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“Don’t Copy Me!”: The Plagiarism of Anatomical Drawings

by

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Abstract

In the world of medicine, the study of anatomy possesses a most tumultuous history. Stories of grave robberies and live dissections are well known; however, it has also been plagued by another criminal act: plagiarism. Lacking the copyright laws of today, many anatomists had their research and drawings widely copied and distributed.

Andreas Vesalius is hailed as one of the most distinguished anatomists in history. Often referred to as the founder of modern human anatomy, his work and drawings are identifiable worldwide. With great success came many plagiarists, among whom Thomas Geminus was one of the best. Geminus accessed a new market, altered Vesalius' drawings and even published in a different language, all which contributed to his success.

Although Vesalius did not derive any monetary gain from Geminus's plagiarism, he accrued much more publicity and prominence than he could have achieved on his own. Geminus's entrepreneurial ideas, although based on dishonesty, nonetheless helped launch Vesalius to the renowned position he currently holds in the history of anatomy. In this article, I explore how Geminus's plagiarism affected the popularity and distribution of Vesalius's anatomical work.

Thomas Geminus: The Man

Thomas Geminus (worked c. 1540 to c. 1563) would seem to have led an obscure life besides his involvement with copying Andreas Vesalius' (1514-1564) anatomy texts. What we do know about him has been pieced together from various unconventional sources, and is mostly centered on his life at the time of the plagiarism incident. He was initially thought to be Italian, as he used the Italian version of his name *Gemini* to print his texts and his figures were drawn with an “Italian taste” (1) (2) (3). However, later evidence points toward a Flemish background. For one, he signed the dedicatory epistle in his 1545 Latin edition “Thomas Geminus Lysiensis” and thus, historians have concluded that he hails from the village of Lys-les-Lannoy, which is about fifteen miles away from Lille, in French Flanders (3)(12). His pseudonym as a Flemish refugee was believed to be Thomas Lambrit or Lambert (4). The will of one “Thomas Lambrit als Geniny of the pricincte of the late blacke friers nighe Ludgate of London, booke printer [...]” was registered in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury upon his death in 1563. In his will he bequeathed inheritance to his brother “within the bishopryke of Leuke;” Leuke which is Flemish for Liege (11). Historians approximate his migration to England to be the early 1540s, probably in search of employment (1).

His profession has been disputed just as avidly as his heritage. The name has been associated with many professions including an engraver, a printer, a surgical instrument

maker, a surgeon, a cartographer, and an author of books on anatomy (5) (12). Mitchell emphasizes that these may not necessarily all relate to a single individual and that there may be another Thomas Geminus in London (5). A Thomas Geminus is listed as a surgeon in the *Annals of the Royal College of Physicians* (1555) list of Edward VI's (1537-1553) disbursements (1547-52), but does not appear to be mentioned in the *Annals of the Barber Surgeons* (5). Underwood maintains that Geminus was definitely attached to the Court of King Henry VII (1457-1509) and received a salary of 10 pounds a year from the Privy Purse (12). His first appearance in English publishing was in collaboration with Thomas Raynald in producing *the byrth of Mankinde (Womans booke)* in 1545 (4). Shortly thereafter, his next project was that of replicating Vesalius' anatomy texts. It has been rumored that he was commissioned by King Henry VII himself to produce the copper-plate copies of Vesalius' anatomy or at the very least, his knowledge and approval (4) (12). This information would be very difficult to corroborate unless the King had written a decree or note to Geminus tasking him with the job. If true, it would easily explain the lengthy dedications to the royal family and even inclusion of royal portraits in Geminus' texts. However, the dedications in themselves cannot be used as evidence to substantiate his royal orders since many publishers made some dedication to the royal family in their printings in order to gain favor with them.

The Act

Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (known colloquially as *Fabrica*) and *Suorum de humani corporis fabrica librorum epitome* (*Epitome*) were both printed in 1543. Geminus did not copy either of these books in full, but rather drew upon visuals from both and altered the accompanying text. Therefore, Dixon defends that Geminus did not plagiarize Vesalius at all, but was honest in acknowledging that his work was a compendium of Vesalius' work in the title of his printing (2). Geminus' first printing came out in 1545 entitled *Compendiosa totius Anatomie delineation, aere exarata*. It consisted of 40 engraved copper-plates which were almost exact copies of the woodcuts used for *Fabrica* and *Epitome* (4) (12). Although many of the plates were exact copies, there were a few exceptions where Geminus felt he should use his artistic license to alter the images. The most notable change is in the male and female nude figures from *Epitome*. In Vesalius' version the male is holding a skull, whereas Geminus has his male figure holding an apple and the skull is now depicted on the ground between the two figures with a serpent intertwined (4). Thus, Geminus has now inserted religion into his anatomy texts, emphasizing the Adam and Eve story with his alteration of the plates (1).

Andreas Vesalius was obviously less than impressed with this "theft" of his work. Letters written between him and his brother in 1546 document his irritation and spite against Geminus copying and altering his images (6). However, unbeknownst to Vesalius, this act of infamous anatomical plagiarism may actually have been more beneficial to him than he could ever have imagined.

The Fallout

Acknowledgement

It is obvious that Geminus did not ask for Vesalius' permission to reproduce his anatomy texts since Vesalius openly condemns him for copying his work. However, Geminus

made no attempt to pass off the work as his own and acknowledges Vesalius via a head-title in *Compendiosa* (page A1a): *Andreae Vesalii Brvxellensis svorvm de hvmani corporis fabrica librorvm epitome* (1). While he was reaping the financial benefits of selling someone else's research, at least, he still acknowledged the author and the particular publications he used. This courtesy is not only limited to the first edition, but an acknowledgement to Vesalius was included in subsequent editions and variations either in the title of the text itself or as a formal acknowledgement within the text. Cushing even states that Vesalius should have "taken it as a compliment rather than a slight; for the engraver [Geminus], who undoubtedly shows skill, makes no concealment of their source but accredits the work to Vesalius and draws with equal freedom upon both *Epitome* and *Fabrica*" (1).

Worldly Distribution

We must also recognize that Geminus was not the only individual copying Vesalius' works (8). Replicas of *Epitome* and *Fabrica* were appearing all across the continent, but of all of these, Thomas Geminus' copies still drew the most attention. Even Vesalian historians acknowledge his uniquely accurate and popular copies by dedicating entire sections in their books specifically to his copies, while grouping all other non-Geminus copies in another section (1). It were Geminus' copies that brought Vesalius' work across the Channel to England, where they proved to be wildly popular, as evidenced by multiple editions and printings. They proved to be the most important anatomical works in England in the sixteenth century, lending them to use by the Barber-Surgeons Company and the Royal College of Physicians (1). It probably even led to more knowledgeable surgeons and physicians in the Elizabethan period (1)! In fact, it was Geminus' engravings that were taken to Germany to be copied and not Vesalius' original works which led to these works being popular in Germany for over two decades (8). He also entered into agreement with one Jacques Grévin (1538-1570) of Paris to publish editions of his text and plates in Latin and French outside of Paris in 1564 and 1565 (9). This of course provided a good income for Geminus, but more importantly, he was distributing Vesalius' work across England and continental Europe and helping Vesalius make a name for himself, since it was acknowledged as his work. Geminus' success in selling his texts was not solely based on Vesalius' name and plates. A lot of it was due to his entrepreneurship in business, ideas about distribution, and giving the people what they wanted. To prove that it required a smart individual with business sense to do what Geminus did, and not just someone with the ability to copy pictures, one needs only to look at the popularity of the other texts. Many of the other copies of *Epitome* and *Fabrica* did not last through multiple printings or editions like Geminus' did, and did not receive the same readership (1). The numbers of texts which still survive and circulate are evidence to how many people owned a copy of his work.

Further Copies & Languages

One of Geminus' brilliant ideas was to have the *Compendiosa* translated into English from its original Latin. This made the text accessible to a much larger *clientèle* since only the wealthy and well educated would be able to read the Latin texts. With this advancement, anyone who was literate and could afford the book would be able to learn a little about human anatomy. The mysteries of the human body were not to be dominated only by physicians. There were two English editions printed in 1553 and

again in 1559. Geminus dedicated these to the “unlatined surgeons” and changed the text of the book to be brief and more suitable for the public (1). When he speaks of these ‘unlatined surgeons,’ we can suppose that he was referring to the barber surgeons who did not have a formal education in the area. Although many other replications of Vesalius’ work were being copied, circulated and translated on the continent by other publishers, Geminus’ were the only ones ever to be translated into English (1). As mentioned above, the Geminus plates were sent to France for an additional three publications: two Latin continental editions and one French edition (1). In the end, Geminus’ *Compendiosa* and his plates (not Vesalius’) were printed and translated into Latin, English, French, German, Italian, and Dutch. The wide scope of Thomas Geminus’ work combined with his acknowledgement of Vesalius’ authorship means that Vesalius actually benefited from the plagiarism and gained fame through Geminus’ clever business ideas.

Improvements

Although letters between Andreas Vesalius and his brother Franciscus complained about his work being “copied very poorly and without skill in drawing,” they are thought to have not actually seen the work itself, but heard only of it second hand (6)(8). This is because Geminus had the woodcuts engraved onto copper plates, and thus, the figures came out sharper than even the skilled engravers who carved the *Fabrica* woodcuts (1) (7). His book was the second book in England to be printed with copper plates and his English edition was the first book ever printed in the English language using engraved copper plates (7) (10). Consequently, his books were of great importance to both the field of anatomy and the history of printing in England. Other improvements made on *Fabrica* and *Epitome* includes the correction of an error marking the illustration of the fourth “muscle-man” as *Prima musculorum tabula* (6). In his book, Geminus also rearranged the text so that it would be useful in the dissecting room for students in the study of anatomy (1). Just like the translation into English reaching a new audience, a simple maneuver such as rearranging the text creates a new clientele for Geminus’ text over Vesalius’ version.

The Result

Even though Geminus probably made a lot of money from copying and reprinting Vesalius’ anatomy texts, he may not have left Vesalius entirely uncompensated. It is unsure how much the monetary aspect mattered to Vesalius, but in the long term, it was only with Geminus’ help that he is the infamous anatomist as we know him today. Geminus repaid him, not with money, but with notoriety. While the *Fabrica* was only ever printed in Latin until the 20th century, copies of Geminus were rendered in multiple languages, spanning most of the European countries. He also learned to find new readership within the non-medical community by printing in vernacular and in medical students who required an easy-to-use anatomy atlas for dissection courses. Furthermore, linking the particular publication with the first use of copper plates in England additionally heightened the popularity of the book and increased its sales. Finally, most people recognized that the work within *Compendiosa* was Vesalius’, due to the acknowledgement included in the title. There was little mistaking the work as Geminus’ and therefore, the name that was spread far and wide was that of Vesalius.

Afterward: The Cycle Continues – documented copies of Geminus' work (1)

1. *Anatomia Deudsch, Ein kurtzer Auszug der beschreibung aller glider menschlichs Leybs aus den buchern des Hochgelerten Hern D. Andree Vesalij von Brussel...soderlich wundartzten Deutscher Natio zu nutz ins deutsch gebracht* [German]. Jacob Bauman. Nurnberg; 1551, 1575.
2. *Andree Vesalii Brvxellensis Suorum de Humani corporis fabrica librorum Epitome: Cum Iconibus elegantissimis iuxta Germana Authoris delineationem artifitiose iam pridem ex aere expressis: ...Opus perinsigne, nunc primum in Germania renatum, hacque forma quam emendatissime editum* [Latin]. Henricus Botterus. Cologne; 1600, 1601.
3. *Anatomia Viri in hoc Genere Princip. Andree Vesalii Bruxellensis; in quo tota humani corporis fabrica, iconibus elegantissimis, iuxta genuinam Auctoris delineationem aeri incisis, lectori ob oculos ponitur ... Opus perinsigne et utilissimum, nunc primum quam emendatissime editum* [Latin]. Henricus Botterus. Amsterdam; 1617.
4. *Librorvm Andree Vesalii Brvxellensis De Hvmani Corporis Fabrica Epitome* [Latin]. Nicolai Fontanus. Amsterdam; 1642.
5. *Vivae imagines partivm corporis hvmani aereis formis expressae* [Latin]. Juan Valverde de Hamusco. Antwerp; 1566.

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