

The Original of Ravenscroft's Anatomist, and an Anecdote of Jemmy Spiller



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Now M. Gustave Cohen⁵ has proved that Balzac was born in 1595. Since it seems that there would be no reason for Balzac to falsify his age in this letter, it must have been written in 1623, twenty-eight years after his date of birth, probably in the period of disillusionment which followed his return from Italy.

These two letters are only typical of the scores of misdated ones in the folio edition of Balzac's works already cited, many of which have been corrected by Tamizey de Larroque.⁶

W. R. QUINN

THE ORIGINAL OF RAVENSCROFT'S *ANATOMIST*,
AND AN ANECDOTE OF JEMMY SPILLER

With the possible exception of *The London Cuckolds*, Edward Ravenscroft's most popular play was *The Anatomist, or The Sham Doctor*.¹ First written in three acts, it received frequent performances. Later, in a condensed and altered form, it became one of the standard English farces, and as such was acted in both England and America until early in the nineteenth century. Although most of Ravenscroft's plagiarisms have been identified, the original of *The Anatomist*, so far as I know, has not been mentioned except in a casual allusion by Mr. W. J. Lawrence,² who is primarily interested in the actor Jemmy Spiller. My chief purpose is to establish Ravenscroft's source; but I shall, besides, question Mr. Lawrence on two points: (1) his identification of Jemmy Spiller as the actor praised by Riccoboni,³ and (2) his statement that the performance of *The Anatomist* seen by the Italian was of the condensed and altered version.

Robert Jennens in a letter⁴ dated Thursday, November 19, 1696,

⁵ *Ecrivains français en Hollande dans la 1ère moitié du XVII siècle*, p. 141, Paris, Champion, 1920.

⁶ Chapelain, *op. cit.*, I. Lettres de Balzac, publiées par. P. Tamizey de Larroque, Paris, 1873.

¹ Produced at Lincoln's Inn Fields c. Nov., 1696. Printed 1697.

² "A Player-Friend of Hogarth", *The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies*, Second Series, p. 221.

³ *Reflections Historiques et Critiques sur les Differens Theatres de L'Europe*, Paris, 1738. Mr. Lawrence's quotations are from an English translation, London, 1741.

⁴ Quoted by the Reverend Montague Summers in his edition of Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus*, p. 254.

writes of *The Anatomist* as "translated out of the French", but he does not give the author or title of the original. In 1738, Luigi Riccoboni⁵ has the following account:

Au théâtre de Linksinfild je me trouvai à la représentation d'une Comédie, dont l'action principale ne m'étoit point connue, mais il me fut aisé de reconnoître un épisode que l'Auteur avoit sans doute placé dans son intrigue: C'étoit cette scène que nous avons tant vûe dans *Crispin Médecin*; le seul changement qu'on y avoit fait c'étoit d'introduire un Vieillard à la place du Valet, qui fait rire le Spectateur par ses allarmes, lorsqu' il se met à la place du cadavre que le Médecin doit disséquer. La scène étoit ainsi disposée: le Vieillard amoureux s'entretient avec un Valet de la maison de sa maîtresse; le Valet entend du bruit, ou fait semblant d'entendre, il dit au Vieillard de se cacher, & comme toutes les issues sont fermées, il lui conseille de se mettre sur la table où l'on devoit apporter le cadavre; après quelques difficultés le Vieillard y consent, & fait précisément les mêmes choses que Crispin dans la Comédie Française; mais pour donner une plus grande apparence de vérité à la supposition, le Valet fait deshabiller le Vieillard amoureux, & le met en chemise. On vient pour faire l'opération, on porte quantité d'instrumens de Chirurgie, on se met en état de disséquer le cadavre, le Vieillard crie, & la fourberie est découverte.

Je trouvai dans l'Acteur qui faisoit le Vieillard la plus parfaite exécution que l'on puisse souhaiter, & que l'on aperçoit guères dans un Comédien, s'il n'a quarante ans d'expérience d'exercice. . . . Comme c'étoit un rôle de vieillard qu'il représentoit, je ne doutois nullement que ce ne fût un vieux Comédien, qui instruit par une longue expérience, & en même tems aidé par la pesanteur de l'âge, jouoit si naturellement; mais quelle fut ma surprise, lorsque j'appris que cet Acteur étoit un jeune homme de vingt-six ans tout au plus.

The following points in Riccoboni's account are notable. First, it was only an episode in the comedy seen at Lincoln's Inn Fields, which reminds him of *Crispin Médecin*.⁶ He says the main action was not at all known to him. Second, the episode differed from the original in that an old man, instead of Crispin, pretended to be a corpse. Third, it was the actor who played the old man who most impressed him, and drew a eulogy from him. Last, he was particularly surprised to find that this actor was only twenty-six years old. It may also be noticed that Riccoboni does not give the name of either the comedy or the actor.

The *Reflexions Historiques et Critiques* did not appear until almost ten years after the death of Jemmy Spiller in 1729. In

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 173-7.

⁶ By Noel L. Breton, Sieur de Hauteroche. Produced at Paris, about 1674, and printed, 1680.

1761 Victor ⁷ repeats the Italian's eulogy as an anecdote connected with him. Samuel Ireland, ⁸ writing at the end of the century, evidently does the same. Genest's ⁹ account of Spiller contains this and other anecdotes given by Victor, but Genest is cautious, and in connection with one of them, he has the following rather sceptical note: "This is so good a story that one hopes it is true."

Mr. Lawrence, ¹⁰ reviewing Jemmy's career, follows Victor, Ireland, and Genest in identifying Spiller as the actor referred to by Riccoboni. He appears to be the first who adds that the performance which the Italian saw was one in which Jemmy played the part of "Crispin the Sham Doctor in the farce of *The Anatomist*—a condensed and considerably altered version of Ravenscroft's old comedy so called." Although Mr. Lawrence has noticed the connection between *The Anatomist* and *Crispin Médecin*, and is undoubtedly correct in stating that the former was the play seen by Riccoboni, he has not gone into the question. His readers are left with the impression that, as the Italian says, the two works have only an episode in common, and that the principal action of one differs from that of the other.

Such is not the case. A comparison of the two reveals that *Crispin Médecin* is the play from which *The Anatomist*, as Robert Jennens wrote in 1696, has been "translated out of the French." To be sure, Ravenscroft has taken liberties with the original. When *The Anatomist* was first performed, it was given in conjunction with P. A. Motteux's masque *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, each of the three acts of the former being followed by an act of the latter. In order to connect the two, Ravenscroft has made additions, ¹¹ so that the masque appears to be given for the entertainment of the characters of his play. He often translates so freely that he may rather be said to paraphrase. In spite of this, he follows very closely *Crispin Médecin*. With one minor exception, ¹² the characters of *The Anatomist* correspond to those in

⁷ *The History of the Theatres of London and Dublin*, II, 69-73.

⁸ *Graphic Illustrations of Hogarth*, 1794-9. This work is mentioned by Mr. Lawrence, but I have been unable to see it.

⁹ *Some Account of the English Stage*, III, 271-2.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 221-3.

¹¹ With the exception of a scene at the beginning of the play, these occur at the end of the acts.

¹² Ravenscroft omits the Chirurgen, an unimportant character of *Crispin Médecin*.

the original, and in some cases have the same names, as, for instance, Crispin and Gerald. In Ravenscroft's first two acts the same incidents succeed each other in the same order as in the French play. The third act contains some changes, the most important of which is, curiously enough, the addition of the very episode which Riccoboni describes as recalling to him a similar one in *Crispin Médecin*.

It is not strange that the Italian should have been reminded of the French play by this scene where Old Gerald (called le Vieillard in Riccoboni's account), in order to escape discovery, pretends to be a corpse on the dissecting table. The episode bears a close resemblance to the scene in *Crispin Médecin* where Crispin pretends to be the corpse. It is strange, however, that Riccoboni should have been impressed by this scene, which has been added by Ravenscroft, and should not have noticed the one in the preceding act where the Englishman duplicates the original exactly by having Crispin on the dissecting table. Perhaps Riccoboni arrived at the theatre too late to witness the earlier episode. Perhaps, writing many years later, he remembered only what had most interested him, namely, the performance of the actor who had played the old man.

If Mr. Lawrence is correct¹³ in his statement that the rôle assumed by Jemmy Spiller was that of Crispin the Sham Doctor, it is evident that Jemmy cannot be the actor eulogized by Riccoboni. Crispin is the valet, and it is perfectly clear that the Italian was referring to the interpreter of the part of Old Gerald.¹⁴ Everything that Riccoboni recounts "le Vieillard" as doing, even to removing his clothes, is done by Old Gerald, and there can be no question that it is "le Vieillard", and not Crispin the valet, who is the subject of Riccoboni's praise. Jemmy Spiller may have been a remarkable actor, but it appears that in this case he has long been the recipient of credit due some one else. That he was the subject of other anecdotes, the reliability of which cannot be depended upon, may be seen by Genest's¹⁵ account of him. It will be recalled that Riccoboni was particularly amazed to find that the player of le Vieillard was only twenty-six. Mr. Lawrence, supposing that Jemmy's age is referred to, says that the Italian "is absurdly wide

¹³ It is reasonably certain that he is. For confirmation of this, see Genest, *op. cit.*, III, 64 and 273.

¹⁴ I have not been able to identify this actor. ¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, III, 271-2.

of the mark." Since it was not Jemmy, Riccoboni may very well be correct.

Because we know that the Italian's visit to London must have occurred before 1738, and since Mr. Lawrence dates it as 1727,¹⁶ it is unlikely that the performance under discussion was of "a condensed and considerably altered version of Ravenscroft's old comedy." What evidence there is seems to point to the original.

Genest¹⁷ thinks *The Anatomist* was altered about 1743, when it was given at Drury Lane on November 18, with *Venice Preserved*. Assuming that Mr. Lawrence's date of 1727¹⁸ for Riccoboni's visit is correct, we find two performances¹⁹ recorded at Lincoln's Inn Fields for that year, one on March 25 and the other on December 22, and on each occasion it is the only play mentioned. If it was the condensed version, some other play would have been on the bill. As late as 1735, *The Anatomist* was still being printed in its original form, which is not proof, but is an indication that it was being so acted. Mr. Lawrence may have been led to suppose that Riccoboni saw the condensed version, because the latter recognized only an episode and not the whole plot. But it seems likely a foreigner would be more confused by the original interspersed with acts of *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, than he would by the alteration, which is without the masque, and, though somewhat shortened, still bears a close resemblance to *Crispin Médecin*. Both versions contain the two episodes of first Crispin and then Old Gerald impersonating the corpse.

To sum up: (1) the original of Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist* is Hauteroche's *Crispin Médecin*; (2) Jemmy Spiller is not the actor, as has commonly been supposed, who is eulogized by Riccoboni; and (3) the version of *The Anatomist* which the Italian saw was probably the original and not the altered one.

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¹⁶ He disagrees with Victor and Ireland, who give 1715.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, iv, 59.

¹⁸ This is a late date. The earlier the date the more likely that my contention is correct.

¹⁹ Genest, *op. cit.*, III, 193 and 219.