

A LITTLE-KNOWN PORTRAIT OF GIOVANNI ALFONSO BORELLI

THE MOST commonly reproduced portrait of the mathematician and physiologist Giovanni Alfonso Borelli is a lithograph after Pierre Roch Vigneron (1789–1872),¹ which forms one of a series of portraits of medical worthies by Vigneron lithographed by G. Engelmann as a commercial venture a century and a half after Borelli's death in 1679. I do not know the source of Vigneron's portrait, which shows a bland elderly man with flowing white hair and a skull cap, who is gazing sadly and rather vacantly into space. It is hard to believe that it can be a good likeness. There are also two small portraits in oil in the church of the Casa Generalizia of the Scuole Pie in Rome. The larger was painted by an unknown artist in 1706,² the smaller, attached to a memorial tablet, somewhat later.³ Both are in need of restoration.

In the Vatican Library, Codex *Ottob. Lat.* 3116 is a volume of 192 leaves containing sketches by Cavalier Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674–1755). Some of these are street scenes, some caricatures, some portraits. All are fluent and show the work of a man of genuine talent. Folio 103r of this codex contains the red chalk drawing reproduced here. At the bottom is written in ink:

Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, il quale è stato un bravo, e famoso Matematico, e questo ritratto lo ò levato da uno schizzo fatto da Ciro Ferri, che stà in Casa Falconieri, frà alcuni altri schizzi in Disegno fatti dal med.^o Ciro; et il S.^r Card. ^{le} Alesandro Falconieri, che lo à conosciuto, e praticato, mi dice, che è similissimo.

We may translate this as follows:

Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, who was an able and famous mathematician. I took this portrait from a sketch made by Ciro Ferri that is in the Falconieri house among some other drawings made by Ciro himself; and Cardinal Alessandro Falconieri, who knew him [presumably Borelli] and was familiar with him, tells me that it is a very good likeness.

Ciro Ferri (1634–1689), a pupil of Pietro da Cortona, was one of the most competent painters of the seventeenth century, and finished the decorations in the Pitti Palace that his master had begun at the behest of the Grand Duke Ferdinand II. Painters at this period were expected as a matter of course to produce 'good likenesses', and it is highly probable that Ciro Ferri's sketch would have expressed the character of Borelli very well. Ghezzi was clearly attempting to preserve the likeness, and there is reason to suppose that this drawing is more nearly authentic than any other portrait of Borelli that we know of. I have so far been unable to find the sketch by Ciro Ferri.

The smaller of the two portraits in the church bears such a likeness to the Ghezzi drawing that one might suspect that they were derived from the same original, except that in the former the eyes are directed straight ahead and the expression is more peaceful. The shape of the nose, the wrinkles at the corner of the left eye, and the hair and whiskers are very similar indeed.

¹ It was reproduced, for example, in Fielding H. Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine* (4th ed., Philadelphia & London, 1929), p. 259; also in A. Wolf, *A History of Science, Technology, and Philosophy in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London, 1935), opposite p. 415.

² I am indebted to Father Giovanni Ausenda, the Secretary of the Piarist Order, for this information.

³ This is reproduced in Pietro Capparoni, *Profili biobibliografici* (Rome, 1925), pl. xv.



*Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, il quale era un bravo e famoso Matematico e puo-
to (dipinto da un discepolo suo) fatto di mano di Ferr. de' Rossi in fatto di Gal-
vani. Si alcuni altri scritti in Borelli. F. Galvani del. Sculp. 1700. F. Galvani
Alessandro Galvani, detto il discepolo, dipinto, M. Die. 1700. F. Galvani*

Portrait of Giovanni Alfonso Borelli
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Director of the Vatican Library.)

News, Notes and Queries

The drawing by Ghezzi shows us an intelligent, untidy, and suspicious man in middle age. The most probable date of the original sketch is 1658, when Borelli spent several months in Rome collaborating with the scholar Abramo Echelense in a translation of an Arabic mathematical manuscript.

I wish to acknowledge the permission of the Director of the Vatican Library to publish this portrait.

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Dr. William F. Bynum has been appointed lecturer in the History of Medicine and Head of the Sub-Department of the History of Medicine in University College London from 1 October 1973. He replaces Dr. Edwin Clarke, who has assumed the Directorship of the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine.

Dr. Bynum holds a B.A. in English Literature from Swarthmore College. He obtained his M.D. from the Yale University School of Medicine in 1969, having spent the academic year 1966–1967 studying with Professor Erwin H. Ackerknecht at the Institute of Medical History of the University of Zürich. After an internship at the Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., he went to King's College, Cambridge on a Josiah Macy, Jr. post-doctoral fellowship in the history of the bio-medical sciences. His Cambridge Ph.D. thesis is concerned with a study of human biology in the first half of the nineteenth century.