

## CABINET HOAXED?

In its nine-year history, *Cabinet* has never had a “letters page.” But the following correspondence—from Princeton history professor Anthony Grafton concerning the conversation we published in our issue on Deception (issue 33, Spring 2009) between “him” and D. Graham Burnett, an editor of *Cabinet* and Grafton’s long-time colleague—demanded both an airing and a response. The interview is available at <[cabinetmagazine.org/issues/33/toc.php](http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/33/toc.php)>.

To the Editors:

Back in 1707, a number of French Protestant ministers in England had a strange experience. A mysterious scholar appeared on the street outside their houses, sometimes early in the morning. He wore a black suit, a damask vest, a clerical collar, and a blond—a very blond—wig, and had a rose on his hat. Anyone—apparently—could see by his outfit that he was a minister. But the man in the blond wig was more than an ordinary cleric. When accosted, he would ask if the person he addressed was personally acquainted with the great Jean Le Clerc, a famous scholar and the editor of a great journal. Ideally, his interlocutor would answer, as one did, “I know his famous name by his works ... but I have never seen him.” He could then reply, with aplomb, “*Eh bien*, I myself am Mr. Le Clerc.”

Le Clerc explained that he had been offered a chair at Cambridge and had come to England to accept it. He had already drawn up a Latin inaugural address, which he carried in his pocket, but he was maintaining his incognito just in case a problem arose. The well-dressed and articulate Mr. Le Clerc moved from one minister’s house to another. All of them entertained him well. Somehow he never made it to Cambridge. Instead he invited all of his hosts to a grand dinner at an inn in Essex, and slipped away, leaving them the bill.

“Jean Le Clerc”—as the historian Anne Goldgar explains in her great book *Impolite Learning*—was actually a former monk named Gabillon, who had failed to receive ordination as a Calvinist minister in the Low Countries, where he also denounced Le Clerc with a scurrilous pamphlet. It’s no surprise that he got away with the impersonation. Those who wanted to check him out had to find one of Le Clerc’s books and see if it had an author portrait distinctive enough to establish the pretender’s identity, or write a detailed letter, perhaps with a sketch, to someone who knew the great man in Rotterdam. Gabillon did no real harm—except to the ministers’ wallets—during his time pretending to be

Le Clerc in Britain. Still, Le Clerc wasn’t happy when the news reached him.

And I, for my part, am by no means happy that someone pwned you all with that “interview” with “me” that you published in *Cabinet*. One would think that verification of identities would be a whole lot easier nowadays, but it would seem that none of you made the effort. Good heavens, the stuff isn’t even plausible! I mean, *me*, going on about deception being “cool”? I’m as reactionary a positivist as anyone I know. I would never have said anything like that. And then those smooth lines: “the forgers took on the project of historical recovery”; “the truly passionate historical forger of the Renaissance”; “The Baconian project is commercialized and becomes cinema”? This is all way too hip for me. Couldn’t someone have Googled something I had written?

It is clear that there is some sort of contemporary Gabillon out there in Brooklyn. I’d love to know what color his wig is. But next time he sends you something I ostensibly said, could I be so bold as to ask that you check it with me before you print it, please? I’d like the forged Grafton to be a respectable simulacrum of the real one. Surely that is not too much to ask!

—Anthony T. Grafton

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D. Graham Burnett responds:

It is a source of no small concern to all of us here at *Cabinet* to learn of this nefarious act of subterfuge, and I in particular tremble at the memory of the jocular hour that I spent with this IMPOSTOR in a most ranging and fascinating *tête-à-tête*. The very thought now of his charming and garrulous erudition, the image (graven in my memory) of his Mosaic beard-stroking as he rocked with delight at some little *aperçu* about Descartes or Valla—all this can bring me now only despair and terror, as I consider the possibilities. Could I have been deceived by a mortal shape-shifter? I, who for some seven years have had almost daily and most collegial contact with this learned man? I, who as a youthful *discipulus* learned what Latinity I possess at his knee? Impossible! No, vaster forces are here at work. Mock me you who will, but I put out the call: there are agents—wily and daemonic agents—that walk about in the form of the Putnam Professor. Be on your guard!

—D. Graham Burnett

Editor, *Cabinet*