

Texts and Documents

Noël du Fail, Cardano, and the Paris Medical Faculty

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Noël du Fail, Seigneur de la Hérissaye (c.1520–1591), is a minor figure in the history of French literature. A Breton gentleman, he studied law in Paris and saw military service in Italy before returning home to become a provincial landowner, judge, and politician.¹ Beginning in 1547, he published a series of “*contes*”, miscellaneous stories, some fictional, others drawn from real life, and incorporating wider reflections on society in the manner of Rabelais and Montaigne.² His varied experiences and his gentle humour make for pleasant reading even today.

Unusually for a lawyer, he took a strong interest in matters medical; the more he was criticized for this by his fellow lawyers, the more books on the subject he sought to acquire.³ In the late 1530s or early 1540s he attended lectures on Galen’s *De usu partium* given at the Collège de Tréguier in Paris by Jacobus Sylvius (1478–1555), and he describes his teacher arriving with parts of an animal or even a human limb, concealed in his gown, to be dissected before an eager crowd “drawn from every nation”.⁴ Du Fail put his medical learning to good use in his writings. Following in a long line of literary figures from Lucian to Rabelais, he devoted two of his *contes* to a discussion of gout, “a condition for which everyone has his own remedy”, and a third to syphilis, from which he also suffered.⁵ In 1578, he contributed, under the initials of the publisher, a preface to the *Demonstrion* of his fellow Breton, the controversial Paracelsian physician Roch Le Baillif, in which he displayed his

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¹E Philipot, *La vie et l’oeuvre littéraire de Noël du Fail, gentilhomme breton*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1914; R D’Amat, ‘Du Fail, Noel’, in M Barroux, M Prévost, R D’Amat, R Limouzin-Lemothe (eds), *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française* (hereafter *DBF*), Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1933–, vol. 11 (1967), cols. 1364–5; M J Giordano, ‘Noël du Fail’, in P F Grendler (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 6 vols, New York, Scribner’s, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 220–1. A longer account in English is given in the introduction to the selection of his writings included in A J Kraisheimer, *Three sixteenth-century*

conteurs, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 137–49.

²His three collections, *Propos rustiques et facétieux*, *Baliverneries et contes nouveaux*, and *Contes et discours d’Entrapel*, are cited by the page and volume number in his *Oeuvres facétieuses*, 2 vols, Paris, P Daffis, 1874.

³*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 142, ascribing this to a natural human inclination to seek after forbidden fruit.

⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 145–6, discussed by C D O’Malley, *Andreas Vesalius of Brussels, 1514–1564*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1964, p. 49, although his translation is inaccurate and misleading in its omissions.

⁵Du Fail, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, vol. 1, pp. 184–94; vol. 2, pp. 271–82, quotation from p. 272; vol. 2, pp. 224–31. Du Fail is not included in the discussion of literary representations of ‘Dame Gout’ given by Roy Porter and G S Rousseau, *Gout: the patrician malady*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998.

wide acquaintance with both traditional and Paracelsian writers as well as with local antiquities.⁶

A further reminiscence of Parisian medicine has escaped scholarly notice until now, despite throwing new light on a famous episode in the life of the physician and astrologer, Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576). In 1552, Cardano was summoned to treat John Hamilton, Archbishop of St Andrews, who was thought to be suffering from phthisis.⁷ His journey to Scotland took him via Paris, where he was entertained by leading members of the medical faculty and participated in a medical conference. Although he retained friendly memories of his meeting with Jean Fernel and with Sylvius, he seems to have been more impressed with the unicorn horn that he saw at St Denis when on an outing with the royal physician Nicholas Legrand.⁸

In his autobiography, Cardano merely records that “a conference was held with the physicians to the King.⁹ We dined together, but they did not succeed in getting an expression of my views at table, because before the meal they had wished me to take precedence in expressing my opinion. I continued my journey on the best of terms with Fernel, Sylvius and another court physician, all of whom I left there regretfully.”¹⁰

For another view of this visit, from the French side, we must turn to Du Fail.¹¹ The story is put into the mouth of Polygame, the family nickname of Du Fail’s elder brother, François, although it is not clear whether he had been present in person on that occasion or had merely heard of it from a friend such as Aimar de Raçonnet, a Paris lawyer who had been involved in some of the arrangements for Cardano’s visit.¹² The context of Du Fail’s

⁶Roch Le Baillif, *Le demostrion*, Rennes, P le Bret, 1578, sig. b iv^r–c iv^v, reprinted in H Baudry, ‘Noël Du Fail, préfacier du Démonstrion de Roch Le Baillif’, in Catherine Magnien-Simonin (ed.), *Noël Du Fail, écrivain*, Paris, Vrin, 1991, pp. 185–201, at pp. 195–8, a reference we owe to Hiroshi Hirai. As Philipot showed, Du Fail repeats in his later *Contes* several passages from this *Préface* (op. cit., note 1 above, pp. 354–81).

⁷The story of his treatment of Hamilton is found in all the biographies of Cardano, e.g. J Eckman, *Jerome Cardan*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1946, p. 25; A Wykes, *Doctor Cardano, physician extraordinary*, London, Frederick Muller, 1969, p. 129; and at greater length in C L Dana, ‘The story of a great consultation: Jerome Cardan goes to Edinburgh’, *Ann. Med. Hist.*, 1921, 3: 122–35; M Fierz, *Girolamo Cardano, 1501–1576*, Boston and Basel, Birkhäuser, 1983, pp. 37–55. G Aquilecchia, ‘L’esperienza anglo-scozzese di Cardano e l’Inquisizione’, in M Baldi, G Canziani (eds), *Girolamo Cardano: le opere, le fonti, la vita*, Milan, Francoangeli, 1999, pp. 379–92, adds some new archival material.

⁸H Cardanus, *De rerum varietate* 17,97, in *Opera omnia*, 10 vols, Lyons, Huguetan and Ravaut, 1663, vol. 3, p. 97, placing the visit on his way north from Paris. For his other comments on the unicorn, a beast he thought lived in Ethiopia, see *De subtilitate* 10,20, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 3, p. 531.

⁹H Cardanus, *De vita propria* 29, in op. cit., note 8 above, vol. 1, p. 18: “Ex hoc congressus cum regiis medicis. pransi sumus, sed non obtinuerunt ut me audirent a prandio, quoniam ante prandium volebant me priorem dicere. prosecutus igitur iter, amice satis cum Pharnelio et Sylvio alioque Regis medico quos ibi reliqueram.” The translation is that of Jean Stoner, in Jerome Cardan, *The book of my life (De vita propria liber)*, London, J M Dent, 1931, p. 98.

¹⁰For Fernel (1506–1558), and Cardano’s respect for him, see N G Siraisi, *The clock and the mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance medicine*, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 158–61. The third doctor was probably Nicholas Legrand.

¹¹This account is not recorded by Siraisi, *ibid.*; F Secret, ‘Cardan en France’, *Studi Francesi* 1966, 10: 480–5; E Kessler (ed.), *Girolamo Cardano: Philosoph, Naturforscher, Arzt*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1994, the authors cited above in note 7, or any other writer on Cardano, Sylvius or Fernel we have read. Philipot, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 432, n. 1, drew attention to the (partial and inaccurate) citation by the Paracelsan physician David de Planis Campy (1589–1644), in his *L’hydre morbifique exterminée par l’Hercule chimique*, Paris, H Du Mesnil, 1528, p. 561, also in *idem, Les oeuvres*, Paris, D Moreau, 1646, p. 264. But this citation is even harder to locate than that in Du Fail, and it is hardly surprising that it has remained unknown.

¹²For the nickname, see Krailsheimer, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 141.

account, which is here translated in full, is a discussion of the time and the place to speak. The Batemanesque chapter heading, ‘On the student who spoke Latin while out hunting’,¹³ introduces the first of Du Fail’s tales, while the chapter concludes with thumbnail sketches of four practitioners consulted by Du Fail about his syphilitic symptoms, and an account of their conflicting diagnoses and treatment plans and of the acrimonious debate which ensued at the apothecary’s shop.¹⁴

The link between these two stories is provided by the account of Cardano’s visit, which Du Fail places on Cardano’s return from Scotland. This is an error, for Cardano’s return journey took him to Brussels and down the Rhine, but it is understandable, given that Du Fail may have been writing up to thirty years after the event, and on the basis of hearsay.¹⁵

His account is as follows:

The reputation of Cardano, that great Milanese doctor, had he only known how to correct and curtail his writings, had spread everywhere, said Polygame, when, on his way back from treating a certain grandee in England, he was summoned to Paris to visit another sick nobleman, where the most famous doctors in the city, that is to say, in Europe, did not ignore his coming; thinking that Cardano would leave none of his great learning behind at his lodging when giving his account of the illness and its specifics, Sylvius, Houillier, Goupil, Fernel, Charpentier, Gorris, and Legrand,¹⁶ fully prepared, all set, and well primed, having secretly informed themselves of the cause, present state, rise and decline of the illness, were there to meet him.¹⁷ Of their own volition they conceded precedence and the right to speak first in this conference and discussion to Cardano, who even while turning it down accepted it, as bishops do, “*nolens volo*”, “I accept against my will”. The man who had the main charge of the case described matters in a great stream of words, until, not remembering where he had started and becoming lost in the middle of his tale, he was pulled up by Houillier, who, putting the cart before the horse,¹⁸ finished it off for him, saying that perhaps the speaker had been somewhat sidetracked by his great abundance of learning, not observing that common adage, “*Bene, sed non hic*”, i.e., this has been well said and with considerable eloquence and learning, but totally inappropriately. At each pause in these contributions from the University, Cardano merely gave a slight nod, in the fashion of his countrymen who, so they say, (but don’t you believe them) have more in their storehouses than they display in their shops. It was absolute torture to listen to the younger men hold forth on the doctrines of the Greeks, Arabs, and Latins old and new. Fernel, who was then considered throughout their schools to be the foremost pioneer and sapper in the trenches of medicine and philosophy, brought into play all his elaborate equipment

¹³ He pleaded that provincial hares, not understanding Latin, should not be scared off by his voice.

¹⁴ Du Fail, *Contes et discours*, op. cit., note 2 above, 13, vol. 2, pp. 40–8; the Cardano story occupies pp. 42–4. Although Du Fail has been regularly accused of a lack of structure in his *contes* almost to the point of a “*paroxysme pathologique*”, this chapter is clearly organized with a theme within one section suggesting the next.

¹⁵ H Cardanus, *De vita propria* 29, in op. cit., note 8 above, vol. 1, p. 18, makes it clear that his return journey was by way of Belgium and the Rhine.

¹⁶ For Jacques Houillier (1500–1562), see H Blémond, *DBF*, vol. 17, 1989, col. 1347; for Jacques Goupil (1525–1564), see A Tétré, *DBF*,

vol. 16, 1985, cols. 767–8; for Jacques Charpentier (1521–1574), more famous as a mathematician, see M Prévost, *DBF*, vol. 6, 1959, cols. 638–9; and for Jean de Gorris (1505–1577), A Tétré, *DBF*, vol. 16, cols. 631–2. All were in senior positions in the faculty at the time. For Parisian medicine in general, see I M Lonie, ‘The “Paris Hippocratics”: teaching and research in Paris in the second half of the sixteenth century’, in A Wear, R French and I M Lonie (eds), *The medical Renaissance of the sixteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 155–74.

¹⁷ Throughout, Du Fail uses a series of military metaphors to describe the confrontation.

¹⁸ The French idiom means literally “taking the eel by the tail”.

and everything else one might care to name. In his turn, Sylvius, with the fluency in Latin which had made him universally admired, also said some wonderful things. But Cardano was the last to give his opinion, and without further words, he brought so much learned debate to an end, having identified and picked out precisely the nub of the ailment, saying simply, “Ha besongna d’onno clystere” (“He needs a clyster.”). The medical contingent, as put out as could be, said, “Cardano’s better value at long distance than at close hand; *minuit praesentia famam* (his presence diminishes his reputation).”¹⁹ He, for his part, said, “Ingannati tutti los pedantes, io son medico non di parole, ma d’effetto” (“All these pedants are mistaken; I’m a doctor not of words, but of action”).²⁰

The historicity of what Emmanuel Philipot called “this mysterious story” is far from easy to determine. That the debate took place is clear, even if Du Fail gave it the wrong date, and there is a good deal of plausible detail. While it includes the great names of the Paris Faculty, those of Legrand and Charpentier, who was active only briefly as an academic physician, would not spring immediately to mind in any embroidered reconstruction. The fact that Cardano is quoted in tolerably accurate Italian suggests that the original informant was present at the time, although, given the tenor of the story, hardly as a medical participant from the Faculty itself.²¹ The discussion follows the rules of academic debate, in which the significant speeches are the first and the last, and in which the president has the right to pronounce on each contribution as it is made. Du Fail’s report also confirms Cardano’s own comment that he had been asked to make the first diagnosis, but had declined in some way.

Du Fail’s suggestion that this confrontation was deliberately engineered and planned in advance by the Parisians, whether true or false, makes for a good story.²²

¹⁹This quotation, from the Latin poet Claudian, *De bello Gildonico*, I, 135, became a well-known tag, see H Walther, *Proverbia sensentiaequae latininitatis medii aevi*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964, vol. 2, no. 14891.

²⁰Du Fail, *Contes et discours*, op. cit., note 2 above, vol. 2, pp. 42–4: “Le reputation de Cardan ce grand medecin Milanois, s’il eust seu revoir et trancher ses escrits, avoit volé par tout, dit Polygame, quand revenant d’Angleterre medicamenter un certain Milort, il fut appellé à Paris pour visiter un autre Seigneur malade, où les plus renommez Medecins de Paris, c’est à dire de l’Europe, n’y furent oubliez, estimans qu’il ne laisseroit rien à hostel, pour le discours de la maladie, et sur les points d’icelle, Sylvius./ Hollerius, le Goupil, Fernel, Charpentier, de Gorris, le Grand, bien preparez, bandez, et esmorez, s’estans faits instruire, par sous main, de la cause, l’estat, augmentation et declination de la maladie, s’y trouverent, et par eux mesmes fut deferé la preaseance et prerogative de ceste conferance et pourparler à Cardan, lequel en la refusant, l’accepta, comme font les Evesques, *nolens volo*. Celuy qui avoit la charge principale du patient, ebaucha de la matiere par un long flux de paroles, où ne se souvenant du commencement, et s’estant perdu au milieu de son conte, Hollier le redressant et eschorchant l’anguille par la queue, fit la conclusion, disant que le rapporteur s’estoit peut estre par sa grande multitude de doctrine un peu escarté, n’observant ce qui a esté plusieurs fois dit,

Bene, sed non hic, c’est bien dit, et avec grand eloquence et science mais mal à propos. Cardan à tous ses intervalles de l’Université ne fit qu’un simple/ et petit clin de teste, à la mode de son pays, qui ont, ce disent-ils, mais on ne les peut croire, plus en leurs magazins, qu’en leur boutique.

“Ce fut pitié d’ouir les plus jeunes sur la doctrine des Grecs, Arabes, des Latins tant vieux que nouveaux. Fernel lors estimé en tout leurs escholes le plus fin pionnier et fossoieur aux creux de la Medecine et Philosophie, y apporta tout l’apparat, et ce qu’on pourroit dire. Sylvius en son ordre avec sa facilité de langage latin, qui l’avoit rendu admirable par tout, dit aussi merveilles. Mais Cardan opinant le dernier, sans autre propos, et faisant la resolution de telle et si docte deliberation, ayant bien choisi et esleu le noeud de la maladie, dit seulement, Ha besongna d’onno clystere. Ceste troupe medicinale mescontente au possible, disoit: Cardan vaut mieux loin que près, *minuit praesentia famam*; et luy disoit de son costé, *Ingannati tutti los pedantes, io son medico non di parole, ma d’effetto*.”

²¹Philipot, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 442.

Krailsheimer, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 142, concludes that, within Du Fail’s stories one finds a substantial amount of realism, self-revelation, and a good deal of personal observation.

²²Such medical confrontations can be found in literary representations from Antiquity onwards.

Cardano's astuteness consists both in withholding his hand until the last minute, and in refusing to take on the Parisians at their own learned game. He responds in Italian, not in Latin, and with the briefest of conclusions. It is hardly surprising that his hosts felt that they had been short-changed, especially given Cardano's reputation, known even to Du Fail, for long and eloquent exposition.²³ By putting himself forward as the author of effective action, not words, Cardano was claiming superiority over those who thought they were the best doctors in Europe.²⁴ That he was capable of such self-advertisement is well known, both from the case histories in his autobiography and from his *De curationibus*. There he openly declared himself to be the modern successor of Galen, a doctor with many triumphs and very few failures, and his behaviour in Paris would easily fit into the Galenic model of competitive consultation and confrontation with other doctors.²⁵

But there are other features that point towards a tale that grew in the telling. One may wonder why Cardano, who was certainly a fluent Latin writer, should choose to deliver his judgment before a French audience in Italian, not in Latin, the international language of scholarship.²⁶ Similarly, his final comment, suggesting that he had seen through the Parisian plan, would, if delivered in public, have been insulting especially to Sylvius, Fernel and his host, to whom he elsewhere shows respect.²⁷

It remains possible that something Cardano said later in private was passed on more widely, but it is more likely that whatever Cardano said was recast in order to disparage the Paris Faculty. Such an aim fits neatly not only with the theme of the chapter, but also with the preface that Du Fail had written a few years before to the *Demostriion* of the Paracelsian Roch Le Baillif, who, within months of its publication, was being pursued through the courts by the Faculty for illegal practice.²⁸ Du Fail approved of his activities not least because the Paracelsians had discovered so many "good and valuable waters, so many oils, so many balms, and so many valuable essences for the upkeep and preservation of human health",²⁹

Du Fail's priority was decisive and effective treatment. The last pages of this chapter continue the theme, contrasting the general ineffectiveness of many practitioners (of

²³ Given what may have happened, Cardano's own reference to his relationship with Fernel and Cardano as "amicis satis" ("friendly enough"), note 9 above, may be more accurate and less enthusiastic than Stoner's "on the best of terms".

²⁴ Hence the use of the story by Planis Campy, *loc. cit.*, note 11 above, who introduces it with "There is nothing in the world I hate more than those who offer names and not effective action".

²⁵ H Cardanus, *De admirandis curationibus*, in *op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 7, pp. 253–64, esp. p. 261, citing Galen's *On prognosis*.

²⁶ Du Fail, who had seen military service in Italy, would certainly have picked up enough Italian to (re)construct an answer in Italian.

²⁷ Above, notes 9 and 10. In the letter to Duno, written before his Paris visit, he calls Sylvius and Fernel "most celebrated", and suggests that they be called to adjudicate between Cardano and

his opponents (*op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 7, p. 274).

²⁸ Above, note 6. For this celebrated case, see D Kahn, 'La Faculté de Médecine de Paris en échec face au paracelsisme: enjeux et dénouement réels du procès de Roch le Baillif', in H Schott, I Zinguer (eds), *Paracelsus und seine internationale Rezeption in der frühen Neuzeit*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. 146–221.

²⁹ Roch Le Baillif, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, sig. c iiiif, Baudry, p. 198. He continued to disapprove of Paracelsians whose mystifications were of no practical effect, cf. Du Fail, *Contes et discours*, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, vol. 2, pp. 46–7. See also H Baudry, 'Contribution à l'étude du paracelsisme en France au XVI^{me} siècle (1560–1580) de la naissance du mouvement aux années de maturité: Le Demostriion de Roch le Baillif (1578)', *Diss.*, Université de Paris X, 1989, pp. 129–38, a copy of which was obtained for us by Hiroshi Hirai.

whatever sort) with their eagerness to offer expensive and often longwinded advice. But to seek to establish the entire historicity of this record of Cardano and the Paris Faculty is perhaps to miss the point. Du Fail's witty stories at the expense of university physicians are to be read both as humorous literature and as part of his own individual reaction to the changes in medicine that were going on around him.