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Richard Dawes and the Art of Pre-Emptive Self-Defence: the figure of 'Momion' in Akenside's *the Pleasures of Imagination*

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SUMMARY

This article investigates why Richard Dawes, the mid-eighteenth-century headmaster of Newcastle Grammar School, took such grave exception to The Pleasures of Imagination*, a poem published in 1744 by the Newcastle poet, Mark Akenside. It is suggested that Dawes felt threatened by an allusion in the poem to a passage from the Renaissance Italian writer, Giordano Bruno, in which a pederastic schoolteacher is depicted. Dawes knew that some of his enemies in Newcastle were spreading the rumour that Akenside had satirized him, and could legitimately have feared that anyone recognizing the allusion to Bruno, and hearing gossip to the effect that he was the target of Akenside's satire, would infer sexual impropriety on his part.*

Richard Dawes was one of the best Greek scholars of his generation. He was also, however, a spectacularly unsuccessful headmaster of Newcastle Grammar School from July 1738 to June 1749. He presided over a school riot, and a disastrous decline in pupil numbers, engaged in numerous quarrels with his employers, and retired early – although only at his second attempt. (His first, several years earlier, failed because of his inability to negotiate an agreed severance package.) It is perhaps understandable that someone of considerable talents who suffered such reverses in his career might become prickly and even neurotic, but in one respect the extent of Dawes's neurosis has always seemed inexplicable.

In January 1744, Mark Akenside published his highly successful poem, *The Pleasures of Imagination*. Dawes took great exception to the following passage, which he believed satirized him in the person of Momion:

> Thee, too, facetious Momion, wand'ring here,
> Thee, dreaded censor, oft have I beheld
> Bewilder'd unawares: alas! too long
> Flush'd with thy comic triumphs and the spoils
> Of sly derision! till on every side
> Hurling thy random bolts, offended truth
> Assign'd thee here thy station with the slaves
> Of folly. Thy once formidable name
> Shall grace her humble records, and be heard
> In scoffs and mock'ry bandied from the lips
> Of all the vengeful brotherhood around,
> So oft the patient victims of thy scorn.
> (3.179–90)

Akenside had been a pupil at the Grammar School, but he had left by the summer of 1738, when Dawes's tenure there began.[1] At first blush, therefore, it seems unlikely that he would be satirizing Dawes's classroom techniques. Commentators have tended to assume that Dawes was right to think that he was being pilloried, however, and it is of course possible that Akenside received information about events at his old school, and had it in mind as he drafted. Indeed, it is perhaps likely that he had contacts, at least of an indirect kind, with people still at the school, as the majority of *The Pleasures of Imagination* seems to have been composed in 1742–43, after Akenside had returned to Newcastle from four years at Edinburgh University.

Yet even if the identification of Dawes with Momion is correct, it is by no means obvious from the text, and given that *The Pleasures of Imagination* was published – initially anonymously – three hundred miles away in London, and was philosophical rather than satirical in

tenor, Dawes's most prudent course of action would surely have been to maintain silence, secure in the knowledge that nothing in the poem itself would lead readers to connect him with Akenside's caricature. What is more, we know that after publication, Akenside wrote a letter to Dawes's enemies in Newcastle, explicitly denying the identification of Dawes and Momion.[2] At this point, Dawes should logically have been able to drop the matter.

But he did not. He wrote a work called *Extracts from a MS. Pamphlet Intitled the Tittle-Tattle-Mongers* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1747), evidently intended as the first in a series, as it is labelled 'Number I', in which he attacks various aldermen of Newcastle – in effect, his employers; and he also maintains his onslaught against Akenside.[3] Given that the publication date was three years after the appearance of Akenside's poem, and that during this period there is no indication that anyone had actually connected Dawes with Momion (apart from the Newcastle-based group who had received Akenside's explicit assurance that no attack on the schoolmaster was intended), the tenaciousness with which Dawes maintained his aggression seems even more peculiar.

The explanation for his extreme sensitivity, I would suggest, lies in a hitherto unnoticed allusion in Akenside's lines – an allusion which Dawes was certainly learned enough to pick up, and which he was justified in fearing, if anyone should apply the lines from Akenside's poem to him. The allusion is to Giordano Bruno's *De La Causa, Principio e Uno* (1584), where we find the following in the first Dialogue:

> *Questo sacrilego pedante avete per il quarto: uno de' rigidi censori di filosofi, onde si afferma Momo, uno affettissimo circa il suo gregge di scolastici, onde si noma nell' amor socratico; uno, perpetuo nemico del femineo sesso, onde, per non esser fisico, si stima Orfeo, Museo, Titiro e Anfione.*[4]

The passage has recently been translated thus:

> That sacrilegious pedant is the fourth speaker, one of the rigid censors of philosophers, a man through whom Momus expresses himself, strongly attached to his own flock of students, so that he is reputed to follow the Socratic way of love, a fellow who is the ceaseless foe of the female sex; whence, so as not to be sensual, he considers himself like Orpheus, Musaeus, Tityros, and Amphion.[5]

Akenside's use of the name 'Momion' – a variation on Momus, the relatively obscure fault-finder of the classical Gods – parallels Bruno's 'Momo', while his description of this ridiculously pretentious tyrant as a 'dreaded censor' precisely echoes Bruno's '*uno de' rigidi censori*'. Furthermore, the figure in question displays his censoriousness in front of an audience in both texts: in Bruno, there is a 'flock of students', while in Akenside we find a 'vengeful brotherhood' of 'patient victims', who could conceivably be identified as Dawes's pupils. Given that within a few lines of the passage quoted, Akenside also uses concepts of sacrilege and pedantry,[6] the likelihood that the verbal similarities between his poem and Bruno's dialogue are fortuitous becomes vanishingly small.

But there is a further point to be made. In Renaissance Italian, the word pedante (like the word 'pedant' in English) could mean 'schoolmaster' as well as 'pedant'; indeed, 'schoolmaster' was its primary meaning in both languages at the time Bruno was writing. And this – assuming that Dawes did indeed identify Akenside's allusion – surely explains the link that he feared people might make between Akenside's caricature and himself. For in Bruno, 'Momo' is a teacher who, despite his censoriousness, harbours erotic feelings for his pupils: he is '*uno affettissimo circa il suo gregge di scolastici, onde si noma nell' amor socratico*'. These words might most accurately be translated as 'one [who is] very affectionate towards his flock of pupils, for which reason he is named in [the annals of] Socratic love': there seems to be no hint of the dubiety indicated by the words 'is reputed to' in the translation quoted above.[7] It is of course true that the one element of Bruno's portrait which finds no echo in Akenside is the suggestion of sexual impropriety. Nevertheless, if the Newcastle tittle-tattle-mongers were claiming a link

between Akenside's Momion and Dawes, Dawes would understandably have been worried that anyone who picked up the allusion to Bruno might infer that he abused his position by engaging in sexual relations with his pupils. What is more, this fear would remain, whether or not Akenside had intended to target Dawes, and whether or not the tittle-tattle-mongers who were hinting at the identification were aware of the source in Bruno. All that was required for Dawes to face an investigation, possibly followed by dismissal, prosecution, and even execution, was for someone who knew of the suggested identification to recognize the allusion to Bruno, and infer that Akenside's lines constituted a veiled hint of sexual misconduct on Dawes's part. Dawes must further have known that, were he ever in a position where he had to defend himself from such allegations, his unpopularity both within the school and among his employers in the Corporation of Newcastle would make the task of proving his innocence very hard indeed. He may also have felt that the fact he was unmarried would strengthen suspicions against him, by adding significance to Bruno's charge that Momo is a '*perpetuo nemico del femineo sesso*'.

Given these dangers, Dawes's strategy of attempting to discredit Akenside's highly successful poem starts to seem less like paranoia, and more like a carefully crafted piece of preemptive self-defence. He does not mention the fact that Akenside echoes Bruno in the offending lines; still less does he say anything to alert readers to the sexual innuendo present in the Renaissance text. Instead, he concentrates on undermining Akenside and his contacts in Newcastle, claiming that their motivation for suggesting a link between Momion and himself is mere ill nature; he makes Akenside sound thoroughly disreputable by suggesting that he may have been bribed by Dawes's enemies to include the portrait in the poem; he emphasizes the fact that Akenside himself had denied the identification, while also making it clear that he disbelieves this protestation of innocence; and he draws attention to the fact that the poem's argument had been found logically and morally wanting in other respects by William Warburton (who objected to Akenside's use of Shaftesbury's theory of ridicule).[8] These are doubtless points that Dawes would have been able to develop in his own defence, had any investigation into his conduct been initiated.

Further, it seems clear from Dawes's text that his enemies in Newcastle, whom he derisively calls the 'Genii' and who are, he assumes, in league with Akenside, were not pupils from the school, as commentators on *The Pleasures of Imagination* have assumed, but rather those members of Newcastle Corporation with whom he was in dispute. Admittedly, there is a remote possibility that Dawes, like the critics who have commented on Akenside's lines, recognized the passage as referring to the classroom, and sought in his published riposte to deflect attention from the dangers that this posed for him, by planting in his readers' minds the alternative frame of reference provided by his quarrels with the town council. The character in Bruno to whom Akenside alludes in *The Pleasures of Imagination* is, of course, explicitly described as a '*pedante*' or schoolmaster, and Akenside's 'Momion' may appear, in context, to be a member of the same profession. Nevertheless, there is good evidence that Dawes genuinely believed the focus of Akenside's attack to be his relations with his employers, and saw Akenside as allied (possibly through his medical connections) with these enemies, rather than with disaffected pupils. As early as the title-page, for instance, he says that a future instalment (never actually published) of the *Tittle-Tattle-Mongers* would be directed against 'Characters of some of the *Gentlemen of the Corporation* of *Logopoiion, alias, the vengeful Brotherhood*, or, *Fungus's Clan*.' The term 'vengeful Brotherhood' is taken from Akenside's poem (3.189), where it is used to describe the audience treated so contemptuously by Momion; and 'Fungus' has long been identified as Dr Adam Askew, a prominent Newcastle physician and alderman.[9] The suggestion that Akenside may have been bribed to include the portrait in his work suggests the same frame of reference: current pupils, or

ones who had left the school more recently than Akenside, would scarcely be in a position to offer the now medically qualified poet the kind of sum likely to sway him. Finally, to see the onslaught on Akenside in the second and third 'Extracts' of the pamphlet as related to the attacks on Dawes's enemies in the Corporation has the advantage of giving the book as a whole a single focus: Extract 1 is clearly written against Askew and a Custom House Officer identified as a Mr Isaacson by Hodgson.[10]

This discrepancy between Dawes's understanding of Akenside's lines as supporting the aldermen with whom Dawes was quarrelling, and the reading adopted by most literary critics, who, even without identifying the source in Bruno, see Momion as a schoolteacher, adds conviction to Akenside's denial that he had intended to pillory Dawes: an accomplished writer would presumably have ensured that his attack, if one had been intended, was accurately targeted. Nevertheless, Dawes's apparent conviction that the lines were not referring to his classroom activities does not diminish the threat that the lines posed for him: as noted above, he could justifiably have feared that readers who heard of the claimed connection between himself and 'Momion', and who noted the reference to Bruno, would apply the passage to Dawes in his capacity as teacher, and infer sexual impropriety, even though – according to his own reading of the passage – the 'vengeful Brotherhood' should be interpreted as referring to his enemies among the aldermen.

Finally, it is worth noting that the significance of Akenside's allusion to the pederastic teacher in Bruno's work is not limited to Dawes himself: it also throws some light on the question of Akenside's own sexuality. Several recent critics have suggested that Akenside (who, like Dawes, never married) was the homosexual lover of Jeremiah Dyson, his university friend and later his patron.[11] I have argued elsewhere that it is methodologically unsound to infer the existence of a homosexual relationship from the absence of a heterosexual one, and that in any case the evidence cited in support of this speculation is deeply flawed.[12] But the allusion to Bruno tips the balance more strongly against the homosexual thesis. It would be most imprudent for a practising homosexual, at a time when homosexuality was illegal and technically at least punishable by death, to draw attention in a published work to a passage containing criticism of a homosexual figure: such allusions would appear as pure hypocrisy to anyone who was aware of such a writer's true sexual orientation, and could stimulate a degree of exasperation which might lead to exposure. Discretion in public, and in publication, was the safest course of action for the eighteenth-century homosexual, and Akenside's allusion to Bruno would not have been discreet if he and Dyson had been lovers.

NOTES

[1] Akenside went to Edinburgh University after leaving school, initially using sponsorship from the Dissenters' Society to enable him to train for the dissenting ministry, but later switching to the study of medicine. Confusion over the precise dates and details of his university career arose in the nineteenth century, and continues today. It used to be believed that Akenside's student career did not begin until 1739, while the date at which he switched to the study of medicine was not known. Some recent critics have repeated these mistakes and confusions: see, for example, P. J. FitzPatrick, 'Richard Dawes (1708–1766), Classical Scholar and Tynesider, Part One', *AA*[5], 27 (1999), 146 and 150; and Sandro Jung, 'Mark Akenside: A Letter Reconsidered', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 49 (2002), 370–72. In fact, Akenside went to Edinburgh at the start of the academic year 1738–39, enrolling at the University Library on 24 November 1738, and matriculating in the first ceremony of the academic year, on 23 March 1739: see Edinburgh University Library MS. Da.2.1, p. 61, for his library registration, and the University Matriculation Book, p. 103. We can infer that by the academic year 1739–40 he had switched to the study of medicine, as students were required to matriculate each year, and his name does not reappear in the matriculation book. (The matriculation book for medical students has been lost.) For fuller details, see my article 'Akenside's University Career: The Manuscript Evidence',

Notes and Queries n.s. 32 (1985), 212–15, which also transcribed the letter described by Jung as 'unpublished'.

[2] Although Akenside's letter of denial has been lost, three sentences from it were copied out by Dawes in a manuscript now held at the British Library (MS. Burney 387, for further details of which, see note 3). The sentences read: 'You quite astonished me with your story of Philhomerus [Dawes's name for himself]. I wish you had mention'd what it is that has offended him so sorely; for I am quite at a loss about it. It argues a very self-conceited and a very little mind for a man to imagine himself so important as to take it for granted that I (almost an entire stranger to him) could not write a passage in any remote or imaginary sense applicable to him, without having a particular view to him; and at the same time to betray such a jealousy and childish fretfulness of temper. However if so small a matter will contribute to his peace, I authorize you to tell him that not a syllable in the Poem was intended to reflect on him, or on any particular person whatsoever' (fols. 17–18). In the published *Extracts from a MS. Pamphlet Intitled the Tittle-Tattle-Mongers*, Dawes understandably decides against printing this in full, instead merely noting Akenside's denial with the words 'The Poet indeed has absolutely denied that the Character was intended personally, and has professed himself *astonished* at the Application' (p. 30).

[3] The book is extremely rare: only three copies are known to have survived into the nineteenth century, and one of these is now untraceable. John Hodgson, in an 1828 biography of Dawes, reprinted as 'An Account of the Life and Writings of Richard Dawes, A.M. Late Master of the Royal Grammar School, and of the Hospital of St. Mary, in the Westgate, Newcastle upon Tyne', *AA*[1], 2 (1832), 154, suggested that the majority of copies were bought up and destroyed by Dawes's enemies in Newcastle. The most accessible text is perhaps a manuscript transcription of the copy at Emanuel College Cambridge, made for Charles Burney in February 1791, and now held by the British Library (MS. Burney 388). A related manuscript in Dawes's own hand (British Library MS. Burney 387) perhaps represents an early draft of the attack on Akenside in the published work, and contains a much more extended commentary on the lines describing Momion. Interspersed with this is material on classical metre, relating to Dawes's scholarly work, *Miscellanea Critica* (1745).

[4] Giordano Bruno, *De la Causa, Principio e Uno*, Dialogue 1, in Giordano Bruno, *Dialoghi Italiani: Dialoghi Metafisici e Dialoghi Morali*, Classici della Filosofia 8, 3rd ed., Florence (1958), 215.

[5] *Five Dialogues by Giordano Bruno: Cause, Principle and Unity*, translated by Jack Lindsay, Westport (1962), 71.

[6] For pedantry, see *The Pleasures of Imagination* 3. 198–201, concerning an 'illustrious band' who scorn 'reason's tame, pedantic rules'; for sacrilege, see the attack on hypocritical clergymen 'adorn'd with holy ensigns' who, with 'sanctimonious eyes, / Take homage of the simple-minded throng' (*The Pleasures of Imagination* 3. 109–13).

[7] I am grateful to Professor Christopher Duggan of the Italian Department, Reading University, for advising me on how best to capture in translation the undertones, as well as the precise meaning, of these words.

[8] See *Extracts from a MS. Pamphlet Intitled the Tittle-Tattle-Mongers* pp. 34, 35, 29–30, and 28–29 respectively.

[9] The identification of 'Fungus' as Dr Askew was established by John Hodgson, and is recorded in a letter from him to John Bell, bound into the Newcastle Public Library's copy of Dawes's book. It has been generally accepted by later commentators. 'Logopoiion' is Dawes's name for Newcastle: it might be translated as 'rumour mill', and is clearly the home town of the 'tittle-tattle-mongers' in the title of Dawes's book. A third character in the book has been identified as Askew's son, Anthony, who had indeed once been a pupil of Dawes's; but Dawes portrays him as an ally of 'Fungus'.

[10] See the letter, referred to above, from Hodgson to Bell.

[11] See, e.g., G. S. Rousseau, '"In the House of Madam Vander Tasse, On the Long Bridge": A Homosocial University Club in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Homosexuality* 11 (1986), 311–47; Jon Thomas Rowland, *'Swords in Myrtle Dress'd': Toward a Rhetoric of Sodom. Gay Readings of Homosexual Politics and Poetics in the Eighteenth Century*, Madison, NJ and London (1998).

[12] See Robin Dix, 'The Pleasures of Speculation: Scholarly Methodology in Eighteenth-Century Literary Studies', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (2000), 85–103.