

## MORE'S EPIGRAM ON BRIXIUS' PLAGIARISM : ONE POEM OR TWO ?

In the course of reviewing the literature pertaining to More's *Letter to Brixius* – to retain the Latin name of Germain de Brie – I naturally took a close look at the long letter to Erasmus in which More explains how his quarrel with Brixius began.<sup>1</sup> From More's painstaking inventory in this letter of the epigrams which he himself wrote against Brixius' *Chordigeræ Naus Conflagratio* (Paris, 1513), it initially seems that one epigram which taunts Brixius for plagiarizing classical authors is missing from the series against Brixius as printed in More's *Epigrammata* (Basel, March and November 1518, December 1520). It is a good deal more likely that the one epigram which we do have on Brixius' plagiarism represents a conflation of two poems.<sup>2</sup> If we separate these two, we obtain two suggestively different pronouncements on the right and the wrong way to imitate ancient stylistic models. More's two poems – not one – represent a significant contribution to the humanists' incessant and earnest debate on the nature of apt *imitatio*.<sup>3</sup>

The most pertinent passages from the letter which More sent Erasmus are these :

I really do wonder in which of my epigrams he [i.e., Brixius] finds those banes and imprecations which he, witty fellow, converts, as he boasts, into jests. Does he call it imprecations and banes that in one of my epigrams [*Epig.* 171] I jestingly excuse his lies by supposing that no one came home from the *Cordelière* who could present the matter to him as it actually happened, adding that Brixius himself should have been right there on the ship, so that he could have witnessed with his own eyes the matter which he was going to describe, and would not have been compelled to lie as shamefully as he did and commemorate false deeds in place of the truth ? ... But besides that epigram nine others remain, in the first of which [*Epig.* 170] I point out simply what is undeniable, that all writers will lose credibility if they get into the habit, based upon his example, of writing with less attention to credibility than to partisan sentiment. In two of them [*Epigg.* 174-75] I make fun of the way that he makes Hervé fight so prodigiously. In one [*Epig.* 176] I joked about both the boastfulness and the thoughtlessness of Brixius' fabrications ; besides many other remarkable absurdities, he makes Hervé utter a prophecy about Brixius himself, as a nursling of Phoebus, and (to render this possible) makes him sermonize at length, in the midst of the flames, as if he had all the time in the world. Finally, I made fun of him because of this : although many were saved from each ship when some of our boats came to

the rescue, he preferred to burn them up, one and all, leaving no one behind who might plausibly have told him the tale he was going to write. In one [*Epig.* 178] I made fun of those verses Brixius made up for the cenotaph of Hervé. In two [*Epigg.* 177-?] I made fun of the way that Brixius had adorned his *Chordigera* using verses of ancient poets which he had snatched like a thief. In two [*Epigg.* 179, 193] I indicated that I desired a little more evidence of intelligence and cleverness in the *Chordigera* as regards both the invention and the arrangement of the matters he dealt with. (Allen, 4, ep. 1087, ll. 103-11, 135-150.)

More clearly counts ten epigrams; no less clearly, he mentions two epigrams on Brixius' plagiarism where only one seems to have survived. Allen, ignoring More's final epigram expressly directed against Brixius in the 1518 editions (*Epig.* 193), which is separated from the rest of the series (*Epigg.* 170-179) in these early texts, adopts the same numbering-convention as Bradner and Lynch and includes More's two excerpts from Brixius, *Epigg.* 172-73, in the pertinent sequence of More's poems; this, in turn, allows Allen to connect More's own figure of *ten* poems pertaining to Brixius with the pages in Froben's editions containing the ten entries *Epigg.* 170-79. Once we choose to count *Epig.* 193 with the rest of the entries explicitly pertaining to Brixius in the 1518 collection, we have on our hands not ten entries, but rather eleven. Clearly, therefore, More is not numbering the two Brixius-excerpts in his figure of ten; on the other hand, striking these two from the list, we end up with just nine poems. Have we then lost More's own second epigram about Brixius' poetical thefts, or have we just misplaced it?

It is tempting to suppose that More's « lost » epigram about Brixius' poetical thefts is none other than *Epig.* 220, « In Gallum Sublegentem Veterum Carmina » (« On a Frenchman who pilfers the verses of the ancients »). We have already noted that one of More's poems, *Epig.* 193, is detached from the series on Brixius; we might easily assume that *Epig.* 220 had been similarly detached. On the other hand, ll. 156-162 of More's letter to Erasmus make it clear that the poems against Brixius which More has just catalogued attack Brixius personally by name:

Finally, when I heard that steps were being taken to publish my *Epigrammata* at Basel, you yourself know [cf. Allen, 2, ep. 461, ll. 20-23] what steps I took to have those poems I wrote against Brixius omitted, along with some others, since certain poems seemed overly frivolous to me (even if they are far from that obscenity which, I see, virtually all by itself commends some writers' epigrams to some readers); and at the same time I did not wish in the least to mock anyone by name [*neminem .... a me perstringi nominatim*], even for a good cause...

Brixius' name is never used in *Epig.* 220, while in each of the nine other poems to which More here refers Brixius' name figures clearly in either the text or the title. The vocative « Galle » which occurs twice in *Epig.* 220 is not metrically equivalent to the vocative « Brixi », a fact which precludes the conjecture that « Gallus » is merely a late substitution for « Brixius ». Further, More's first Brixius-epigram is addressed not to « Germanus Brixius » but to « Brixius Germanus » or « Brixius the German », a deliberate equivocation on More's part as to Brixius' nationality which allows More to snipe at the Gothic or « Germanic » character of Brixius' own poetry. At no point in the collection of 1518 does More seek to correct this convenient mistake by identifying Brixius explicitly as a Frenchman, and More's first title (« In Brixium Germanum ... ») actually seems to have misled at least two of More's own near-contemporaries into stating that Brixius was German.<sup>4</sup> Brixius may well be the indirect target of *Epig.* 220, as indeed he may well be the indirect target of one other poem in More's *Epigrams*; <sup>5</sup> even so we cannot use *Epig.* 220 to make up More's sum of ten *direct* attacks upon Brixius which use Brixius' own name. In the 1563 Basel edition of More's *Lucubrations*, followed by the 1689 Frankfurt *Opera Omnia*, *Epig.* 193 is restored to its place at the end of Brixius-series; *Epig.* 220 remains wholly isolated. The relation between this poem and *Epigg.* 170-79 is by no means a patent one.

Actually, the single surviving epigram on the topic of Brixius' plagiarism which can be identified with any certainty (*Epig.* 177) is very probably a conflation of the two epigrams which More himself mentions. It appears in traditional editions as follows:

IN EUNDEM [sc., BRISIUM] VERSUS POETARUM SUFFURANTEM

Priscos poetas nemo te colit magis

Legitue diligentius.

Nam nemo priscis e poetis omnibus

Est cuius ipse ex uersibus

5 Non hinc et inde flosculos et gemmulas

Manu capaci legeris,

Vatem redonans tanto honore protinus

Scriptis tuis ut inseras.

Beasque uatem nempe quae tu congeris

10 Suos parentes indicant,

Magisque resplendent tua inter carmina

Quam nocte lucent sydera.

Tantum decus uati inuidere nemini

Soles, amicus omnium,

- 15 Ne quis, decus prioris olim seculi,  
Neglectus abs te defleat.  
Ergo sacrati ne poetarum modi  
Longo situ obsolescerent  
Iniuria tu uindictos temporis  
20 Nouo nitore percolis.  
Hoc est uetustis arte nouitatem dare,  
Qua re nihil felicius.  
Ars O beata, quisquis arte isthac tamen  
Vetusta nouitati dabit,  
25 Is arte nulla (quamlibet sadet diu),  
Nouis uetustatem dabit.<sup>6</sup>

It is likely that More's first epigram on the topic of Brixius' thefts ends with the *argutia* or « point » found in l. 12; ll. 13-26 are based on a radically different conceit and climax in a « point » all their own. If the *argutia* is the « soul » of any epigram, one might argue on no other basis than the presence of two such « souls » here that we must have two « bodies » - distinct poems - as well.<sup>7</sup> But the lasting significance of More's themes in this pair of poems makes it well worth the trouble to argue our case in more detail.

The conflation of adjacent epigrams on a single theme is a simple and commonplace transcription-error. It involves nothing more than the omission of the abbreviated lemma or title « in idem » (« On the same subject ») which divides the first poem from the second; once it has occurred, it is rarely corrected except through collation with some text which is nearer the archetype. One Greek text which More translates as a single poem (*Epig.* 71) is actually a conflation of two; in the *Palatine Anthology*, not recovered for centuries after More's death, this division is clear and convincing. In a recent issue of *Moreana* Marianne S. Meijer has discussed the conflation of two of More's epigrams on astrologers (*Epigg.* 43, 47) in Agrippa's *De Vanitate Scientiarum*.<sup>8</sup> At least two instances of conflation (*Epigg.* 32-33, 37-38) appear in both 1518 editions of More's *Epigrammata* itself, disappearing in More's 1520 revision. More's failure to restore in a similar fashion the text of the two poems comprised in *Epig.* 177 may be easily explained in accordance with More's reluctance to assume any direct editorial responsibility for his first group of Brixius-epigrams.

The two poems comprised in *Epig.* 177, like the other conflated poems which I have mentioned, are assuredly not unrelated. There are echoes: « beata » in l. 23 echoes « beas » in l. 9; « percolis » in l. 20 vaguely echoes « colit » in l. 1; and, most tellingly, « tantum decus » in l. 13 echoes « tanto honore » in l. 7. It is this last connection, indeed,

which has made it so easy to accept the whole text as one poem. On the other hand, it is not unlike More to repeat certain phrases in successive epigrams for straightforward or ironic emphasis. In the Brixius series itself, the first four lines of *Epig.* 171 echo the governing phrases of *Epig.* 170. The « tantum » in l. 13 of *Epig.* 177 « looks forward » to the « ne » of l. 15 just as clearly as it « looks backward » to the « tantum » of l. 7, thus inviting us to consider ll. 13-26 as a new, supplementary explanation for Brixius' inordinate eagerness to show off his thefts from the ancients.

By l. 12 the gardening and garnering metaphors of the earlier lines are exhausted. The controlled incongruity of More's comparison likening Brixius' excerpts from others in the context of his own muddy verse to « the stars in the night sky above » recalls Martial's conclusion to one of his own plagiarist-epigrams and caps off More's hints that to « cull » and to « garner » as Brixius does is to pilfer and hoard other men's purple patches with no notion of how to assimilate them.<sup>9</sup> A still closer precedent for More's comparison, a passage in the preface to Erasmus' *Adagia* on the ornamental value of classical authors' proverbial tags, suggests what has gone wrong in the process of Brixius' « borrowing »:

Indeed, if adages are woven in wittily, in their place, it will happen in consequence that one's entire discourse will be bright, as it were, with these little stars of antiquity, will please with these figurative colors, will gleam with these sententious gems [*gemmulis*], and will entice with these festive embellishments; will, in summary, stir with its novelty, delight with its brevity, and persuade with its authority.<sup>10</sup>

If *all* Brixius' brilliance is borrowed, then Brixius himself can lay claim to no brilliance at all; what is uniquely his must at last be defined by privation. Even when *imitatio* is seemingly confined to the level of diction, a witty and topical disposition or *arrangement* of borrowed material is needed to elevate *imitatio* beyond empty mimicry. Brixius receives none of his borrowings into a living argumentative context; rather than *becoming* a child of the ancients by virtue of his borrowings, he kidnaps their children and enviously freezes their growth in a frivolous poetic menagery. More presses the « garnering » and « filial » metaphors dear to innumerable writers on *imitatio* in order to drive home the point that an apt sense of context alone can do credit to any man's « diligence » in imitating.<sup>11</sup>

More's l. 13 introduces a far more intriguing thematic development, taxing Brixius' thefts from the ancients as symptomatic of Brixius' historical naiveté about language in general. Here More's « solution » to the problem set forth in the preceding lines, his resolve to link argumentative and historical context in the most general sense, aligns More's concern for *anachronism* as an indispensable element of apt *imitatio* with the concern which Erasmus displays in his *Ciceronianus*.<sup>12</sup>

Brixius' version of bridging the gap between present and past in his diction is a scandalous travesty of the program presented by Horace :

But he who wants to have composed an authentic poem will take up with his notebooks the spirit of an honorable critic ; he will dare to expel from their place any words which have little brilliance, and are without weight, and reckoned unworthy of honor, although they may withdraw with reluctance, and still remain current in the holy-of-holies of Vesta. Those which have been long hidden from the people he will be good enough to draw out, and to bring to light those comely names for things which, although once borne in mind by the venerable Catos and Cethegi, now labor beneath unseemly rust and deserted antiquation ; he will appropriate new words which generative Custom produces. He will pour forth his riches and make Latium blessed with his opulent tongue ... (Horace, *Epistles*, 2. 2. 109-21)

At one point in the *Letter to Brixius*, More, alluding to Horace's parallel discussion of history and linguistic change in the *Ars Poetica*, states the principal thrust of his poems against Brixius as follows : « ... I arraigned some elements in your poem which you snatched like a thief from the ancients, other elements which you handled most absurdly, and all the elements which you narrated in such a way that there was neither truth in the matter nor credibility [*fides*] in the words ... »<sup>13</sup> Inattention to *fides rerum*, a discreditable scorn for his own real historical context, has made it inevitable that Brixius' own choice of words should lack *fides*, or « credit », in much the same way that his style of retelling the facts does : in denying the historical reality of the gulf between Classical poets and himself, Brixius makes it impossible for himself to achieve enough critical distance from his models to determine just what in their style he should imitate and what he should avoid. The malleable yet solid term « *fides* » forms the basis for More's entire argument, including his comments on wrong *imitatio*, no less in the *Letter to Brixius* than in More's first series of Brixius-epigrams. By recovering the second of More's epigrams on the topic of wrong *imitatio* we enable ourselves to gain new, deeper insights into how *fides* helped shape More's humanism.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen et al., 12 vols. (Oxford, 1906-58), 4, ep. 1087, pp. 217-32, hereafter cited as Allen. This letter and the *Letter to Brixius* both date from April 1520. For the *Letter to Brixius*, see *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.F. Rogers (Princeton, 1947), ep. 86, pp. 212-39, hereafter cited as Rogers.

2. I refer to *Epig. 177* in *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. L. Bradner and C. Lynch (Chicago, 1953). I will continue to refer to More's epigrams using the numbering of this edition.

3. For a wide-ranging and learned, though partisan, treatment of *imitatio* in the Renaissance, see G.W. Pigman III, « Imitation and the Renaissance Sense of the Past : The Reception of Erasmus' *Ciceronianus*, » *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 9 (1979), 155-77, and « Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance, » *Renaissance Quarterly*, 33 (1980), 1-32.

4. Cf. Lilius G. Gyraldus, *De Poetis Nostrorum Temporum* (1551), ed. K. Woltke, Lateinische Litteraturdenkmäler des XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts, No. 10 (Berlin, 1894), p. 65, and Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman* (1634), ed. G.S. Gordon (Oxford, 1906), p. 92. Even if the adjective « Gallus » did suffice to associate *Epig. 220* with Brixius for most of More's readers, this could not even begin to qualify *Epig. 220* as a specimen of « mocking by name. » The information given in the elaborate lemma to *Epig. 130* is certainly sufficient to identify its target as Bernard André, yet More voices no qualms about publishing this epigram just as we have it.

5. For what may be another indirect assault on Brixius, see *Epig. 226*, « In Quendam Qui Dicebat Carminibus Suis Non Defuturum Ingenium. » This lemma may well allude to the prophecy Brixius puts in Commander Hervé's mouth concerning none other than Brixius himself as a « nursling of Phoebus » ; cf. *Epig. 176*. More repeatedly touches on the lack of « mens », or « intelligence, » in Brixius' works (cf. esp. *Epig. 179*) ; lack of « mens » is a principal charge against the unnamed poet of *Epig. 226*, as well.

Incidentally, alternative targets for *Epig. 220* are not far to seek. Writing of Nicolas Bourbon, Brixius' younger friend and compatriot, V.L. Saulnier states,

Nos poètes lisent chaque jour Ovide et Virgile et Catulle, et peuvent de leur admiration concevoir le désir de les imiter en leur langue. Et ils les imiteront de très près, sertiissant avec complaisance dans leurs cadres des hémistiches entiers de Virgile ou d'un autre...

*Les Bagatelles de Nicolas Bourbon*, (Paris, 1945), introd., p. 3.

One very plausible target for *Epig. 220* is Guillemus Pielles of Tours, a French poet so similar to Brixius in his scorn for historical fact that, « so far as fabrications are concerned, there is nowhere on earth one ape more like another » (Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 332-33). Perhaps More found a similar affinity between Brixius and Pielles when he came to rate their *imitatio*.

6. « No one cultivates the ancient poets more than you or culls from them more diligently, for there is not one among the ancient poets from whose lines, here and there, you have not culled little blossoms and buds by the handful ; and you immediately repay the

poet by the great honor of being slipped in with what you write. And you do bestow a blessing on the bard, for what you gather proclaims its parentage and shines out among your lines more brightly than the stars gleaming in the night sky.

« So great an honor you never begrudge to any bard, a friend to them all, so that no one of them, once the glory of an age that is past, now needs to weep at your neglect. Therefore, lest the hallowed measures of the poets perish of long disuse, you save them from the injury of time and adorn them with a new luster. This is by art to give life to what is old — there is no happier gift than this. O blessed art ! And yet whoever, employing your artistic method, shall insert his antique borrowings in a new context, will by no effort of art, however long he sweats about it, succeed in imparting their antiquity to his own new verses. »

7. For the notion of « point » or « argutia » as the « soul » of an epigram, cf. Julius C. Scaliger, *Poetices Libri Septem : Editio Quinta* (Heidelberg, 1617), Book III, p. 390 : « [Epigrammatum] breuitas proprium quiddam est. Argutia, anima, ac quasi forma. » For a discussion of this passage and of the whole history of « point » in the epigrams of the Latins, see James H. Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1935), pp. 55, 60-63. Cf. also Quintilian, 8. 5. 11-14. In his introduction to More's epigrams Beatus Rhenanus uses the Greek near-equivalent, *epiphonēma*.

8. M. S. Meijer, « Les Aventures de Deux Epigrammes de Thomas More, » *Moreana*, 50 (June 1976), 5-10.

9. Martial, *Epigrammata*, II. 72. For More on purple patches, see Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 130-31. Seneca's *Epistle* 84, the *locus classicus* for distinguishing assimilation (true *imitatio*) from indiscriminate pilfering, also underlies the *Letter to Brixius*, Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 250 ff.

10. *Des. Erasmi Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc, 10 vols. (Leiden, 1703-06), 2, 8C.

11. See Pigman, « Versions of Imitation », pp. 5-9, for a history of these crucial metaphors.

12. For Erasmus' stress on anachronism, see Pigman, « Imitation and the Renaissance Sense of the Past, » p. 158 and *passim*. Pigman contends against most previous writers that this stress is atypical among humanists.

13. Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 218-20. Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 46-72, esp. ll. 49-53. More significantly stresses the parallelism of *licentia rerum fingendarum* and *licentia uerborum fingendorum* (Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 274-75) in a further allusion to Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 50-51. Other passages closely pertaining to More's understanding of *fides* in this controversy are *Epig.* 170, ll. 1-8 ; Allen, 4, ep. 1087, ll. 136-38 ; and Rogers, ep. 86, ll. 135, 275-300, and 356-64. Brixius' pertinent comments are in the *Antimorus*, ll. 130-45.

14. For a helpful discussion of Erasmus' pronouncements on *fides* in our sense, see M. Gilmore, « *Fides et Eruditio* : Erasmus and the Study of History, » in *Teachers of History : Essays in Honor of Laurence Bradford Packard*, ed. Stuart Hughes et al. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1954), pp. 9-27.