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CRABTREE AND GERMANY: CHAMELEON MEETS CHAMELEON  
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What of things German in Crabtree studies hitherto? There is very little indeed. The only reference of any insight (it must have been one of those intuitive perceptions with which Crabtree Orators are sometimes blessed) came right at the end of Tancock's Oration in 1960, and I find it amazing that 21 years should have to pass before its true significance was realised. Tancock finished his revelations concerning Crabtree in France between 1791 and 1800 with the words:

I end with a little-known and seldom-quoted remark of a grossly overrated contemporary of Crabtree named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Light, more light!

Perhaps, for the sake of the record, two initial remarks are necessary. Goethe was a great poet, his greatness diminishes only when set beside that of Joseph Crabtree. The 'seldom quoted remark: Light, more light' is an oft misquoted version of Goethe's dying words. It was felt more appropriate to have Goethe's last words radiant with transcendental promise: 'Mehr Licht' — more light — but others closer to the great man's dying breath claimed that the sentence, barely audible, went on beyond the first two words and was: 'Mir liegt der Leberkäs schwer am Magen' — the liver sausage is lying heavy on my stomach.

My point is, gentlemen, that Tancock unwittingly put his finger on the one man in Europe at that time who, despite Tancock's disparaging tone, can stand beside Crabtree and together with him enjoy a bond of mutual respect and friendship, at least up until 1810, when I fear the publication of Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, which was an attack on Newton, will have put an end to the friendship. But setting this aside, where else, save in these two giants, will you find a similar wealth of prose and passion in all fields of human endeavour assembled in one man? Let me remind you briefly of the facts of Goethe's life.

He was born in 1749 in Frankfurt am Main and died in Weimar in 1832, already a life span that rivals Crabtree's. His complete works run to hundreds of volumes. He was poet, novelist, dramatist, scientist. He was a capable minister at the court of Weimar, where he went in 1775 at the invitation of the young Duke, and where he stayed, apart from his travels, for the rest of his life. He was a man who could deal with the prose of ordering breeches for the recruits in the Duke's small army, and with the passion of, for instance, falling deeply in love in 1825 in Marienbad at the age of 76 with a young girl of 17, an experience which was distilled into one of the most moving of European love poems, 'Die Trilogie der Leidenschaft' (The Trilogy of Passion). Is it therefore so surprising that this many-faceted man should have known and have associated with another of similar multifarious ability such as Joseph Crabtree? The answer is plain enough, but why does he go to such lengths to conceal it? We confront once more that conspiracy of silence, but this time I believe we can point to a different, more subtle, form of subterfuge. Hence my title: *Chameleon meets chameleon*.

Whilst you will all see the appropriateness of the chameleon image to Crabtree, you may wonder how it can apply to a man like Goethe, one whose life was so public in so many ways. An Olympian in his own time, the amount of biographical information we have is enormous. His reputation was such that no one who either met him or corresponded with him failed either to keep the letters or to note verbatim the course of a conversation. The public face was, however, in part a deliberately assumed mask behind which Goethe hid himself. He was very adept at adapting himself to his surroundings. There is something iridescent about his character, and this he knew and revelled in. He preferred the implicit to the explicit, he delighted in the veiled and the oblique, the veil being an image central to his work, an image which combines the twofold function of concealing and revealing; the veil of poetry is the conveyor of truths and the impartor of sacred mysteries. He loved to don disguise, to assume a false identity, to travel incognito. In 1796 he confessed to Schiller that he was rather like an accountant who, after doing all the difficult arithmetic, deliberately makes a mistake in the final addition to reduce the total. His poetry of 1815 to 1820 exploits the interplay of private and public, the lover's delight in code and cipher. One poem begins:

In tausend Formen magst du dich verstecken,  
Doch, Allerliebste, gleich erkenn' ich dich,  
(You may hide yourself in a thousand forms, and yet, beloved, I recognise you at once.)

Isn't this what we are trying to do here, to recognise the face of the Master behind the many masks of modesty?

That such a propensity was fundamental to his nature was recognised by Goethe at an early age (a mental precocity similar to Crabtree's) for he wrote in a letter dated 2 June 1764 (he was still 14 at that date):

Alexis is one of my best friends and I have asked him to render you a truthful account of all my vices and virtues, but, clever as he is, he may not see everything. I am rather like a chameleon. And one should not hold it against Alexis, if he hasn't seen me from all angles.

This illuminating statement appears in the letter Goethe wrote by way of an application to join a young men's secret society in Frankfurt, The Arcadian Society of Phylandria. It was generally a time when secret societies flourished and the fascination they hold for Goethe reflects this. His association with Crabtree, secret for so long, testifies to his abiding respect for the demands of brotherly anonymity.

I intend to focus on their friendship and collaboration between 1779 and 1783, between 1786 and 1788, and to follow some surprising consequences of this in the years 1788 and 1791. In the course of my researches, I have stumbled upon a very tangled web, for as other Orators have experienced before me, whilst pursuing one opening, one is often taken aback by a thrust from a totally unexpected quarter.

Of the obscure decade 1773 to 1783 we know very little, but I believe that for at least part of this time Crabtree was with Goethe in Weimar. How this came about I cannot be quite certain. What is certain is that Goethe in his love of secrecy used various symbols to conceal the identity of his friends in his diary entries, usually astrological signs, all but two of which have been identified. One of the remaining ones is ☉ (circle containing cross, followed by a 'c'). The hitherto enigmatic entry for 16 June 1776 reads: 'Lit. ☉c.' Now it seems obvious that this can only mean that he read something by Crabtree on this day, which immediately kindled his interest and imagination.

The next fact we have is the arrival in Weimar in 1779 of an Englishman, said to be a Yorkshireman, with the name Batty, who had apparently been recommended by one of Goethe's friends as an expert in drains, irrigation and the like. Had it not been for last year's Oration in which Rowe proved the link between Joseph Bramah and Joseph Crabtree and the latter's inventiveness with pumps, pipes and water closets, I would not have been able to see the flushed face of Crabtree behind Batty. However, there is more substance to the supposition that Batty is Crabtree than a merely prosaic reflection upon land drainage. There are other letters and diary entries which reveal Goethe's deep admiration and affection for the said Batty. On 13 May 1780 he writes: 'Letter from Batty. He is my only dear son in whom I find pleasure. For as long as I live, he shall lack nothing, neither food nor drink.' In the previous month (1 April) there is the thought-provoking entry: 'Have drunk no wine for three days. Now have to be wary of English beer'.

Does this suggest remorse and abstinence after a binge with Batty? Other references all express the love and concern Goethe has for Batty, but the one which provides conclusive proof, such as this Foundation requires, is to be found in a letter Goethe wrote to Frau von Stein on 14 September 1780. He is away on business with Batty, and after praising his work and even quoting one or two of Batty's maxims, he exclaims, 'O thou sweet poetry!', and that is not my translation, the exclamation is in English, after which Goethe enters upon a rather confused image of fountains, cascades, watermills, irrigation channels, and bungs in barrels, to illustrate the demonic nature of lyrical creativity. Isn't this the very mark of Crabtree, poet and engineer? The odd thing is, Batty now disappears from Goethe's writings of the time — odd, in view of the high regard in which Batty was held, but, as I hope to demonstrate, Batty is replaced by a new persona, Tischbein.

The hunch that Tischbein might conceal Crabtree was one of those inexplicable notions coming from I know not where, but I decided to follow this impulse, whether devilish or divine, and made my way to the reading room of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, where helpful, friendly, but somewhat bemused staff allowed me to see the folio volumes of Tischbein's engravings, published in Naples in 1791, engravings which faithfully recorded the designs on Sir William Hamilton's second collection of Greek vases. Imagine my surprise and delight when I discovered, right at the end of the first volume, very carefully and precisely attached to the last blank page, a smaller double sheet hand-written in French, but without any signature or other indication as to the writer's identity. Nor was there any date. But the text provided a clue. The writer says, 'Tischbein left Naples in 1790, taking with him some 90 other drawings of the vases, which have never seen the light of day' (qui n'ont jamais vu le jour). How then could the writer know this, one asks? He goes on to say some copies were published by a pupil of Tischbein's in 1808/10 in Paris, but the writer concludes with the words: 'En les comparant avec les gravures correspondantes de Tischbein, on observera, outre des differences assez importantes, une supériorité marquée dans le style du Maître.'

The last word says it all, gentlemen: Maître — Master, written with a capital M. Crabtree was presumably the first owner of the BM copy, wishing to reveal his hand, however, only to the eyes of the initiate few. The staff could offer me no information about the hand-written sheets. I do not believe the BM was aware till then of their presence.

You will see how the pieces suddenly fell into place: Tischbein is supposed to have gone to Rome in 1783, in that year Crabtree goes to Orléans; Tischbein leaves Naples in 1790, in which year Crabtree finds 'more congenial lodgings in the home of Paul Vallon'. What I shall show is that Crabtree's uncle's eye was not so watchful, even if just as disapproving, as we once assumed between 1786 and 1790, during which time he was in Italy, for a while in Rome but mainly in Naples, from 1786 to 1787 with Goethe and from 1787 to 1790 mostly with Emma Harte, who was later to become Lady Hamilton when she married Sir William in 1791.

The more sceptical amongst you may well be asking, why Tischbein? Why not some other name? Informed speculation verging on inspired revelation suggests that the appropriateness of the name 'Tischbein' (which means table leg) may have struck Crabtree after an especially intense night of study devoted to claret. Upon regaining consciousness, a table leg will have been the first object his eyes, still proclaiming through their colour the subject of his devotions, will have lighted upon. The Christian names Johann Wilhelm provide another tantalising clue to the real identity. The alliterative and rhythmic parallels really speak for themselves: Joseph William Crabtree / Johann Wilhelm Tischbein.

In 1786 Goethe kept his intention to travel to Italy totally secret, only revealing it to Karl August at the very last minute, asking permission to be granted indefinite leave in order to 'lose myself in a world where I am unknown', the chameleon wish to remain undetected. He left Karlsbad in secret on 3 September 1786, reaching his longed-for goal, Rome, where he is met by Crabtree-cum-Tischbein on 29 October. There Goethe chose to retain the mask of the merchant Möller and both he and Crabtree exploited to the full their novel liberty as harlequins in the 'commedia dell'arte' that is life. It is for this reason that Goethe's letters and diaries of this time speak of his arrival in Rome as a rebirth.

On 22 February the pair left for Naples, arriving on the 25th, but the important date for Crabtree studies is 15 March 1787, when the two friends met Sir William Hamilton (British Envoy at the Court of Naples) and his companion Emma Harte. They spent two evenings in their company and saw two performances of Emma's famous 'Attitudes'. At this point I should refresh the memories of those of you who are less familiar with Lady Hamilton.

Emma was born Amy Lyon in the village of Ness on the Wirral peninsula, possibly in 1761. In 1778 she went to London, where her great beauty secured her employment in the Temple of Health, run by a quack, Dr. Graham. It was a kind of high-class brothel-cum-peepshow. Rejected by her lover, Sir Harry Fetherstonehaugh, she passes into the hands of Charles Greville, who installs her in his home in the rural district of Paddington, where she becomes known as 'the fair tea-maker of Edgware Road'.

Charles Greville plays Professor Higgins to Emma's Eliza, teaching her many graces and imparting to her an appreciation amongst other things of fine engravings. In 1783 Charles Greville's uncle Sir William Hamilton, now a widower, returns to London from Naples, where he has been envoy since 1764. Sir William, a great connoisseur of beauty, was immediately taken with Emma. When Sir William subsequently returned to Naples, his nephew thought his uncle might welcome the solace of Emma in his declining years — he also thought it would keep Uncle amused but unmarried and thus protect his inheritance. Emma was duly dispatched to Naples in 1786, where in the following year she was to meet the most illustrious of her lovers, Joseph Crabtree alias Johann Tischbein, artist, engraver (possible originator of the invitation to 'come up and see my etchings').

Whilst being appreciative of her beauty of form, Goethe was less charmed by Emma's person, finding her without wit or depth, depth of mind that is. Crabtree was less bothered by this absence of spirituality. This was not the time for the monk but for the beast. On 19 March, just four days after meeting Emma for the first time, he decides to stay on in Naples. The day of this decision was, as Goethe revealingly points out in his account, the Feast of St. Joseph. The cultural consequences of this decision were twofold: the partial truth of one has been known since the 1790s, i.e. the publication of the engravings, though the hand of Crabtree was not recognised; the other was the writing of a cycle of the freshest, frankest and most beautiful love poems in the English language, a fact unrevealed before this evening. As far as a continuing relationship between Emma and Crabtree is concerned, there are only hints for the later years. Hamilton died in 1803, Nelson was killed in 1805. In 1813 Emma was sent to prison for debt, was released on bail by someone bearing the unlikely name of

Joshua Jonathan Smith, who helped her to escape to France, where she died on 15 January 1815. We know however, that she lived out her last days sustained by 'partridges, turkey, turbot and good Bordeaux wine'. I refrain, gentlemen, from drawing your attention to the obvious conclusions. What I shall do instead is to read you something which was given me only last Sunday in Parkgate on the Wirral, Emma's early home. It is the text of a poem so far handed down by oral tradition and one with which the name of Amy Lyon has been connected:

Who is Crabtree? What is he?  
That all the swains adore him.  
Oh, he is fayre and he is bright,  
And the spectre of Crabtree  
Haunts the knight ...

Whence cometh Crabtree?  
Whither goeth he?  
Gaunt of aspect, sickly his followers,  
Frail as the leaf on the aspen tree ...

Oh, the holy grail of the Crabtree trail  
Daunts all but the staunchest breast,  
In the quiet shades of such hallowed glades  
Lies broken many a hest.

Then wives and sweethearts, who'er ye be,  
Abandon hope in the name of Crabtree!  
Lay yourselves down, in sable gown,  
And pray that your lovers be once more free ...

But to conclude, gentlemen, we must return to the cycle of poems already alluded to, a cycle of poems which was eventually published in Germany in 1795, of which you have some extracts before you. Goethe returned to Weimar from Italy in 1788, leaving Crabtree in Naples. The poems in question were written between 1788 and 1790 and the German manuscript bears the title 'Erotica Romana'. What we have here is, I now believe, not an original work but an extremely skilful translation of an unfortunately lost original by Joseph Crabtree. These poems, a cycle as published comprising 20 elegies cast in elegiac couplets, are not autobiographical quite in the sense hitherto assumed. Goethe's friends advised him against publishing them in view of their contents, and their eventual publication did cause some shock. They seemed shockingly out of character. Let us consider the text in the light of what we now know. Are not these lines clearly the product of someone who knew how to live life to the full? And did not Goethe himself remark in his diary on the very day that he and Crabtree met Emma for the first time:

If in Rome one can delight in study, here [Naples] one only wants to live and for me it is a strange sensation to be in the company of people who know how to enjoy themselves. (16 March 1787)

In Elegy V, don't we see the hand of Crabtree beating out hexameters on the back of Emma Harte? Is it not more likely to be the painter Crabtree who better understands the marble through comparison with the texture and curves of Emma's body, a knowledge further enhanced by her imitation of classical poses and positions in the 'Attitudes', those *tableaux vivants* for which she was famous? I believe these were published by Goethe as a tribute to his friend's genius. In order to save his friend from malicious gossip and spiteful reprisals, Goethe accepted here paternity, as Wordsworth was later in France to accept a different kind of paternity. The nearest Goethe comes to an admission of a different and English authorship came many years later in 1824, when he confided to his secretary, Eckermann, (25 Feb.): 'If the *Roman Elegies* had been cast in the tone and rhythms of Byron's *Don Juan*, they would have been obscene.'

That the poems contain a secret is acknowledged in the last *Elegy*, which begins:

If strength adorns the man, and a free courageous spirit,  
So becomes him even more the keeping of some profound secret.

And ends with the words:

And you, beloved poems, grow and flourish,  
    cradled in the gentlest breath of mild loving breeze  
And betray at last like those gossiping reeds  
    the beautiful secret of a happy pair.

The love of disguise, the delight in the oblique and the opaque, were common to both Crabtree and Goethe, both chameleons. The chameleon image is, however, one which contains a note of warning for all Crabtree Scholars. In an early poem, written at about the time of his first acquaintance with Crabtree, though not published until 1789 after his return from Italy, a poem entitled 'Die Freuden' (Joys), Goethe cautions us as follows:

About the spring flits  
The iridescent dragonfly.  
I have long delighted  
In her being now bright, now dark,  
Like the chameleon  
Now red, now blue,  
Now blue, now green.  
Oh that I could see her colours  
Close at hand.

She darts and hovers, resting never,  
But still, she has alighted on the willow.  
I have her, I have her!  
Now I can observe her closely,  
And find only a dull dark blue.

This then is your fate, dissector and analyst of your joys!

Gentlemen, elusiveness and brilliant iridescence are the very substance of our beloved poet, Joseph Crabtree. Let us therefore heed this note of caution and be on our guard against too zealous a scholarship that would pin him lifeless to the setting-board. Like Goethe, we must always show due respect and reverence for the mystery that lies at the heart of all greatness.