesse domus.  
Mercedem ergo exacta, tua contingeret, inquit,  
Uberior pactum est ut mihi visus ope.  
At video nunc quam ante minus quorum usus in aede est.  
Vidi multa prius, nunc video inde nihil.

Compare with this the following episode in the influential Latin Aesop of Rinuccio de Castiglione, or Remicius (d. 1450):

*De muliere et medico.*

Mulier anus cum ophthalmiam pateretur: medicus ad se

curandum accersit certum pretium sibi dare promittens : si eo morbo curaretur: si vero non liberaretur: nihil ei debere pacta est. Medicus vero: quotiens illam ibat curatum: totiens quippiam e domo clam exportabat. Mulier igitur ophthalmia curata: cum nihil suarum rerum domi esse prospiceret: medico mercedem pactam petenti solvere denegat. quamobrem vocata in iudicium: pactum quidem non denegat: sed se curatam ophthalmia esse id vero pernegat aiens cum ceca eram domum multa supellectile refertam videbam: nunc cum video ut medicus ait nihil rerum domi esse perspicio.<sup>11</sup>

As in the case of the jest concerning thievery by night, we can discover no great affinity between the actual wording of More's Epigram 206 and that of any antecedent version of the Aesopic narrative. Yet the motifs are identical, and there can be no doubt that More was retelling a story, not inventing one.

More's Epigrams 43 and 44, "Aliud in astrologum uxoris impudicae maritum" and "In eundem iambicum", develop a single motif; they depict a ridiculous astrologer who, foretelling the destiny of everyone else, remains ignorant of his own cuckoldry.<sup>12</sup> Aesop contains no situation identical to this; however, one Aesopic story does provide a close parallel, the principal difference being that the robbery of the seer's house occurs in place of his wife's unfaithfulness. Here is the briefer of the two epigrams by More, no. 43:

*Aliud in astrologum uxoris impudicae maritum*

Astra tibi aethereo pandunt sese omnia vati,  
Omnibus et quae sint fata futura monent.  
Omnibus ast uxor quod se tua publicat, id te  
Astra, licet videant omnia, nulla monent.<sup>13</sup>

Here is the Aesopic analogue, in the Latin of the great humanist Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457):

*De Vaticinatore*

Vaticinator quidam in foro sedens sermocinabatur. Cum sibi quidam denunciat fores domus eius effractas esse/omniaque direpta quae in domo fuissent. Ad quem nuncium gemens

Vaticinator: properansque cursu. se domum recipiebat. quem currentem quidam intuens O tu inquit qui aliena negocia te divinaturum promittis. certa tua ipsa non divinasti.<sup>14</sup>

To insist that Aesop's *vaticinator* represents the "source" of More's *astrologus* would be indiscreet; however, it is reasonable to assert that the epigram belongs to the same literary tradition as the Aesopic narrative.

The remaining epigram of concern is no. 162:

*De vulpe aegrota et leone apologus*

Dum iacet angusta vulpes aegrota caverna  
Ante fores blando constitit ore leo.  
Ecquid, amica, vales? Cito me lambente valebis.  
Nescis in lingua vis mihi quanta mea.  
Lingua tibi medica est, vulpes ait, at nocet illud  
Vicinos quod habet tam bona lingua malos.

Of all More's epigrams, this poem most closely resembles the popular "beast fables" of Aesopic tradition — a resemblance reinforced by the designation *apologus* in the title. Yet the story itself has no close counterpart in Aesop's fables. There does exist, however, an interesting analogue — actually a partial inversion of the situation which More presents. Aesop tells of a sick lion in his den seeking to persuade a fox to enter. As in the epigram, the wily fox triumphs with a verbal retort. Here is Rinuccio's Latin rendition:

*De leone sene.*

Leo cum senuisset: nec victum sibi quaerere posset: viam machinatus est: qui alimenta haud sibi desint. Ingressus igitur speluncam: graviter egrotare iacens simulabat. Animalia illum vere egrotare putantia: visitandi gratia ad eum accedebant: que capiens singulatim manducabat. cum multa animalia iam occidisset/vulpes leonis cognita arte: aditum spelunce accedens: leonem quo valeat pacto: exterius stans rogat. ei leo blande respondens ait: vulpes filia cur non intro ingrederis ad me? Ei vulpes non illepide ait quoniam here mi. animalium ingredientium perplura equidem vestigia cerno: sed egredientium vestigia nulla.<sup>15</sup>

The present examination has increased by two the number of More's epigrams known to have had sources. In one case the source was a jest current in Latin and (probably) vernacular forms; in the other it was a narrative from Aesopic tradition. This discussion has, furthermore, pointed to Aesopic analogues which might have influenced the composition of three other epigrams.

In pursuing More's sources, far from slighting his originality, we gain a new appreciation of the fact that his great inventive powers as a writer were complemented and strengthened by his vast conversancy as a reader.

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#### NOTES

1. *Philomorus: A Brief Examination of the Latin Poems of Sir Thomas More*, revised edition (London, 1878), p. 18.

2. *The Epigram in the English Renaissance* (Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 44.

3. *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More* (University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. xix-xxi. Besides the hundred-and-two, an epigram by More printed in Bradner and Lynch's Appendix I (no. 1) is from the *Greek Anthology*. One in the *Progymnasmata* (no. 18) translates a Greek epigram not found in contemporaneous versions of the *Anthology*. Throughout the present discussion I shall be quoting More's epigrams from the Bradner-Lynch edition, and citing the numbers assigned the poems there.

4. P. 95. Actually, the 1520 catch-word (p. 95) is misspelled *In curram*.

5. Quoted from Bebel's *Opuscula* (Strassburg, 1512), sig. C2<sup>v</sup>.

6. Quoted from a later edition (Cologne, c. 1480), [fol. 76<sup>r</sup>].

7. The popular currency of the jest is evident from Martin Luther's use of it in his "Auslegung des 118 Psalms" (1530):

Gar sein were es (sage ich), Wer so von sich selbs lassen künd und den teuffel spotten mit der leeren tasschen, gleich wie jhener armer hauswirt den dieb spottet, den er bey der nacht inn seinem hause ergreiff und sprach: Uh, du törichter dieb, wiltu bey finster nacht etwas hierin finden, und ich kan bey liechtem tage nichts hinnen finden. [*Werke*, vol. 31, part 1 (Weimar, 1913), p. 150.]

It is possible that Luther derived his jest from More. Luther had read *Utopia* in the Basel ed. containing the *Epigrammata*; see Germain Marc'hadour, *L'Univers de Thomas More* (Paris, 1963), p. 261. It will be noticed that Luther, like More (but unlike More's predecessors) omits the designation "histrion".

8. Discussions of the subject appear in Max PLESSOW, *Geschichte der Fabeldichtung in England*; [*Palaestra* LII (1906), pp. xlix-lxxii]; and T.W. BALDWIN, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (University of Illinois Press, 1944), I, 607-40.

9. D. G. HALE, "Aesop in Renaissance England", *Library*, Fifth Series, XXVII (1972), 116-25, gives a convenient summary. Hale cites more detailed studies of the subject, the most notable being the several works of Ben E. PERRY.

10. George C. KEIDEL, *A Manual of Aesopic Fable Literature* (Baltimore, 1896), pp. 9-28.

11. Quoted from the first edition (Milan, 1474), [fol. 35<sup>v</sup>-36<sup>r</sup>]. The narrative corresponds to no. 57 in the scholarly Greek text of Aesop edited by August Hausrath, et al., revised edition (Leipzig, 1970). Most of the important fifteenth and early sixteenth-century editions employed the Rinuccio translation.

For purposes of comparison, here is the story in a Latin version by Odo of Cheriton (d. 1247), widely circulated in manuscript in More's time:

Anus quedam patiebatur in oculis. Facta autem conventione, spo(s)ndit Medicus eam curaturam. In domo autem vetule plurima erant utensilia. Cot(t)idie Medicus apponebat medicinam oculis eius et cot(t)idie paulatim furabatur vascula eius, donec tota domos (sic) evacueretur. Tandem convaluit Anus illa, que, ut vidit domum suam spoliata, contristata est, et nolebat Medico suam reddere mercedem. Medicus convenit eam coram iudice. Que ait: Nondum convalui ab infirmitate. Cum enim oculus meus sanus esset, plurima videbam in domo mea, que modo non video.

[Léopold HERVIEUX, *Les Fabulistes Latins depuis le siècle d'Auguste jusqu'à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1896), IV, 415. The parentheses are Hervieux's.]

12. Epigrams 45, 46, 47, and 49 are similar, except that in these the astrologer searches the stars to discover the character of his own wife — and fails.

13. The longer Epigram 44 does not vary the situation but simply embellishes it with astronomical and mythological details.

14. Quoted from *Aesopus grecus* ([Nuremberg, c. 1500]), sig. [a5<sup>v</sup>]. Sebastian Brant included Valla's translation in his *Esopi appologi* (Basel, 1501). Here is Rinuccio's version:

#### *De vate quodam*

Foro urbis medio quidam vates: cuius sortem aperiebat futuram: quamobrem magna hominum frequentia stipatus: dum uni et alteri suam aperit sortem: ei nuntiatur: res suas furtim domo esse ablatas: quo audito domum curriculo dum abit: quidam ei obviam factus: ridicule ait. cur alios quid esset futurum monebas: qui tue sortis nescius fuisti? ([fol. 44<sup>r</sup>])

This story corresponds to no. 170 in the Hausrath Greek text.

15. [Fol. 42<sup>r</sup>]. Corresponds to Hausrath, no. 152.



## UTOPIE MUSICALE

### *Les Euphoniens d'Hector Berlioz.*

Dans *L'art de la musique*, gros livre de 689 pages publié par Guy Bernard chez Seghers, Sr Noémi Ruffault d'Avranches a trouvé -- et copié pour nous -- cinq pages sur "l'éducation musicale chez les Euphoniens". Euphonia est une petite ville de 12 000 âmes, située par Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) dans l'Allemagne du 24<sup>e</sup> siècle. C'est "un vaste conservatoire de musique", dont les habitants se consacrent uniquement à cet art. Le passionné de l'orchestration que fut Berlioz donne à l'orgue un rôle capital :

*Le signal des heures de travail et des repas, des réunions par quartiers, par rues, des répétitions par petites ou par grandes masses, etc., est donné au moyen d'un orgue gigantesque placé au haut d'une tour qui domine tous les édifices de la ville...*

*Tout individu possédant toujours une voix quelconque, chacun des Euphoniens est tenu d'exercer la sienne et d'avoir des notions de l'art du chant. Il en résulte que les joueurs d'instruments à cordes de l'orchestre, qui peuvent chanter et jouer en même temps, forment un second chœur de réserve que le compositeur emploie dans certaines occasions et dont l'entrée inattendue produit quelquefois les plus étonnants effets...*

*L'éducation littéraire des Euphoniens est soignée; ils peuvent jusqu'à un certain point apprécier les beautés des grands poètes anciens et modernes. Ceux d'entre eux dont l'ignorance et l'inculture à cet égard seraient complètes, ne pourraient jamais prétendre à des fonctions musicales un peu élevées.*

