

**Francesco Sperulo,  
Three Epigrams for Cesare Borgia  
(edited by Paul Gwynne)**

These three epigrams are taken from a deluxe vellum manuscript presented to Cesare Borgia (1475-1507) by the Italian poet Francesco Sperulo (dates uncertain) (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 5205, fols 36r-37r; see P.G. Gwynne, 'Another Laureate of Cesare Borgia', forthcoming). This volume of poems is divided in two books. In the first book Sperulo celebrates Cesare Borgia's second campaign against the dissident lords in the Papal States, which took place from Autumn 1500 to Spring 1501, in the style of an epic. The poet concentrates in particular on the long winter siege of Faenza. Although this campaign was proclaimed to restore papal authority in central Italy, in reality it was intended to establish a power base for Cesare in the Romagna. While the siege continued through the winter months Cesare retired to spend Christmas at Cesena which he intended to make the capital of his new state. The long hexameter poem on the siege is followed by a collection of thirty-three short poems written during this lull in the hostilities.

The infamous Cesare Borgia is not known primarily for his patronage of literature. Yet, in keeping with the times, he kept a flourishing (if peripatetic) court that could compare favourably with that of any of his contemporaries. Just as poets had accompanied ancient generals such as Scipio and Julius Caesar in their wars (cf. Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, I, 447-9), Cesare was accompanied not only by members of his household but also by a retinue of poets, artists (including Leonardo da Vinci) and men of letters. Among these was the poet Francesco Sperulo who wrote a firsthand description of the fighting (albeit in hyperbolic terms). This unique account by a member of his staff is important both for the historical details it provides and for the poet's observations of Cesare at close quarters. The three epigrams chosen present an

unexpected side of Cesare's character. They are printed here for the first time from the single dedication manuscript now preserved in the Vatican Library. The metre throughout is elegiac couplets chosen to imitate the impromptu epigrams of Martial.

**Eidem de exposita noctu inventa**

Dum vulgi metuit morsus corrupta Puella

Committit mediæ pignora nuda viæ.

Cæsar forte suam spaciatus nocte per urbem

Commotus viso crimine mandat ali

Constituens dotem fuerit dum nubilis amplam. 5

Sub miti en prodest Principe sæva parens.

Sunt hæc parva ducis miracula? non pia mater

Fit pia et impietas sæviciesque iuvant.

Ergo etiam infantes Cæsar tua facta loquantur,

Ut miro pateant maxima mira sono. 10

**To the same, about the baby girl found abandoned at night**

While a seduced girl was afraid of the malicious attacks of the mob she abandoned her baby girl naked on the street. As luck would have it Cesare was strolling through his city by night and, affected by the crime he witnessed, commands the baby to be nursed, at the same time settling an ample dowry on the girl until she is of a marriageable age. Behold the wicked mother benefits by the gentle prince. Are these things the small miracles of the Duke? The impious mother becomes pious and failure in duty and cruelty take benefit. Cesare, even burbling infants may speak your deeds, so that the greatest miracles are made evident by a marvellous sound.

## Commentary

**Title:** *eidem*: i.e. Cesare Borgia.

*exposita... inventa*: NB: *expositā... inventā*, ablative femine.

**Line 2:** *mediæ*: originally written *medię* as was regular contemporary practice in late humanist Latin, for the diphthong *æ*; the subscript cedilla *ę* has been expanded throughout.

*pignora*: lit. a pledge, surety; here, pledge of love, i.e. children.

**Line 3:** *suam... urbem*: lit. 'his city', here Cesena, (see Introductory note).

*spaciatus*: for *spatiatus*. The substitution of 'c' for 't' is especially common in Latin orthography of the period.

**Line 4:** *ali*: present passive infinitive.

**Line 5:**  *fuerit dum*: reversed word order, *dum* plus future perfect indicative 'until'.

**Line 7:** *ducis*: Cesare had been created Duc de Valentinois in 1498.

**Line 8:** *sævicies*: for *saevities*, savagery, cruelty.

**Line 9:** *infantes*: the last couplet relies on a joke upon the literal meaning *infans* 'speechless'.

*Cæsar*: the manuscript has a superscript sign much like an omega  $\omega$  indicating the vocative case. This is fairly common practice in humanistic manuscripts. And need not be translated.

### **Eiusdem Lustricus dies ad eundem**

Publica quæ cunctos hæc exultatio cogit?

Festa nitet vultu cur meliore dies?

Thura redimitis fumant cur largius aris?

Cur nitet aurato hæc limine festa domus?

Nosco læticiæ causam; proh sidera quantum 5

Mortales vestra sub ditione iacent?

Exposuit quam sæva parens lustratur, et infans

Cæsaris est, vetuit quam pater esse suam.

Quantum fata valent? Cuperent quot Cæsaris esse

Nec possunt et quæ non cupit illa potest. 10

Ergo Pater patriæ Cæsar tu iure vocandus,

Invita per quem pignora matre valent.

### **The day of purification of the same little girl to the same man**

What is this public rejoicing that is bringing everyone together? Why does the festal day gleam with a favourable aspect? Why does incense smoke in abundance on the decorated altars? Why does this festive house gleam with decoration around the doors? I know the cause of the happiness. O Heavens! How many mortals are under your jurisdiction? The little girl whom the savage mother abandoned is being baptised, the little girl, whom the father refused to acknowledge as his own, is Cesare's. How effective are the Fates? So many wish to be in Cesare's favour but they cannot, and that little girl who does not want to be, is. Now Cesare, by right you must be called 'Father of the Fatherland' through whom the reluctant gift of a little girl fares well for the mother.

## Commentary

**Title:** *Lustricus dies*: the eighth (or ninth) day after a child's birth, on which it was purified by a sacrifice and received a name; the classical terminology is used here in preference to the term *baptismus* of Church ritual. Note the use of the vocabulary of classical sacrifice (e.g. *thura* line 3; *lustratur* line 7)

*Eiusdem*: i.e. the little girl.

*ad eundem*: i.e. Cesare Borgia; cf. *eidem* in the title above.

**Line 4:** *aurato limine*: lit. 'with a golden threshold'.

**Line 5:** *laticia*: for *laetitia*.

*proh*: for *pro*, interjection.

**Line 6:** *ditione*: more usually *dicione*.

**Line 7:** *quam*: i.e. the little girl, the antecedent is contained in the subject of *lustratur*.

**Line 11:** *Pater patriae*: a solemn title awarded to national heroes in antiquity. As above, the final couplet concludes with a joke: Cesare now truly deserves the title 'father of his country'.

**Line 12:** *invita pignora*: see above, epigram 1, line 2.

### **Eidem de eadem**

Romule, sævicies patrui, te Romula, matris

Exposuit, sceleris causa utriusque timor.

Ast hanc excepit Cæsar, te Romule pastor

Auctore exuperat Cæsare cede licet.

### **To the same about the same little girl.**

Romulus, the cruelty of the uncle exposed you; the cruelty of the mother exposed you, Romula, fear was the cause of wickedness in both. But Cesare took up this little girl, a shepherd took you up Romulus, a shepherd; give place to Cesare, it is right that he surpass the founder.

### **Commentary**

**Line 1:** *sævicies*: cf. above epigram 1, line 8.

*patrui*: lit. a 'paternal uncle'. Romulus was cast out by his mother's paternal uncle Aemulius.

*Romula*: the little girl has obviously been punningly christened.

**Lines 2-3:** the rhyme 'timor... pastor' is probably deliberate and adds to the wit and spontaneity of the epigram which was perhaps improvised on the spot.

**Line 3:** *ast*: = at.

**Line 4:** *exuperat*: (also *exsuperat*).

*cede*: the subject is still *te Romule* from line 3.