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Lording Barry: dramatist, pirate – and dramatis persona?

There is, in Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (probably written early in 1605), an intriguingly odd throw-away line: at his wedding feast Hoard the usurer cheerfully greets two fishily named guests with, ‘Master Lamprey and Master Spitchcock, two the most welcome gentlemen alive,’ adding quite arbitrarily given what we have learnt so far of these two characters, ‘Your fathers and mine were all free o’th’ fishmongers!’ And Lamprey replies, ‘They were indeed, sir’ (5.2.22-4).

Middleton seems to have liked this joke about fishmonger fathers as it turns up again in a slightly different form in his later *Anything for a Quiet Life* (1621). Here, the prodigal Young Franklin has just cheated a mercer out of some cloth and a barber out a substantial sum of money; he is apprehended by two bailiffs and tries to evade them by pretending to be French; during the absurd bilingual conversation that follows, a French bawd, Margarita, enters; she helps him out by pretending to be related to him and tells the constable, again with apparently complete irrelevance to the narrative, ‘his père, what you call his fadre? He sell poissons’ (3.2.114-5) – that is, Young Franklin, like Lamprey and Spitchcock, is the son of a fishmonger.

What, I find interesting about these jokes is that they define the *fathers* of the characters addressed as fishmongers rather than the characters themselves and there was, when *A Trick* was written a young dramatist learning his craft in London who was the son of a fishmonger and was moreover himself literally ‘free o’th’ fishmongers,’ being a member of that company by patrimony; after 1608 he left England to pursue an alternative career at sea, returning to London some time shortly before 1621, the date of *Anything for a Quiet Life*. That person was Lording Barry, the author of *Ram Alley or Merry Tricks* (1606 or 1607) and, it is generally accepted, the author or one of the authors – possibly with Middleton – of *The Family of Love* (1605?). He may also have been at the point *A Trick* was first being performed working as an actor as well as a writer. Given those details, it seems reasonable to ask whether these fathers of fishmongers that Middleton seems so fond of were in any sense related to him.
Lording Barry was born in London in 1580, the fourth child of Nicholas Barry, a citizen fishmonger, and his second wife Alice, née Lording. In 1607, at the age of 27, he became involved in setting up the first Whitefriars Theatre and its boy-company, the Children of the King’s Revels.

Unfortunately for Barry and his partners 1607 was a bad year for the plague and the theatres were frequently closed for lengthy periods. The company failed in 1608 leaving Barry personally in debt to the tune of some £200 and in the Marshalsea.

He found two upright citizens willing to stand bail for him, and having done that promptly fled London, rather callously leaving the two men to settle his debts. He and some companions found their way to Tilbury where they boarded a Flemish flyboat, shot dead a member of the crew and took command of the ship, committing thereby an unequivocal act of piracy. They carried on to Quinborowe in Kent where they took another Flemish ship on which they sailed as far as the Isle of Wight – another act of piracy.

Barry clearly took to the idea of being a pirate as by 1609 he was on the southern coast of Ireland and a member of the crew of a privateer called The Fly. This ship left Baltimore around Easter of that year, and three weeks later, as it was returning to Baltimore, was taken by a king’s ship and everyone on board arrested. The crew was sent from Ireland to London for trial, but Barry, mysteriously, was not amongst them. Nor was he one of the nineteen men who were hung for piracy in London around Christmas 1609.

How he achieved this astonishing escape we do not know for certain, but we could hazard a plausible guess that he played, for all it was worth, upon the coincidence that one of the commissioners in piracy in the south of Ireland was Lord Barry, Viscount Buttevant.

Barry continued his buccaneering life, moving briefly to the Mediterranean in 1614-15, one of his shipmates from this period describing him as having been once ‘a player in England.’ In 1617 he joined Sir Walter Raleigh’s ill-fated expedition to the Orinoco but fell out with Raleigh and abandoned the expedition to continue his piratical activities off Newfoundland.

Some time after 1617 he returned to London where he died in 1629, unmarried and without issue, a merchant, ‘and part owner of the good shippe called the Edward,’ which vessel probably traded with the new colonies in North America since the other owner was Edward Bennett, commissioner of Virginia at the Court of
England.  

We can return now to Middleton’s two fishmonger jokes. First we need to acknowledge that ‘fishmonger’ was slang for ‘a pimp’ and to ‘be free of them’, as Lamprey and Spitchcock’s fathers are said to have been, would suggest ‘made frequent use of pimps.’ But why make it a joke about the loose behaviour of Hoard’s and his guests’ fathers? The joke could be just as well be made by Hoard’s suggesting that Lamprey and Spitchcock were themselves ‘free o’ the fishmongers’ (the names, especially the latter’s, are resonant with suggestions of sexual incontinence), just as, more famously, Hamlet insults Polonius by saying that he knows him to be a fishmonger. If Middleton insists on making it a joke about fathers who were ‘free o’th’ fishmongers’ surely the main thrust of the jokes must be the familial connection, with the accusation of loose behaviour (possibly with the hint that the sinful haunts of the fathers were visited by the sons) running off at a tangent as an additional innuendo.

If that is the case, is not beyond the bounds of possibility that this is a joke about that real son of a fishmonger, Lording Barry, who was of an age with Middleton, was working in the theatre at that point learning the craft of writing at the same time as him, and had possibly worked with him on *The Family of Love*?

But can we take this further? If the allusion is to Barry, for the joke to work at its best he would have to be recognisable as the person referred to, and more so than just as a person with a reputation and presence in the London theatre world. The most obvious and most likely way in which that recognition could have been accomplished would be were he actually playing Lamprey – the part which would give the reply, ‘They were indeed, sir’ an additional humorous twist. The exchange as a whole would then be a sly meta-theatrical allusion to the person behind the character addressed, and, when played, provide an opportunity for a moment of actor/audience interaction that one suspects was a feature of the indoor theatres where *A Trick* was performed and where the players and audience were in such close proximity.

Were that Middleton’s only joke about paternal fishmongers it might be considered that the admittedly circumstantial evidence so far adduced is too flimsy to argue an allusion to Barry, but there is the second one in *Anything for a Quiet Life*, and just as the first coincides with the period when Barry was known to have been working in the London theatre, so the second fits well with the period during which
he must have returned to that city, and taking the two together we have, now, the basis of a statistical case for connecting both jokes with Barry.

We do not know precisely when he returned to London but 1620 or 1621 (the date of *Anything for a Quiet Life*) would be perfectly plausible as that would have given him three or four years off the coast of North America to amass the money and make the contacts necessary to buy his half of the good ship Edward and make the move from pirate to legitimate merchant. Such a level of wealth would also have allowed him to settle up with the two men who bailed him – if they were still alive – and so avoid another spell in the Marshalsea.

If that were the date of his return, the *père* who sells *poissons* line would look very like a welcome home joke for an old friend and possible authorial colleague. But there is much more in *Anything for a Quiet Life* that points us towards Barry’s presence in that play than just that one joke – and hence more to support to the idea that Barry was the subject of the fishmonger jokes.

We first meet Young Franklin, an out of work sea-captain (as Barry had been), in the opening scene where he reminds Lord Beaufort of an earlier promise to give him work. He is, he tells his would-be patron, ‘a younger brother’ whose last employment was ‘upon the late ill-starred voyage | To Guiana,’ (1.1.166-9) that being, of course, Sir Walter Raleigh’s abortive mission to the Orinoco (in which Barry participated). Lord Beaufort prevaricates, eventually putting Young Franklin off by telling him that ‘the merchants are possessed | You have been a pirate’ (1.1.199-200) – a charge which he does not deny (as Barry would not have done).

Taken with the *père* who sells *poissons* joke, all these details that relate so closely to Barry’s life are persuasive evidence that Middleton has given his old friend and colleague a part in another play, not this time as an actor but as a character, and under the pleasingly ambiguous name of Franklin, that name being based on ‘frank’, a word which moves easily along a continuum of ideas that covers ‘free of obligations to superiors’, ‘open and sincere’, ‘candid, outspoken’, ‘free from social restraints’, ‘liberal with money’, ‘vigorous, lusty’, to ‘sexually unrestrained’ (*OED*) – all characteristics that would fit with what we know about Barry. We might also note that the last meaning – ‘sexually unrestrained’ – led to ‘Francis’, the feminine version of the name, being a frequent choice of name for an early modern fictional prostitute, and the choice Barry made himself in *Ram Alley* for the prostitute who figures so largely in that play.
But there is still more. At the end of the play Old Franklin (who is not, we should perhaps observe, a fishmonger) comes on dressed in mourning, apparently for the death of his son, an event which he bears with equanimity since, as he says, the son’s ‘former dissolute course, | Makes me weigh his death the lighter’ (5.1.6-7). He is accompanied by an old serving man and Young Cressingham, Young Franklin’s ally in his cheats and cozenings, who justifies their behaviour on the grounds that circumstances forced them into doing things they would not otherwise have done – a plea one might suspect Lording Barry himself put in on many an occasion. Old Franklin then sets about collecting together all his son’s creditors – a brewer, a hosier, and a tailor – and having settled his debts with them reveals that the old serving man is in fact his son in disguise, telling the assembled company that:

    I have not dealt by fallacy with any;
    My son was dead. Whoe’er outlives his virtues
     Is a dead man [...]
    But if the soul return he lives again,
    Created newly.

    (5.2.370-9)

Young Franklin is thus, by his father’s restitutions, resurrected from the ‘death’ of debt to respectability. It is perhaps a fanciful thought, but for me those lines offer a kind of resurrection and a touching welcome home for a man who seems to have been well known in the early Jacobean theatrical world and well liked (there is nothing in Middleton’s treatment of the fishmonger jokes or of Young Franklin to suggest otherwise), but whose departure from London in 1608 was tainted by debt and a cruel dishonesty and whose subsequent absence for so long in a dangerous and illegal pursuit may well have led many of his friends to feel that if he was not, indeed, actually dead, he was effectively dead to them.
Notes

4 The account that follows is based on Cecil L’Estrange Ewen’s monograph, *Lording Barry, Poet and Pirate* (1938).
5 Barry knew the law relating to this perfectly well since he has Throat the lawyer say in *Ram Alley*, ‘I know the law. | If you be bailed by me the debt is mine’ (Fraser, 3. 5. 90-1).
7 Barry’s will, quoted by Ewen, *Lording Barry*, 16.
8 Jeremy Lopez (2010), 215. Lopez also notes that this ship was in 1627, with an irony that neatly encapsulates Barry’s later career trajectory from seafaring outlaw to respectable merchant, ‘granted a Letter of Marque by the Duke of Buckingham to take pirates.’
9 They were baptised within a day of each other in the city of London (though in different parishes).
10 It was played first by the Paul’s Boys and then, after the closure of that company in 1606, at the Blackfriars by the Children of the Revels. The fact that *A Trick* was performed in theatres which had ‘boy’ companies might be seen an objection to the theory being put forward here since Barry was 26 or 27 years old at this point and so hardly a ‘boy’. However, the terms ‘boy’ and ‘children’ were used loosely: Edel Lamb (2008, 3) notes that Nathan Field was still a member of the Children of Pauls ‘when he was aged 26’, and see also Mary Bly (2002, 127). We should bear in mind as well that minor roles such as these could be played by people who had other employment within the theatre company, including the writers.
11 One might even wonder – though it might be objected that here we are pushing even further into the dark realms of speculation – whether Barry and Middleton worked together on *A Trick*, and had written into the dialogue a jeu d’esprit that might have been a running joke between them and their audience? Speculative as that is, the question is worth raising: current scholarship in the early modern theatre accepts that there was a good deal more collaboration between writers than was previously thought or is indicated by such explicit evidence as title pages or entries in the Stationers’ Register, and in this case we might have an explanation for both the many striking verbal parallels between *Ram Alley* and *A Trick* and the remarkably similar plots (in both a young gallant regains the land he was cozened out of by tricking the cozenor into marrying a prostitute) – a similarity critics have hitherto explained as shameless plagiarism on Barry’s part, but which could possibly be the re-use of a plot.
in a later play by a collaborator in the earlier one (cf Mary Bly’s argument (178) that the repetition of the Ram Alley wooing scene in John Cooke’s Greene’s Tu Quoque is the result of Cooke’s having had a hand in the former play).

12 The argument here is slightly complicated by Leslie Thomson’s attribution of the first scene to Webster, Middleton’s co-author for the play; see Taylor and Lavagnino, Collected Works (1597) and Taylor and Lavagnino, Companion to the Collected Works (422). However, one cannot imagine that collaborators simply left their co-authors to write alone without some discussion (either prior or subsequent to writing), or without making their own additions; besides, what persuades here is not who wrote the precise words, but the remarkable similarity of the details to Barry’s life, and Webster could have known those details as well as Middleton.

13 With perhaps the exception of the last one, though we might bear in mind the hint lurking in the first fishmonger joke that the sons are following in their father’s footsteps, whilst here the alacrity with which Young Franklin accepts Margarita’s invitation to visit her brothel suggests also a willingness to make himself ‘free o’th’ fishmongers!’

Works Cited


